Are the Clintons actually writing their novels? An expert uses 'stylometry' to analyze Hillary and Bill's writing

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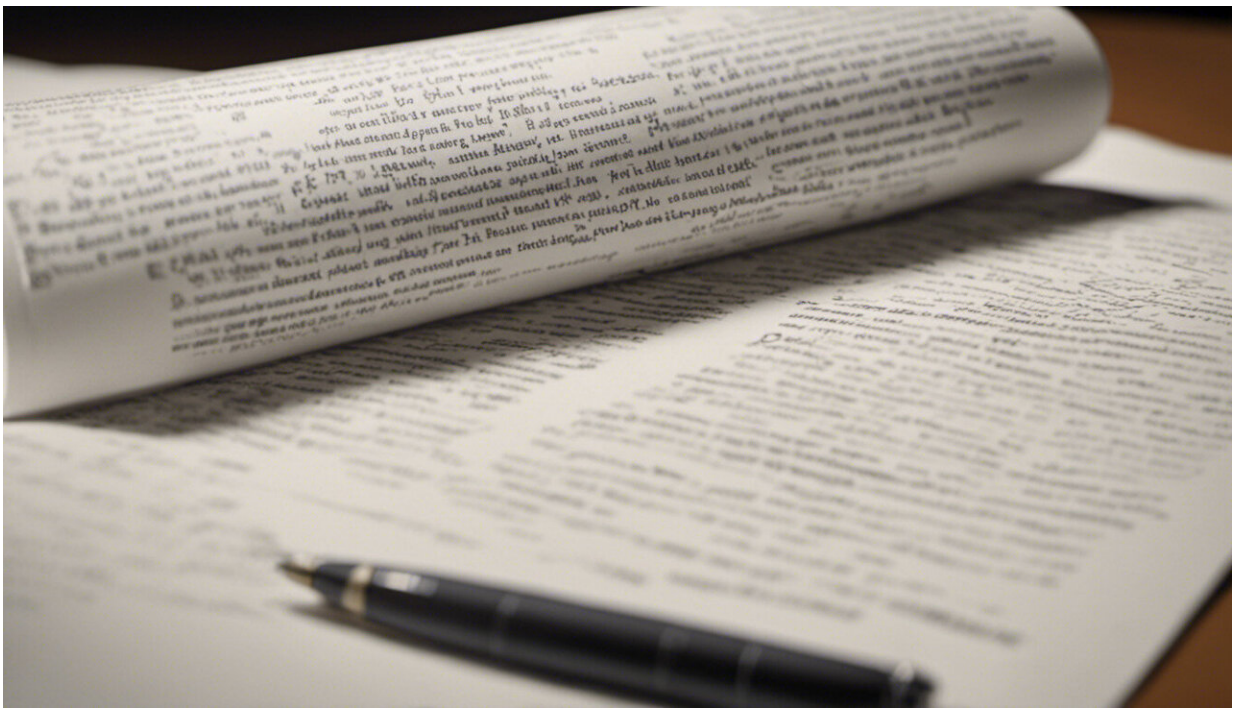

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

In 2018, former US president Bill Clinton coauthored a novel with James Patterson, the world's bestselling author. "The President is Missing" is a typical Patterson: a page-turner of a thriller, easy to read, with short chapters and large font.

Patterson is accustomed to collaborative writing—much of his success can be attributed to novels he has written with others. Considered the first "brand-managed author," Patterson brought the Hollywood model of film production to books.

He is as much a producer as he is a writer, using a string of junior collaborators to run his factory of novels. Patterson outlines the plot, the coauthors write the story, Patterson offers feedback. While he doesn't seem to do much writing himself, it is a system that has made Patterson a rich man.

It's one thing for Patterson to work with aspiring novelists looking to launch their careers, but when former presidents come looking for a writing partner, that's a different story. Where Patterson's other collaborators have been his junior, exchanging their labor as writers for a bit of pay and profile, Bill Clinton probably isn't in need of a freelance writing gig to pay his way.

Indeed, in the case of "The President is Missing," analysis found that Patterson did most of the writing. The only exception is the novel's ending, which is essentially a "fiction-free" version of Clinton's "politico-historical thoughts."

Of course, style isn't the only thing that makes an author. Stories are as much about plot (some might even argue more) as they are style. But analyzing who came up with the contents of a story is a far more complex task than analyzing who actually wrote it and as the adage goes, a good story is all in its telling.

Using 'stylometry' to establish authorship

Using a technique called stylometry, it can be established that Patterson probably wrote most of The President is Missing. Stylometry uses

computers to statistically analyze the frequency of words in a text. It can be applied to a variety of research purposes, most notably, authorship attribution.

Stylometry is useful when a novel's authorship has been questioned because every individual's writing style possesses subtle indicators—or "authorial fingerprints"—which can be used to determine who is most likely to have written a particular piece of work.

Authorial fingerprints are developed by analyzing a writer's solo-authored works, which can then be applied to collaborative efforts (luckily, Bill Clinton has a few books attributed to him alone).

So, what happens when stylometry is applied to a more recent novel coauthored by Patterson and Clinton? In June 2021, a second political thriller, "The President's Daughter," was published by the pair. Once again, it appears that Patterson did nearly all of the writing.

A stylometric analysis of The President's Daughter

As the chart above shows Patterson's authorial fingerprint (represented in green) dominates the novel. But as with "The President is Missing," there is a slight exception.

In their first novel, Clinton clearly wrote the ending, whereas with "The President's Daughter," it seems that he wrote the beginning. The book opens with the attempted assassination of a Libyan terrorist as the novel's protagonist, a soon-to-be former president of the United States, watches on from the famed Situation Room in the White House.

The formula for the collaboration remains consistent across both novels. Patterson, the seasoned pro, does all the actual writing, but Clinton still gets a turn.

What about Hillary's novels?

Bill isn't the only novelist in the Clinton household. Hillary Clinton has also coauthored a novel.

In 2021, she published a political thriller called "State of Terror" with Canadian writer Louise Penny. But that is where the similarities to Bill's literary career end. Unlike her husband, stylometry indicates that Hillary Clinton did contribute a significant portion of the actual writing. More than half of "State of Terror" matches her authorial fingerprint.

The division of labor between Penny and Hillary, shown in the chart above, seems much more equitable than it is with Patterson and Bill. The novel is divided into two absolute sections with the first 40% of the novel seemingly written by Penny (represented in green), while Hillary Clinton wrote the remainder (as shown in red).

Some critics have suggested that the novel is a fictionalized account of Clinton's views, and in part, her career. Guardian reviewer Mark Lawson suspects that future biographers and historians "may find at least as many revelations in the couple's fictions as in their memoirs."

That may well be the case for Hillary, who felt confident enough in her own writing (it is perhaps unsurprising that Hillary Clinton is as literate as she is articulate) to take on such a task in her own hand. But the same cannot be said of her husband's forays into fiction.

Whether or not "State of Terror" is about Hillary Clinton, commentators can certainly be assured that she wrote much of it. Stylometry seems to indicate that Bill on the other hand is merely playing a bit part in the next phase of the Patterson literary machine.

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