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ARTICLE

Don't Shoot the Storyteller

This editorial appears in the January 16th issue of *PW*. Click the "Talk Back" button to post your thoughts on the James Frey controversy.

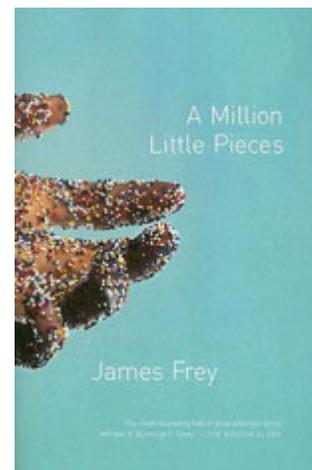
by Sara Nelson -- 1/13/2006



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I shouldn't have been surprised: As soon as it was revealed, on TheSmokingGun.com, that James Frey had apparently fabricated, conflated and/or embellished parts of his bestselling *A Million Little Pieces*, the bookish world started running around as if in *Casablanca*: they were shocked—shocked!—that not every single word of the book was verifiably "true"

"A true story should be true," one reader wrote to Abebooks.com. "What a liar!" wrote another. For days, the media speculated that Oprah Winfrey herself—who had chosen the memoir for her powerful book club—was going to be forced to recant. (She didn't. In fact, she stood by her memoir man.) If anyone was at fault, Oprah seemed to say when she called in to *Larry King Live*, it was publishing folk who misidentified the book as nonfiction.



Lots of media

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outlets agree. "It's hard to know which is worse, wrote an a *L.A. Times* editorial scribe, "a writer who acts as though there is no distinction between a novel and a memoir, or a publisher who does not care.

MORE ON THIS STORY...



sound off here!

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While it's common wisdom in the book business that nonfiction sells better than fiction, there have been many examples in recent years that memoirs sell the best of all. So, yes, Frey, or his editor Sean MacDonald or his publisher, Nan Talese, made a "crass" decision to publish *Pieces* as nonfiction. Never mind that there's a lot of precedent for such a choice. (Truman Capote's "true novel," *In Cold Blood* and Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*, to name two.) Like Nan Talese, the book's original publisher, who was quoted in the *New York Times*, I believe that a memoir is not "simply" nonfiction. While based on truth, a good memoir must share many traits with the novel. It has to have a narrative and development and denouement. And sometimes that means the larger "truth" takes precedence over absolute accuracy.

This happens all the time, of course, and memoirists regularly get pilloried for it. (I remember complaints from Dave Eggers's family for some portrayals in *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* and even the sainted Frank McCourt was questioned about some of his recollections.) But memoirists aren't journalists, they're narcissists. They don't claim to tell the whole story; they're only really interested in their own.

So I wonder about all those people who say they feel duped by James Frey. Would they have bought an earnest, footnoted academic treatise on alcoholism if it read like, well, an earnest, footnoted academic treatise on alcoholism? Somehow, I doubt it. But in typical American build 'em up, tear 'em down fashion, they have to have somebody else to blame for letting them believe what they want to believe in the first place.

I'm not letting Frey off the hook, exactly—though I do admire his books and have occasionally interacted with him socially. (Note to SmokingGun: Detailed documentation of this acquaintanceship can be made available.) True, Frey should have reined in his narrative excesses and sharpened his memory. His editors probably should have said the book was "based on a true story," and they might also have issued all the usual caveats about conflation and attenuation.

But vilifying Frey&Co is both beside the point—and way too easy. Like many memoirists before him, who, after all, practice what is known in writing programs as *creative nonfiction*, Frey produced a compelling portrait of an addict's life complete with all its deceptions and grandiosity—and he gave the readers what they want. He changed some names to protect the innocent, and some details to protect—and, it must be said, aggrandize—himself. But he didn't write front-page newspaper profiles of people he'd never talked to—and he never claimed that *Pieces* was supposed to be *All the Presidents' Men*.

Or, to paraphrase another great (fictional, I think) character: When it comes to memoir, readers say they want the truth, but they can't handle the truth. Not unless it reads like a novel.

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