

## A Course in Deception

By Jana Rieger

TellWell Talent, 2017

---

### Summary<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Mackenzie Smith is the principal investigator (PI) on a study on the relationship between obesity and sleep apnea, involving experiments on mice. After an incident in the lab, Mackenzie and her colleagues have been called in for a meeting with the Animal Welfare Committee. Dr. Anbu Matthews is unable to attend the meeting because he is on his way to a conference in Calgary. Later that day, Anbu dies in a car accident. Soon after Anbu's death, Mackenzie finds some disturbing messages about the latest drug trial in the sleep clinic. The messages are left behind by Anbu, and Mackenzie vows to find out why. While occupied with solving the mystery behind Anbu's messages, Mackenzie falls out with Fennel, a young student and research assistant (RA) in Mackenzie's lab, who seem to do everything she can to destroy Mackenzie's academic reputation and career.

### **Ethical Issues:**

Animal Welfare

Scientific misconduct

Respect for Human research subjects

Authorship disputes

Data privacy

Conflict of interest

Whistle blowing

### **Discussion questions:**

- What is the difference between a serious scientific error and scientific misconduct such as fabrication or falsification of data? (Think of examples to illustrate these distinctions)
- What types of misconduct are represented in the case that unfolds in the book?
- What do you think drives some people to scientific misconduct within biomedical research?
- Internet media like Retraction Watch ([www.retractionwatch.com](http://www.retractionwatch.com)), a blog that reports on retractions of scientific papers, play a big role in reporting on suspected or confirmed cases of scientific misconduct. In your opinion, what are the benefits of

---

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from publisher's summary.

these media in terms of contributing to good conduct of research? Do you have any concerns about their approach?

- How does deception influence work relations, doctor-patient relations, and the reader's perceptions of individual characters as the story unfolds?
- Imagine that the case described in the book was a real-life case. How might this type of scientific misconduct impact the health care institution, the patients and relatives of patients involved with the trial, and future patient enrolment in other trials in the hospital or in similar trials conducted at a different health care institution?
- Do you think the book paints an accurate picture of the academic environment?
- The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) defines the role of an author according to four criteria (see below). Do you agree with these criteria?<sup>2</sup>
  - Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; AND
  - Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; AND
  - Final approval of the version to be published; AND
  - Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

### **Discuss the following passages from the book:**

- (p.154) “Start over from the beginning,’ I said. ‘How?’ ‘An IT friend told me how to recover the original data.’ Surprise flitted across her face. ‘I’ll do the reliability check,’ I said. ‘Whatever you’ve done by Friday.’ ‘A reliability check? Before everything’s done?’ Anxiety swelled in my stomach. She was right. I should do a random re-analysis on the whole data set, but I just didn’t have time.”
- (p. 53) “Fennel was the daughter of one of Elizabeth’s colleagues from medical school. A very wealthy colleague. Apparently, he’d called her and said that Fennel was interested in working in my lab. “I owe him a favour,” Elizabeth said. “I told him it’d be no problem,” [...] I wanted to tell her no; I had no time or money to support a grad student. Especially one that I didn’t choose. But, I was up for tenure and promotion. I needed Elizabeth to provide a positive recommendation to the dean. She’d been known not to, if you didn’t play along. To make things worse, she

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/defining-the-role-of-authors-and-contributors.html>

emphasized the jeopardy that we'd be in without the generous donation from Fennel's father.

- (p. 103) “Deflated, I left his office empty handed, and pondered my options. I really had none, other than to break every ethical code of conduct I had agreed to, as well as the promise I'd made to Luke. I needed to get into the patients' medical files. This time, looking for more than just a signed consent form. A complete invasion of patient privacy. If it meant somehow understanding Anbu's riddle, it'd be worth it.”
- (p.169) “Other people's behaviour, however, was suspect. Especially Schlemmer's. When it came to order of authorship on the manuscript, he somehow thought he should be first. If not first, certainly second and before Luke. He claimed that it was he who conceptualised the whole study, even though he did nothing after that to contribute.”
- (p.179) “You named your rats?” A joker smile materialized on Raucket's face. ‘Ha! Ha! Oh man – you named your rats!’ He slapped his leg. ‘You've gone soft, Mackenzie. Rule number one – don't get close.’”
- (p. 140-141) “She scrutinized all the rats and focused on Huey, Dewey and Luey. ‘I think it's so cruel that these little guys have to spend their days donating their bodies to science.’ ‘They're treated better here than they would be in a gutter in New York City,’ I said. ‘They aren't wanting for much.’ ‘Except their freedom,’ Rebecca said, as she walked out of the rat room. [...] “Don't you think it's cruel to intentionally give them a disease that's going to make them sick?’ Rebecca asked. ‘No, I think it's cruel when we fail to do everything we possibly can to understand a disease that causes people to lose their lives behind the wheel, because they haven't gotten a good sleep.’”