Kevin Morris and Glenn Altschuler

Entertainment lawyer; Professor of American Studies at Cornell

Posted: July 23, 2009 05:55 PM

In Your Face(book)

Read More: Ben Mezrich, Breaking Media News, Eduardo Saverin, Facebook, Harvard, Mark Zuckerberg, Sean Parker, Media News


Q: When is a book not a book? A: (1) When it is Facebook; (2) When it is *The Accidental Billionaires: The Founding of Facebook A Tale of Sex, Money, Genius, and Betrayal*. By Ben Mezrich. 260 pages. Doubleday Publishing

The soft pornmeister of yuppy nonfiction, Ben Mezrich, author of *Bringing Down the House*, is back to tell the story of the founding of the hugely successful social network, Facebook. In an "Author's Note," he lays out his methodology:

I do employ the technique of re-created dialogue. I have based this dialogue on the recollections of the participants of the substance of the conversations. Some...took place over long periods of time, in multiple locations, and thus some conversations and scenes were re-created and compressed. Rather than spread these conversations out, I sometimes set these scenes in likely settings.

He then acknowledges that the founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, "as is his perfect right, declined to speak with me for this book despite numerous requests."

So wait, a lot of this is, like, made up? And isn't Zuckerberg the whole story? As the guy said in the movie, it's Quiz Show hearings without Van Doren -- it's *Hamlet* without Hamlet.

The book -- which begs to be called a novel -- is set on the campus of Harvard University, its Finals Clubs and dormitories. The characters are cardboard cut-out versions of clever and connected college kids. The story is populated with Victims and Victorizers. The central victim (and, the all but acknowledged central source) is Eduardo Saverin, the Brazilian Young Enterpriser who used some of the $300,000 he made trading stocks during his sophomore summer to bankroll the embryonic stages of Facebook. Cast as roadkill are the strapping twins, Tyler and Cameron Winklevoss, Varsity Crew members by day and internet entrepreneurs by avocation.

And, of course, there's Zuckerberg, a fleece-hoody and Addidas-sandals-wearing geek with a golden touch, as outwardly unemotional as Mr. Spock but ruthless in his determination to dominate. You half expect him to appear in the book sitting in a jacuzzi in Palo Alto with a laptop on his knees, telling a bevy of bodacious blondes, "Now the entire world is mine...all mine! Haha hahahahah!! Aahahahahahahahahhh!!"

Mezrich’s conceit is that the Victims were lambs led to the Zucker-slaughter. The twins, he tells us, thought they had hired Mark to design their website and Eduardo thought he was his partner. Aided by the slimy Silicon Valley serial entrepreneur Sean Parker, Zuckerberg relentlessly rolls Facebook into the behemoth that it's become. Until, of course, in a final gooey twist, Parker makes a misstep and Zuckerberg zaps him. "Ahahahahah!! Mine, all mine. Hahahahahahahahahahahahhaah!!"

Actually, there doesn't seem anything especially accidental about the accidental billionaires. If this book says anything it's that these kids wanted to make shitloads of money and decided that a social network was the way to do it. And that Zuckerberg knew what he was doing.

Mezrich misses few opportunities for pulp fiction digressions. He describes what it feels like to be drunk ("the pleasantly warm flush to his normally sallow cheeks"); the buildings at Harvard ("complete with iron bars, ornate masonry, and a great limestone boar's head carved into its arched pinnacle"); and the girls that neck with the nerds ("his hands roamed under her open white shirt, tracing the soft material of her red bra, his fingers lingering over her perky, round breasts").

With the exception of the author, who will cash in on a film version, it seems clear to us that it does no one any good to see people slammed and stereotyped with the sour-grapes recollections of their former associates. For all we know, Zuckerberg may have screwed his college colleagues. But, unlike Julia Angwin's excellent book *Stealing MySpace*, the only case *The Accidental Billionaires* can make is a case of beer.

The "invention" of Facebook raises all kinds of interesting and important questions, including the viability of contracts between students, ownership of intellectual property in an academic setting, the proper role of the University in mediating disputes, and, of course, the features that made Facebook so popular. But Mezrich isn't interested in laying them out -- he'd rather imagine the scene of Eduardo and Mark getting laid in a dorm bathroom.

In an age blessed with heavyweight business analysts -- from Michael Lewis to Ken Auletta -- it's too bad that Facebook went face down at the hands of bare-
knuckled bantam Ben.