

# A Million Little Pieces

In 2003, Doubleday published James Frey's book *A Million Little Pieces* and marketed it as a real account of his struggles with substance abuse. This narrative struck a chord with Oprah Winfrey who selected the title for her popular Book Club in 2005; after which its sales skyrocketed to top bestseller lists over the following weeks due to the publicity from *The Oprah Show*.

On January 8, 2006, *The Smoking Gun* stunted the public by publishing an exposé that depicted several untruths and fabrications in Frey's narrative of his life story. Initially when Frey appeared on *Oprah Winfrey Show* he voiced a declaration of truthfulness: "If I was going to write a book that was true and honest then I had to include negative details about myself." Unfortunately this statement proved false due to more falsehoods being included in the book.

Frey and his publisher, Nan Talese, were unable to provide an adequate defense against *The Smoking Gun's* claims. When Frey reappeared on Winfrey's show she lambasted him for lying and declared that he had deceived millions of readers which made her feel betrayed. Talese characterized Winfrey's reprimand as "unjustified and egotistical" whereas those who opposed Frey viewed him as taking advantage of the situation.

Frey fervently upheld that it is acceptable for authors and memoirists to not only include documented facts in their works, but also rely on the memories of events. He made sure that his book had an engaging story-arc with thrilling tension by taking this approach. Authors and literary experts recognize the difference between biographies/autobiographies and memoirs; thus solidifying Frey's stance as a valid one. When inquiring about this debate, author Joyce Carol Oates maintained that the genre of personal memoir has always been impersonated with a person's own emotions. This situation holds moral implications from both sides; bravely, Oprah had to protect her ethical truth on television and Nan Talese had to defend hers as an esteemed editor-in-chief.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In this case of James Frey and Oprah Winfrey, what particular self-serving biases are evident? Do you feel one is more ethically justified than the other? If yes, why do you think so?
2. Should authors remain strictly factual in memoirs, or should they be able to express their individual truth? Do writers have an obligation towards honesty when communicating with readers?
3. In her cultural critique, Laura Kipnis claims that James Frey's admirers had grown so desperate for a recovery narrative, they neglected to detect the factual errors and artistic excesses in his work. Do you concur? Is it possible readers were willing to overlook any of Frey's ostentatious embellishments simply because they wished for the reassurance the book promised?
4. Have you encountered individuals that recall past happenings in a way that reflects themselves positively? Or do you have the same propensity to embellish your memories? Share examples of how this tendency manifests.