



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on December 9, 2014

Lena Dunham, UVA, and False Rape Accusations

Rape is a horrific crime. A false accusation of rape is also a horrific crime. Both can alter your life, tragically — and perhaps forever.

Rape has also figured prominently in the news recently, the big story being embattled comedian Bill Cosby, who has found himself accused of the crime by multiple women. But accompanying this headline-grabber are two more high-profile rape stories, both, it appears, involving questionable allegations.



When curiously famous Lena Dunham (shown) alleged in her recently published memoir *Not That Kind of Girl* that she was raped by a “campus Republican” while a student at Oberlin College, the blogosphere was aflutter with incredulity. And it now appears the skepticism was warranted, with an in-depth Breitbart [investigation](#) finding that Dunham’s claim “collapses under scrutiny.”

For the record, we should review the “Girls” creator’s allegations. As I [wrote](#) in October:

[O]ne day when she was 19 and drunk and high as a kite on Xanax and cocaine, she entered a state of undress to relieve herself in a parking lot right in front her GOP friend [whom she identifies as “Barry”]. He then, to put it delicately, makes aggressive physical sexual overtures, after which she takes him back to her apartment; at this point, “in an attempt to convince herself that she’d given consent — [she] talks dirty to him as he forces himself on her,” she writes in her newly released memoir....

[T]here’s more to the story: when Dunham’s roommate characterized the incident as rape the next day, Dunham laughed. Years later, she pitched a version of the story to her “Girls” collaborators and still didn’t call it rape, though her co-writers would. And now they have her convinced.

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Or maybe not. The recently released, weeks-long Breitbart [investigation](#) found — as others had already discovered — that there was in fact a Republican at Oberlin named Barry during the year of Dunham’s alleged attack (2005); however, the news outlet also learned that he didn’t even remotely match the description Dunham provided. As Breitbart wrote, “This man is by all accounts (including his own) innocent.” This didn’t prevent him from being implicated, though.

Not that this mattered to Dunham. Barry, who now is married with a family, requested for weeks that Dunham clear his name — to no avail; he also started a legal fund, retained a lawyer, and is considering a suit. But now Dunham’s publisher, Random House, has responded to the Breitbart investigation by admitting that “Barry” was just a pseudonym, has said that it will alter the memoir to reflect this fact, and is offering to pay the real Barry’s legal fees.

And this striking admission has inspired further incredulity. The *Washington Post*, for instance, called the episode “appalling” and [wrote](#), “How could Dunham and Random House do this? How could an author and a publisher — again, of a self-described memoir, not a work of fiction — describe a *supposed*



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rape by a person, give a (relatively rare) first name and enough identifying details that readers could easily track the person down, and not even mention that ‘Barry’ wasn’t this person’s real name?”

Perhaps the answer is that Dunham’s “memoir” is more fiction than memories. In point of fact, Breitbart found that none of the details she provided about her alleged attacker rang true. And what details they are. Breitbart writes, “To be sure we get the point, on three occasions Dunham tells her readers that her attacker is a Republican or a conservative, and a prominent one at that — no less than the ‘campus’s resident conservative.” And, supposedly, a hypocritical one. Dunham reports that the man had a violent sexual episode with a friend of hers named “Melody” and then took her to get the morning-after abortion pill. He was also described as having a “mustache that rode the line between ironic Williamsburg fashion and big buck hunter,” as wearing “purple cowboy boots,” as having a voice “that went Barry White low,” as having “hosted a radio show called *Real Talk with Jimbo*,” and as working in the library, among other very specific details about him and his time at Oberlin. In other words, the man sounds like a conservative stereotype disgorged by a liberal fiction writer — and he’s not the kind of fellow who’d melt into a crowd.

Yet no one in the Oberlin crowd remembers this very flamboyant character, despite the institution being a small school of only 3,000 students. Breitbart scoured school news clippings and records and visited the campus, speaking to staff and former students, and came up empty. No one of any political persuasion who attended Oberlin during the relevant time period fit Dunham’s description of a mustachioed, purple-boot-wearing, radio-talk-show-hosting, bass-talking, library-working young man. In fact, Breitbart talked to radio stations and could not even identify a show called *Real Talk with Jimbo*. Put simply, Dunham’s attacker seems a ghost, and “Dunham’s rape story,” writes Breitbart, “didn’t just fall apart; it evaporated into pixie dust and blew away.” But perhaps this is no surprise coming from a woman who opened the chapter in her book titled “Barry” with the admission, “I’m an unreliable narrator.”

But then there are unreliable journalists. It isn’t often that a magazine issues a full-scale retraction of a story accompanied by a mea culpa and an apology to those it might have hurt, but that’s precisely what *Rolling Stone* did on Friday. The issue was a University of Virginia rape allegation made by a student identified as “Jackie” and [related](#) in an explosive piece by *Rolling Stone* reporter Sabrina Rubin Erdely. CNN [summarized](#) the claim last month:

In “A Rape on Campus: A Brutal Assault and Struggle for Justice at UVA [Nov. 19],” the student told *Rolling Stone* an upperclassman invited her to a party at the Phi Kappa Psi house in fall 2012 and seven men raped her over a three-hour period in a bedroom

She didn’t want to go to law enforcement but told the school’s Sexual Misconduct Board what happened, *Rolling Stone* reported.

She said she became discouraged because she had difficulty obtaining statistics about campus sexual assaults....

Jackie’s description of the assault was gruesome; it left her, as the *Washington Post* [writes](#), “blood-spattered and emotionally devastated.” But now it appears that *Rolling Stone*’s and Erdely’s reportage is being devastated. The *Post* tells us that not only was there no event at the fraternity house the night the attack allegedly occurred, but furthermore:

A group of Jackie’s close friends, who are advocates at U-Va. for sex-assault awareness, said they believe that something traumatic happened to her, but they also have come to doubt her



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account. A student who came to Jackie's aid the night of the alleged attack said in an interview late Friday night that she did not appear physically injured....

The friends said that details of the attack have changed over time and that they have not been able to verify key points in recent days. For example, an alleged attacker that Jackie identified to them for the first time this week — a junior in 2012 who worked with her as a university lifeguard — was actually the name of a student who belongs to a different fraternity, and no one by that name has been a member of Phi Kappa Psi.

In fact, the story fell apart so thoroughly that *Rolling Stone's* managing editor, Will Dana, felt compelled to print a 300-word retraction, originally [writing](#), in part:

Because of the sensitive nature of Jackie's story, we decided to honor her request not to contact the man she claimed orchestrated the attack on her nor any of the men she claimed participated in the attack for fear of retaliation against her.

...In the face of new information, there now appear to be discrepancies in Jackie's account, and we have come to the conclusion that our trust in her was misplaced. We...now regret the decision to not contact the alleged assaulters to get their account. We are taking this seriously and apologize to anyone who was affected by the story.

The magazine, however, has now [altered its apology](#), changing the line "our trust in her was misplaced" to "These mistakes are on *Rolling Stone*, not on Jackie." *Rolling Stone* offered no explanation for the change

Note that it cannot be said definitively that nothing happened to Jackie, though it does seem, in the least, that her story was embellished. But there's no doubt *Rolling Stone* failed to apply proper journalistic standards, as Bloomberg's Megan McArdle outlines [here](#).

And some are left to wonder if politically correct journalists will ever learn. The UVA story is somewhat reminiscent of the 2006 Duke University [rape frame-up case](#), in which black stripper Crystal Gail Mangum falsely accused three white university lacrosse players of rape. The media and university staff rushed to judgment, treating the accused as guilty, tarnishing their reputations, and altering their lives, perhaps irreparably. Ultimately, the young men were exonerated; the prosecutor in the case, Mike Nifong, was disbarred for dozens of violations of North Carolina's rules of professional conduct; and Mangum is now serving prison time for murder.

Yet what about false accusers who simply kill others' reputations? This seems of minor concern. And McArdle's piece, while critical of RS, bears a title that says it all: "Rolling Stone's Rape Story Fails Victims."

She did not mean the true victims of a false rape allegation: the men whose reputations, lives, and psyches are raped.

What matters, apparently, is not the truth but the narrative. As one Oberlin figure, who refused Breitbart access to information, told the news service about those accusing others of sexual assault, "It's just not important if they are telling the truth."

Photo of Lena Dunham: AP Images

(This is an updated version of an article published earlier in the day under the title "After Cosby Rape Scandal, More High-profile Rape Stories Appear.")



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