



**The Runner: A True Account of the Amazing Lies
and Fantastical Adventures of the Ivy League
Impostor James Hogue**

David Samuels

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The Runner tells the remarkable true story of a drifter and petty thief named James Hogue who woke up one cold winter morning in a storage shed in Utah and decided to start his life anew. Reimagining himself as a self-educated ranch hand named Alexi Indris-Santana who read Plato under the stars and could run a mile in under four minutes, Hogue applied and was accepted to Princeton University, where he excelled academically, made the track team, and became a member of the elite Ivy Club.

Echoing both *The Great Gatsby* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, the story of Hogue's life before and after he went to Princeton is both an immensely affecting portrait of a dreamer and a striking indictment of the Ivy League "meritocracy" to which Hogue wanted so badly to belong. Beginning with the end of Hogue's career as a thief in Telluride, Colorado, *The Runner* takes readers back in time to uncover the true story of Hogue's life based on an unlikely trove of documents and the firsthand accounts of those who encountered the many colorful personalities the gifted liar, dreamer, and athlete had made up as he went along.

The Runner is an extraordinary personal story and an absurdist parable of the Ivy League admissions game. It is also a deeply felt exploration of the slippery nature of personal identity in America. Drawing elegant parallels between Hogue's ambitions and the American myth of self-invention, while also examining his own uneasy identification with his troubled subject, author David Samuels has fashioned a powerful metaphor for the corruptions of the American dream, revealing his exceptional gifts as a reporter and as a literary stylist.

The Runner: A True Account of the Amazing Lies and Fantastical Adventures of the Ivy League Impostor James Hogue Details

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Esther says

A haunting tale of psychological manipulation and an exploration into what exactly would compel an individual to take such extreme measures to reinvent oneself. I assumed the book would be more of a thrilling story however, Samuels spends a lot of time on the previously mentioned exploring. Overall, it was definitely interesting but in no way was it mind blowing.

Kyla says

(This is really a 3.5 review, oh woe, why are there no half stars?) Like an extended Vanity Fair piece or New York Times Magazine, I confess, I sometimes wondered if the subject merited being fleshed out so. But then the author turns on you mid-way and finally lets you know - this books isn't about the con-man, we don't really care about him - it's about class and America and meritocracy and higher education and how the Great American past-time of reinvention has disappeared completely, never to return. As I often - often! - rant on these very subjects, I found it rather more compelling than most, I imagine. I usually don't like author as narrator but his self-awareness here appealed to me.

Mike says

I'm not entirely sure why, but I'm a little obsessed with James Hogue's Gatsby-esque tale of self-(re)creation and identity. He is a genuine "con-man" in archetypal American form.

He's a (Melvillianesque) confidence-man who is also a CONvicted felon. As author David Samuels describes Hogue in this volume (which is essentially an expanded version of an article that Samuels had previously published in *The New Yorker* magazine): "Hogue was a convicted fabulist who attempted again and again to impose the freaks of his imagination on the world around him, a practice that struck me as being entirely in the American vein. Americans are fibbers. Our national literature celebrates the whopper and the tall tale, beginning with the story of the boy who could not tell a lie. The fact that we lie like crazy while pretending to always tell the truth is such a common narrative strategy in American literature and American lives that we frequently confuse our wishful imaginings with reality. Living with one foot in the future, we native optimists often feel that we have little choice but to make things up, a slippery procedure that can lead to the full-scale onset of the liar's disease from which I am in no way immune" (p. 15).

I wonder how many of the rest of us might feel implicated by Samuels's confession here of his voyeuristic impulses & fascination with Hogue and his serial frauds. I don't necessarily WANT to stare at Hogue and learn everything I can find about his compelling, highly unlikely life story. As a matter of fact, I feel that my fascination with him and his (pathological?) ruses is a little unseemly. Nevertheless, I can't take my eyes off him and his elusive identity.

Am I also a little haunted by Hogue because I'm a teacher? And also an Ivy League graduate (like author Samuels, as well!)? He certainly does implicate the Princeton Admissions "meritocracy."

In sum, I think that this story resonates on many different levels. It's not a very long read, yet I found it perversely engrossing. What makes this James Hogue guy tick, after all? And why are so many of my (high school) students and faculty colleagues just as obsessed as I am by his truly extraordinary tale?!

Rachel says

I tried, but gave up after the first fifty pages. The narrative is so incoherent and the metaphors so mixed that I couldn't keep a grip on the life story of the protag-- well, antagonist, I guess. Samuels writes for some high-quality magazines -- I'm disappointed that this wasn't better.

Lisa says

Really it's more like 2.5 stars. The book just wasn't what I expected. I thought it would be a bunch of entertaining anecdotes about a con artist. Instead the author spent most of the book trying to "expose" Ivy League institutions for the frauds he believes they are. I didn't feel that he was revealing anything shocking or unknown about the Ivy League. I would've liked to have heard more of Hogue's story.

Robert says

This book tells of the exploits of James Hogue, a master of deceit. His speciality was masquerading as another person while attending different schools, most notably Princeton University. The author's set-up in telling these stories about Hogue is different and confusing and he has this irritating habit of injecting himself into the story and pontificating on various subjects. I nearly stopped reading the book. For me, the story really takes off in the last 90 pages, the amazing story of Hogue posing as Alexi Santana applying to Princeton with a made up name and persona and then actually being accepted and then deferring his admission for one year because he was serving a jail sentence for robbery in Utah, unbeknownst to Princeton admissions officers. Here Samuels story-telling becomes clearer and his injection of himself becomes less annoying. So al-in-all this is a satisfying read.

Jillian says

I read this despite the lukewarm reviews it received, because I would read pretty much anything about James Hogue, and Samuels' original New Yorker piece about Hogue was compelling. (Even more gripping, however, was Jesse Moss' film "Con Man" - highly recommended.) But here, Samuels basically delivers a longer, more rambling, more self-involved, sloppily crafted article - not a book about Hogue. The interviews are oddly documented, and since Hogue's stint at Princeton is the most compelling part of the story, I can see leaving it for the end, but that section of the book also fails to deliver. Samuels says one of the great elements about Hogue's story is the fact anyone can project themselves onto it - which is exactly what Samuels does here, and shouldn't have.

Diana says

This book was pretty good. I did feel like the author jumped into the story at a weird time and worked his way back around. I would have enjoyed this crazy guy's life story a little more if the pieces weren't as much in a jumble

Sam says

This is a short book that can be finished within a couple of hours. If it were compared to a distance run it started off fast, blew it's load and walked slowly across the finish line. When I started reading this book, it was fascinating. The pages melted away and I was really captivated by the story. I couldn't put the book down as it described Jame's childhood and how he faked his way into Princeton. However, around the midway mark the story really bogged down and it became arduous to read. I finished the book more out of obligation rather than a desire to find out how the story ends. I would recommend reading the first half of the book but the same can't be said about the second half...

Stacey Nguyen says

It's been a while since I've finished a book within a day—it's hard to believe that this book is a biography. Echoing *The Great Gatsby*, Samuel writes beautifully, and he has a knack for extracting American ethics from James Hogue's narrative. A real treat considering the dry texts I often read for school.

Ken says

I borrowed this thinking that it would be a "Catch me if you Can" type story and it was to some extent, although I think the subject of this was far less clever. Basically, the only thing James Hogue did was bs his way into Princeton at the age of 32. The author is fascinated with people who invent their own story as they go along. Hogue, until he went to prison, made up stories about himself and then stole personal items from the people he made friends with.

For most of the book I was not sure why the author chose to write about a fairly ordinary pathological liar. The last quarter of the book about how Hogue got into college and how he did there was fairly interesting. He dominated the Princeton scene and was one of the better runners on the track team-supposedly, although he never really raced.

The funny thing is that people will ignore the contradictions in a friends story. Hogue was a liar and liars will contradict themselves. Siince most of Hogue's acquaintances believed what he said and what he said was not all that outlandish were willing to overlook the contradictions.

I had a similar experience. When I was running high school cross-county, we had a volunteer coach named Mike Matthews who worked as a doctor at Huntington Hospital. His name was on our school record board

for the two mile, so we knew he was fast. I heard him claim that he had finished fourth at the 1972 Olympic Trials in the marathon. I knew for a fact that he had not, and challenged him on it. He pretty much ignored me and I figured I had heard it wrong. His story fell apart when our coach asked for a Dr. Matthews at Huntington Hospital and it turned out he worked there, but was a gardener. He also refused to return some records he had borrowed from one of my friends. Later, his father visited our team and apologized, explaining that his son had a problem, etc. We were pretty shocked and hurt, which is not unlike how most of the people Jim Hogue had let down felt. I wonder if most people have this sort of experience.

The book was a bit confusing for the first several chapters-I had no idea what this guy had done that was so worth reading about. In the end, because of the Princeton chapters and how I connected it with my own personal experience with a pathological liar I was glad I had read it.

Erin says

This is an interesting look at a brilliant con-artist by a journalist who writes for the New Yorker, Harper's, etc. He give some great insight into how Americans lie to ourselves as part of our national self-image. Pretty original account. If interested check out this interview with the author, its pretty great <http://coolehmag.com/frontEnd/feature...>

Matt says

David Samuels - The Runner

""I knew that I could trust him on one count: the story of his life would have only a tangential relation to whatever version of it I chose to write... The fact that the dream of becoming someone new is doomed to failure is not really so bad, since every story ends in failure. It's just a particular kind of story, that's all. Living suspended between the present and the future, 300 million flowers bloom in midair."

[4 stars for Augustinian philosophy, the places where truth and lies intersect, a runner that just kept running... and none of it at all what I expected.]

Lawrence says

I really liked Samuels' Harper's piece from backstage at the Superbowl, so went for this one. Very different. The Harper's piece was all over the place--he spent half the article hanging out with Stevie Wonder, and had some sharp cultural commentary stuck into some pretty wacky observations.

The Runner is more a straight-up tale--an impostor/con man named James Hogue fakes his way into Princeton--and I wondered if he'd just tell it straight. Not really; he bounces around the chronology, and he's heavy on the metaphysical and introspective. This con man somehow fooled everyone into thinking he was a whole lot more than he was, and Samuels dwells on why he finds himself connecting to such an outrageous liar. Lots here from Samuels about how America is all about starting over, reinvention, and the little lies that make up the self we present to others. Ben Franklin lied in his autobiography, we love Huck Finn and Jay Gatsby, etc.

He namechecks Erving Goffman--the sociologist who wrote *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, a "dramaturgical" analysis of how we very meticulously and secretly sew together the personality we want others to see--and drops a DFW-weight footnote about how bad Aquinas and other philosophers and theologians thought lying really was. And he talks about the lies he's told himself...how he sees himself in Hogue. To Samuels, Hogue's just an advanced liar.

The best part of Samuels' approach is that he focuses on the people Hogue fooled through out his life of elaborate deceptions. In a book about an impostor, there's a temptation to try and find out what makes the guy tick. But good liars don't leave many clues about that, so you sort of end up beating your head against a brick wall trying to penetrate their mystique. By focusing on how these people let themselves get fooled, Samuels tells us something about our culture, and--with a little introspection on our end about who we really are and what we're willing to believe about others when it serves us--ourselves.

Megan says

I thought this book was too choppy; it just didn't flow well and wasn't very engaging. Not to mention I don't think the book really lived up to its title...although his life was certainly full of lies, there didn't really seem to be many "fantastical adventures." Perhaps I've just read too much fiction. :-)
