



Truth falls to 'Pieces' after suspect memoir

By Marco R. della Cava, USA TODAY

The truth may want to think about hiring a few bodyguards after its recent whupping at the hands of its hip cousin, "truthiness."



Should memoirs be 100% factual? That's the debate stirred by news of embellishments in James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*.

By Todd Plitt, USA TODAY

That catchy word, popularized by comedian Stephen Colbert, refers to a fact that won't be intimidated by, well, the facts. And it took center stage in last week's odd saga of writers JT Leroy and James Frey.

Leroy was supposedly a boy prostitute who turned his life around and produced riveting prose, winning celebrity friends in the process. But Leroy appears to be a concoction of the couple who purportedly rescued him. And then there's Frey, who does exist — which is what makes his case all the more significant.

Frey, a 36-year-old former substance abuser, chronicled his redemption in the wrenching 2003 memoir *A Million Little Pieces*. Oprah Winfrey was Frey's biggest cheerleader, which helped *Pieces* sell 1.7 million copies last year, second only to the latest *Harry Potter*.

But trouble is, some of this true story isn't true. An unrepentant Frey told CNN's Larry King that while episodes had been altered — notably a three-month prison stay that in reality lasted a few hours, according to police records uncovered by TheSmokingGun .com — "the important part of a memoir is to get at the essential truth."

Reaction has been swift. Oprah led the charge supporting *Pieces*, speaking for supporters when she told King that although some facts were in question, Frey's message "still resonates with me." But some readers felt lied to while writers grumbled that Frey had fudged the line between memoir and fiction. Both views duked it out in the household of journalist Gay Talese and his publisher wife, Nan, who brought *Pieces* to market. Gay told *The New York Times* that "non-fiction takes no liberty with the facts," while his wife countered that "memoir is personal recollection, it is not absolute fact. ... This is a debate we've been having for 40 years."

And it's likely to continue for another 40, without that much of a change in the realm of entertainment.

When *does* the truth matter? Few would dispute its importance in business or politics, where livelihoods and even lives can be at stake. Condemnation also follows deceit in the worlds of science (South Korean scientist Hwang Woo Suk's falsified stem cell research) and sports (Baltimore Oriole Rafael Palmeiro's suspension for steroids use).

But does the truth matter when you're creating art, when your goal isn't so much to recount facts as it is to pique the mind and rev up the heart? Apparently not. Far from pulling Frey's book, its publisher is simply amending it: Doubleday announced that future copies of *Pieces* would include an author's note about the book's mixed

content.

And sales have far from slowed. *A Million Little Pieces* was the No. 1-selling book on Amazon.com, Barnes&Noble.com and Bordersstores.com on Sunday. The website for Powell's Books, an Oregon-based chain, listed the book as its No. 1 seller in retail stores Sunday, as did Joseph-Beth Booksellers, which has stores in Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Tennessee.

"Everyone still loves the book," says Joseph-Beth's Briane DeLambre. "All the news reports didn't hurt it."

"People relate to art, books and ideas in a way that's personal to them," says celebrity attorney and TV analyst Jeffrey Steinberger. "Embellished or not, *A Million Little Pieces* is a great read. Embellishment is not a crime. Everybody does it. People are used to it."

Apparently so. "I didn't buy every last detail when I read it, so I'm not offended" by its exaggerations, says Eric Smith of Clearfield, Pa.

The artistic world has always been a dimly lit place where fact and fiction flirt and meld, often spawning masterpieces.

Frey's approach — shading the truth in pursuit of a tale's heart — in fact enjoyed great acclaim in the 1960s, when so-called New Journalism heroes such as Hunter S. Thompson and Michael Herr used literary flair to plop readers into their sensitized shoes.

No 'free pass' for Frey

"George McGovern said Hunter's coverage of the 1972 election was the least factually accurate but the most truthful portrait of the campaign," says historian Douglas Brinkley, a pal of the guru of gonzo journalism. "But I don't give Frey the free pass on this one. I'm old-fashioned. I like to know if something's a novel or fiction."

In the case of any story where liberties are taken, the intent of the author is crucial, says Marc Weingarten, author of *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight*, a chronicle of New Journalism's heyday.

"You can be digging for the truth, or you can be looking to promote yourself, and that leads to two different kinds of work," he says. "The New Journalists were all about the story, and mostly they got the details right. But today, their legacy includes people like (filmmaker) Michael Moore, who plays with facts like Tinkertoys."

Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* riled some because of the way he assembled facts to support his anti-Bush administration thesis. And it did him no harm at the box office: The \$6 million documentary set records by taking in \$222 million worldwide. Where there's cultural commotion, there's cash.

When Screen Gems released *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, it knew that "by saying it was based on a true story, it would register much hotter with people," says Valerie Van Galder, president of U.S. marketing for Columbia Pictures. The \$15 million film — loosely based on an exorcism-gone-bad in Germany — made \$136 million worldwide.

"When you walk in that theater, you know it's entertainment, you know you have to suspend your disbelief," says Peter Sealey, professor of marketing at the University of California-Berkeley and former marketing chief at Columbia Pictures. "You're allowed greater latitude in filmed entertainment. Look at (Steven) Spielberg's new movie, *Munich*. It's anchored to a book (George Jonas' *Vengeance*) that has largely been discredited."

The world of television also benefits from this check-your-fact-checking-at-the-door mentality. Just look at reality shows.

"The participants are not manipulated, but (reality shows) are crafted stories whose dramatic elements are spruced up," says Joe Borgenicht, co-author of *The Reality TV Handbook*. His example: A perfect gasp might be a reaction

culled from another scene. "It's all about heightening the experience for the viewer without changing the outcome of the story."

No one cared more about heightening his audiences' experience than Robert Zimmerman, a middle-class Minnesota boy who pawned himself off as wandering troubadour Bob Dylan.

For Dylan, "the issues of authenticity were paramount," says former *Spin* editor Alan Light. But modern times make it difficult to pull off a makeover of Dylan's magnitude, he says. "Vanilla Ice is a poster boy for that," Light says of the white rapper whose Miami street credibility vanished when a newspaper discovered he was a nice boy from a Dallas suburb.

Then there's Johnny Cash, who never "shot a man in Reno," as he famously sang. But Cash "played up the bad-a- — part beyond what his own experience was," Light says. "That was part of the image."

The co-dependent nature of celebrity and sales means that the entertainment machines are likely to continue to churn out fare that titillates, whether it's factual or slightly less so. Playing fast and loose with details never did Oliver Stone's bank account any harm, despite polemical movies like *JFK* that raise more questions than they answer.

But that's not to say the Frey affair will pass without effect.

For starters, beyond printing disclaimers, publishers might look twice at the next graphic memoir that crosses their transom. "I do think that publishers will spend more time thinking about these things the next time out," says Sara Nelson, editor at *Publishers Weekly*.

The popularity of the memoir genre is attracting those who are "maybe a little bit lazy and lacking integrity," says Patsy Sims, director of the creative non-fiction program at Goucher College in Baltimore. "It'll be interesting to see if, down the road, (people are) going to be interested in buying his books."

Peers, bloggers are watching

Any author who does plunge into the murky waters of enhanced autobiography will be watched closely by peers and bloggers alike.

Because anything with a whiff of a dramatic truth tends to catch the public's eye and critic's pen, it had better be accurate, says Daniel Wallace, author of *Big Fish*, which became the Tim Burton movie about a man who discovers his dad's tall tales had an underpinning of truth.

"Publishing is tough. As a writer, if I'd murdered my family, that'd be a great gift, not to my family maybe, but definitely to my book," says Wallace, who says his wife loved *Pieces* but wouldn't buy Frey's second book, *My Friend Leonard*, after hearing of his fabrications. "Oprah's defense (of Frey) just doesn't work. You can't say a memoir is 90% true. Which 90%? It's cheating."

Which isn't lost on some readers. Former fan Laura Tepitsky of East Amherst, N.Y., is "appalled" that some of *Pieces* isn't true: "(That) diminishes every feeling I had when I read the book."

Today, factual discrepancies aren't likely to be the writer's secret for long. "With blogs today, you can run but you can't hide," Sealey says. "Movies and literature will always push the boundaries; they just have to realize they're doing so under intense scrutiny."

That's something James Frey now knows all too well. Looking like a weary boxer, he told Larry King, "I'm certainly never going to write another book about myself." When King asked if he might stick with fiction in the future, Frey exhaled, "Yes." After all, there's no safer place to hide from the truth.