

The man who rewrote his life

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"Lying became part of my life. I lied if I needed to lie to get something or get out of something" - James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces*

You start at the outskirts of his beard, your eyes following the curve of his chin, winding their way through the soft-coloured bristles and down to the pale flesh of the cheek below. You are searching for clues, for a scar, for the criss-cross of 41 stitches that sewed up a hole in his cheek big enough to poke a finger through. You are hunting for signs of the assembly of injuries - a broken nose, knocked-out teeth, fractured eye socket - incurred by falling face-first down a fire escape in Michigan while high on crystal meth, crack cocaine and cheap wine. In conversation with James Frey, you look for proof.

Frey is the author of *A Million Little Pieces*, one of the bestselling books of recent years. Published in 2003, it is a memoir of the author's time as a 23-year-old alcoholic drug addict and former criminal in a rehabilitation centre in the American midwest. Over the course of 500 pages he wrestles a swarthy rage he names "the Fury", battens down his cravings, sprays spit and snot and blood and urine, recounts his misdemeanours, finds friendship, and falls in love. In one memorable scene he undergoes back-to-back root-canal surgery, but as he is in withdrawal he is forced to weather the entire procedure without anaesthetic, pressing his pain into two tennis balls until his fingernails crack. It is a brutal, foul-mouthed, utterly compelling book.

To begin with it sold fairly well, as did its sequel, *My Friend Leonard*, which recounted the now sober Frey's life after rehab and a jail sentence. In September 2005, however, something unexpected happened: *A Million Little Pieces* was selected for Oprah Winfrey's book club - making Frey the first living author to be chosen in more than three years. In a show christened *The Man Who Kept Oprah Awake at Night*, various tearful Oprah employees appeared to declare the book "revelatory" and an emotional Winfrey announced, "[It's] like nothing you've ever read before ... we all loved the book so much". *A Million Little Pieces* proceeded to outsell any book ever featured on Oprah's book club, swiftly becoming the No 1 paperback non-fiction book on the New York Times bestseller list for 15 weeks, as well as the No 1 seller on Amazon, and was published in 22 languages worldwide. You spotted its cover everywhere: on train journeys, on coffee tables, enjoying pride of place in the autobiography section of bookshops. There was applause from Bret Easton Ellis and Gus van Sant, and reviews that labelled the memoir "turbo-charged", "compulsive" and "unflinchingly honest".

Then in January of this year, something even more unexpected happened: the investigative Smoking Gun website claimed that *A Million Little Pieces* was far from honest. It asserted that a six-week investigation had cast doubt on some of the details in Frey's memoir, including his incarceration, the severity of his crimes, and his experiences in rehab. It told how the site's reporters had contacted the police department in Licking County, Ohio, and questioned Sergeant Dave Dudgeon about Frey's arrest in October 1992. In the account of the incident in *A Million Little Pieces*, Frey, stacked to the rafters with crack and alcohol, hits a police officer with his car, reacts violently to arrest, is charged with assault with a deadly weapon among other things, and ends up sentenced to an 87-day jail term. Dudgeon revealed that, in fact, the author was issued with two traffic tickets, one for driving under the influence and one for driving without a licence, and received a misdemeanour criminal summons for having an open bottle of beer in his vehicle. Frey spent five hours in police custody and was released on a \$733 cash bond. As news of the Smoking Gun report ricocheted across the internet and out into the mainstream media, Frey responded on his blog: "So let the haters hate, let the doubters doubt. I stand by my book and my life."

Oprah, too, initially stood by her man. "The underlying message of redemption in James Frey's memoir still resonates with me," she said, "and I know it resonates with millions of people who have read this book ... To me, it seems to be much ado about nothing." Two weeks later, however, as the story gathered pace and further dubious truths emerged, she hauled the author on to her show to explain himself. "I have to say it is difficult for me to talk to you because I feel duped," she told him. "But more importantly, I feel that you betrayed millions of readers." Frey conceded that the book contained fabrications. "I think most of what they wrote was pretty accurate," he said of the Smoking Gun report.

Then, earlier this month, a tentative legal settlement was reached that required Frey and his American publisher, Doubleday, to provide refunds to readers who felt they were defrauded in buying a book classified as memoir. Meanwhile, *A Million Little Pieces* is now published with "a note to the reader" included. In it, Frey apologises to any reader who has "been disappointed by my actions", and says: "My mistake, and it is one I deeply regret, is writing about the person I created in my mind to help me cope, and not the person who went through the experience." But the book is still selling - 3.5m copies and counting. This week *A Million Little Pieces* and *My Friend Leonard* reside at number 24 and number 16 on the New York Times non-fiction paperback bestseller list.

We sit in a dimly lit corner of a Manhattan restaurant across the street from his apartment. It is the beginning of the lunchtime rush; shouts, shattering crockery, steaming plates of carbonara spill out of the kitchen. Frey is wary. He has not given any interviews since Oprah in January. Today he has brought his own dictaphone, and places it side by side with mine on the restaurant table, where they sit like an uneasy cruet set. Since the Smoking Gun

report, it has been, he says slowly, a "very surreal six months, very strange. Sometimes terrible, slightly overwhelming. It's been like living in a Camus book, or a Kafka book, or something." His voice seems to come from far back in his throat, sharp and high and faintly nasal. "We had reporters camped out at the front and back entrances of our building," he says. "For a while I couldn't leave the apartment at all. And then when I could leave I left with a bodyguard and got directly into a black SUV." After 10 weeks of relentless media scrutiny, Frey, his wife and their young child left New York for France, where they remained for two months. "You never expect anything like that to happen," he says. "I'm a writer. I never expected to be recognised on the street. I never expected to get that kind of coverage, good or bad. I never expected to sell as many books as I have. And it was just overwhelming."

What was hurled at Frey was a furious mass of both loathing and veneration. Even now, if you type his name into an internet search engine, he turns up both streams of vitriol from those who feel defrauded, and fervent defenders of his writing. Of the 5,000 letters sent to him, he says, only 50 have been hate mail. People still stop him in the street. "Never had anybody say anything negative to me, ever," he says. "No. Most people just say they loved the books, or it helped them, or someone they knew." Still, he has found fame an uneasy bedfellow. "I actually went and started seeing a shrink before the controversy erupted," he says. "I just [felt] uncomfortable. It's weird when you become a transparent person. I don't do what I do to be famous."

He may not have wanted the kind of fame that would cause him to be recognised on the street, but he undoubtedly desired notoriety. "I never got into it to sell 25 books, and get written up in the local paper," he says. "I wanted to be a writer that had an impact. I wanted, and still I say the same thing, I want to write books that change people's lives, change how we think and live and read and write. I wanna write books that are read in 50 or 100 years." There is an echo in this of Frey the addict, as portrayed on the pages of *A Million Little Pieces*: "I want a drink," he writes. "I want 50 drinks. I want a bottle of the purest, strongest, most destructive, most poisonous alcohol on Earth. I want 50 bottles of it. I want crack, dirty and yellow and filled with formaldehyde. I want a pile of powder meth, 500 hits of acid, a garbage bag filled with mushrooms, a tube of glue bigger than a truck, a pool of gas large enough to drown in. I want something anything whatever however as much as I can." And maybe this is one of the things about Frey, whatever he does, whether it be tubes of glue or writing books, he wants to do it the most - to be the hardest, to be the strongest, to win and to defeat.

When Frey first arrived on the literary scene he showed no qualms about squaring up to the distinguished writers of the period, writers such as Dave Eggers and David Foster Wallace, just as in rehab he wasted no time (by his account) in challenging the toughest guy in the centre to a brawl. "I mean, it just wasn't relevant, y'know?" he says now of their work. "I think writers and artists in general come in two forms: there are thinkers, and feelers. And I think those guys are thinkers, their work is about the intellect. The intellectual

gamesmanship, it was all about irony and postmodernism and it was very clever. And none of those things were things I care about. I care about what I feel and how I feel it. So I actually set out to do absolutely the opposite. Strip everything away. Make it not about intellectualism at all, make it about emotional heart. It's like they were making conceptual art, and I'm making expressionistic art."

Undoubtedly some found this refusal to kowtow to the current literary hierarchy abrasive, and perceived as intolerable arrogance his eagerness to align himself with the great writers of history and his openly expressed desire to be the voice of a generation.

"Before I started, I read a lot of the authors who had achieved what I wanted to achieve, tried to figure out what they had in common," he says. "The most obvious thing all of them had was when they were published, nobody had ever seen anything like what they were doing, in terms of how they did it and what they said." He hauls out the blueprints: "I mean like Baudelaire, Celine, Henry Miller, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Kerouac." The names are growled, like those of old drinking partners. "You know, I'm an American male and I looked to that tradition for guidance, and I hope someday to be included among that group of American writers."

It was around the age of 25, when still quite newly sober, that Frey decided to become a writer. Accordingly, he applied himself to finding a distinctive voice and subject-matter. "I just started trying to figure out how to write [something] which was unlike anything anybody had ever seen, and once I felt like I had figured that out I tried to figure out what kind of book I could write that would be unlike anything anybody had ever seen. When I started writing *A Million Little Pieces* I felt like it was the right story with the style I had been looking for, and I just kept going."

The voice he found was not entirely unlike anything anybody had ever seen - there are shades of Hemingway, of Carver, of Kerouac. But it was a voice that wore its influences well, and ironically proved both arresting and addictive. "We live in a fast world," he says. "Much faster than has ever been before. So to write something that was very relevant to our time I wanted to write something that was very fast, that kept a reader moving. Cos that's what they expect in our world today, with the music and the film and the telephones and the internet. That's just how our brains function." He says he would rather his writing read like spoken language, "So I talk everything out. I talk my sentences through, and when they sound right I write them."

When the book was finished, he touted it around various publishing houses in New York. It was rejected by 17 in all, including Doubleday, which would eventually become his publisher. The problem, it seemed, was that Frey was promoting it as a novel, a work of fiction. "People asked me, 'How much of it's true, how much of it's not true?' " he says. "Initially I said, 'I want it to be published as a novel so I don't have to get into all that. I don't

wanna have to go through picking it apart, talking about what was changed and why.' Things were changed for all sorts of reasons: effect, for respect, other people's anonymity, making the story function properly."

He also wanted to establish himself as a novelist so that he could stand among his literary heroes. "Y'know, those guys wrote books about their lives and published them as fiction. I mean the idea that *The Sun Also Rises* is not about Hemingway's life, or *On the Road* is not about Kerouac's life, or anything ever written by Bukowski or Celine or Henry Miller is not about those men's lives is a ridiculous idea. I think if a lot of those guys were writing now they'd be published as memoirs." Arguably the reason *A Million Little Pieces* received so many rejections when first submitted as a novel was market-based. "What's interesting is that *On the Road* was going to be published as non-fiction, and they altered it cos they were worried about legal ramifications," Frey says of Kerouac's largely autobiographical work of 1957. "And because at the time fiction was much more popular than non-fiction. For me it was almost the opposite, y'know - non-fiction is much more popular now."

Once he had signed with Doubleday, reportedly for an advance of \$50,000, the process of editing altered the book - now billed as a memoir - further, timelines shifted, characters were erased, segments rearranged. "So the idea that nobody at the publishing company knew it was a manipulated manuscript is an absurd idea," he says. "I remember somebody at the publishing company told me that if the book's 85% true there's no problem. Certainly that standard wasn't then applied to it later." (This version of events is disputed by the publishers. Nan Talese, editor-in-chief of *A Million Little Pieces* and the senior vice president of Doubleday, told Oprah: "A memoir is different from an autobiography. A memoir is an author's remembrance of a certain period in his life. Now, the responsibility, as far as I am concerned, is: does it strike me as valid? Does it strike me as authentic? I mean, I'm sent things all the time and I think they're not real. I don't think they're authentic. I don't think they're good. I don't believe them. In this instance, I absolutely believed what I read.")

Our increased appetite for non-fiction is a crucial factor in both the inception of *A Million Little Pieces* and the subsequent persecution of James Frey - a persecution that seems particularly vicious when you consider that a man who is known to have manipulated the story of his own past is allowed to occupy the White House. Arguably, our recent desire for facts is an indication that we are recoiling from a culture that has grown increasingly synthetic. Perhaps it's not entirely unconnected that, in a period of enormous political uncertainty, the bestselling publications at the newsagent are reality magazines, and that documentary films are shown at the multiplex and non-fiction flies off the shelves. In this climate, the discovery that what appeared to be still-bloody fact was in truth a "manipulated text", as Frey terms it, proved deeply unsettling to many. "I think a lot of it had to do with what was happening and is still happening in our country, y'know?" he says. "People feel

frustrated by a lot of distortions by politicians, by members of the media, by movie stars, by tabloid journalists, and it was like a sorta confluence of events that I happened to be in the middle of."

Frey read the Smoking Gun report at the same time as everyone else. "I was sorta shocked by it," he says. "And I was upset by it and surprised by it. Just surprised that the book would be put under that much scrutiny, and picked apart so thoroughly. Throughout this I've been surprised by the venom with which people have come after me." He does not altogether blame the Smoking Gun, whose reporters allegedly stumbled upon the holes in Frey's story when they went looking for his police mugshot. "The guys that work there have a job," he says. "Their job is to get people to come to their website, to look at what they do. I just never thought that I was that big a target. I never thought that I would garner that much attention, that I was that big a deal."

To many, Frey and his novel were a big deal. Not just because he sold millions of books and was wept over by Oprah Winfrey, but because his was a tale of triumph over adversity, and it gave people hope. Frey still insists that the bulk of his book is true. His addiction is unquestioned. The root-canal surgery, queried by dental experts, is "true to my memory ... My memory is still what I wrote." The absence of criminal records is because he had them (legally) destroyed before he published the novel. "I mean, if I wanna go be a teacher, do I want all that stuff to exist?" he asks. "It's not an uncommon thing to do." It is feasible too that Frey's booze-soaked, crack-addled brain did remember events differently from the way they occurred; after all, a large section of his life exists like a half-remembered drunken night out. Take apart a lot of memoirs, he says, and you will find truth lying down with fiction. "Some people think memoirs should be held to a perfect journalistic standard," he says. "Some people don't. Obviously I don't. My goal was never to create or to write a perfect journalistic standard of my life. It was always to be as literature. I thought in doing that it was OK to take certain licences." All storytellers, he argues, are embellishers. "To tell a story effectively you manipulate information ... I think that if stories were told always exactly as they really happened most of them would be really boring."

The real true story of Frey's fall from grace has, however, proved riveting to many. They have watched and waited for him to break. In an email, one journalist goaded him with: "Are you drinking again yet, asshole?" He looks placidly across the restaurant table. "I mean it's interesting," he says, "the Europeans as a whole reacted very, very differently to the controversy than the Americans did, and the European media looked at it very, very differently from the American media." Certainly, as the American media coverage grew increasingly hysterical, the European press seemed to shrug slightly at the furore. He has theories as to why: "America in a lot of ways is still a puritan society ... there are a lot of issues related to truth that are at the forefront of our culture right now because of what

happened [in Iraq]. I think it has in certain ways to do with being a young culture, with being a culture that has less of an artistic and literary canon than some of the older European cultures."

Even in this puritanical setting, when Frey's American publisher and agent dropped him, and Warner Brothers elected not to make the film of *A Million Little Pieces*, he was surprised. "My agent just called me and said she couldn't work with me any more because she felt her integrity was being questioned," he says, and frowns a little. "My publisher called and said they were cancelling my new contract simply because they didn't want to honour it." The most curious thing, he says, was that despite the scandal they had made, were continuing to make, an enormous sum of money out of James Frey. "I mean, that's sort of the irony, y'know? My agent said her integrity was questioned, but it wasn't questioned enough for her to stop taking the money."

(Frey's former agent, Kassie Evashevski, has told *Publishers Weekly* that "it became impossible for me to maintain a relationship once the trust had been broken. He eventually did apologise, but I felt for many reasons I had to let him go as a client." She also said: "I told all the publishers that it was the true story of James's addiction and recovery, which is what he had told me. He did say he had changed the names and identifying characteristics of his fellow rehab patients, but, until recently, always maintained the veracity of his account ... Based on the information given us by the author, [editor] Sean McDonald and [publisher] Nan Talese believed in good faith they were buying a memoir, just as I believed I was selling them one.")

Does he, one wonders, regret any of it? "Well, I think that, doing it over, I would probably do certain things differently," he says. "I would be more clear up front about the fact that it was a manipulated text, that it was a text that was not a work of non-fiction." His expression is unreadable. "I generally try not to go through life regretting things, or playing the what-if game. Whatever I have said I have said, whatever I have done, I have done."

The fact remains, though, that whatever Frey says he has done, he has not necessarily done. It is hard to know what to believe about him, except that he is an exceptionally talented writer. This interview with a self-confessed liar, a proven fabricator, is bewildering for both of us, and the only certainties that lie between us today are our dictaphones, his half-eaten pasta, and our mutual suspicions. And so you look for the physical facts about him.

There is a scar to his lip, tattoos inked on his wrist and ankle, there is a set of pale green immovable eyes. He sits here before me, an impermeable rock of a man, and his very solidity, the unassailable fact of James Frey, seems strangely reassuring. A passage from *A Million Little Pieces* in which he finds solace in a copy of the *Tao te Ching* drifts into my mind: "The words and the words together and the meaning and the context are simple so

simple and basic so basic and true and that is all that matters true," he writes. "They speak to me, make sense to me, reverberate within me, calm, ease sedate relax still pacify me. They ring true and that is all that matters the truth."