

Case Study



A Million Little Pieces

In 2003, publisher Doubleday released James Frey’s book *A Million Little Pieces*, marketing it as a memoir about Frey’s struggles with alcohol and drug addiction. In 2005, the book was selected for Oprah’s Book Club, in part for the inspiring and supposedly true story of Frey’s overcoming addiction. The publicity from *The Oprah Winfrey Show* sparked strong sales for the book, which topped bestseller lists in the following weeks.

On January 8, 2006, investigative website The Smoking Gun published an exposé describing numerous exaggerations and fabrications in Frey’s account of his life story as written, creating controversy regarding the truthfulness of the book as a “memoir.” When Frey first appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in 2005, he emphasized his honesty: “If I was going to write a book that was true, and I was going to write a book that was honest, then I was going to have to write about myself in very negative ways.” As he did so, he expanded on falsehoods that appeared in the book.

Frey and his publisher, Nan Talese, were unable to effectively refute The Smoking Gun allegations. When Winfrey invited Frey back on her show, she harangued him for lying, saying that she felt “duped” and that Frey had “betrayed millions of readers.” Talese described Winfrey’s rebuke of Frey as “mean and self-serving,” while critics of Frey saw him as opportunistic.

Frey defended the right of authors and memoirists to draw upon their memories, not only upon documented facts: “I wanted the stories in the book to ebb and flow, to have dramatic arcs, to have the tension that all great stories require.” Authors and literary critics have echoed this sentiment, noting that memoirs are not necessarily the same genre as biographies or autobiographies. When asked about this controversy, author Joyce Carol Oates stated, “the tradition of personal memoir has always been highly ‘fictionalized’ — colored with an individual’s own ‘emotional truth’ ... This is an ethical issue...with convincing arguments on both sides. In the end, [Winfrey] had to defend her own ethical standards of truth on her television program, which was courageous of her; and [Talese] had to defend her standards as a longtime revered editor, which was courageous of her.”

Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways is self-serving bias apparent in this case regarding James Frey? Regarding Oprah Winfrey? Do you think one's position is more ethically defensible than the other's? Why or why not?
2. Do you believe authors should adhere only to fact in memoirs? Why or why not? Do you think authors have a responsibility to tell the truth to their audiences? Explain.
3. Cultural critic Laura Kipnis writes, "If Frey, an aspiring novelist, harnessed himself to the engine of the recovery narrative to get his story into print, his readers compromised themselves too, swallowing his writerly affectations like pills mashed up in applesauce, so eager for a fix of recovery lit that the eye-blinking grandiosities [of the book] barely registered." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
4. Do you know people who seem to remember past events in their lives in ways that put themselves in a very favorable light? Do you have this tendency? Explain with examples.
5. Can you think of other examples in politics, newspapers, business, or your everyday life that seem to illustrate the impact of the self-serving bias? Explain with examples.

Resources:

The man who rewrote his life

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/sep/15/usa.world>

Blind Spots: Why We Fail to Do What's Right and What to Do About It

<http://www.worldcat.org/title/blind-spots-why-we-fail-to-do-whats-right-and-what-to-do-about-it/oclc/679940661>

Sidetracked: Why Our Decisions Get Derailed, and How We Can Stick to the Plan

<http://www.worldcat.org/title/sidetracked-why-our-decisions-get-derailed-and-how-we-can-stick-to-the-plan/oclc/807028907>

How to Become a Scandal: Adventures in Bad Behavior

<http://www.worldcat.org/title/how-to-become-a-scandal-adventures-in-bad-behavior/oclc/540643949>

Picking Up the Pieces: How James Frey flunked rehab, and why his fakery matters.

http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2006/01/picking_up_the_pieces.html

James Frey's Morning After

<http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2008/06/frey200806>

How Oprahness Trumped Truthiness

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/30/business/media/30carr.html>

Oprah vs. James Frey: The Sequel

<http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1648140,00.html>

Author:

Robert Prentice, J.D.

Department of Business, Government and Society

McCombs School of Business

The University of Texas at Austin