



Does it matter if it's true?

James's Frey's book *A Million Little Pieces* sold almost 2 million copies in 2005. Most of them after Oprah endorsed it. Oprah had enthusiastically made it one of her Book Club selections because it was "like nothing you've ever read before."

Then the truth came out. Frey's supposed memoir was filled with exaggerations and outright fictions. He wasn't wanted by the cops in several states, or jailed for months. He hadn't been a teenage troublemaker. As he admitted to Oprah, he didn't have a girlfriend who hanged herself in a shower because he couldn't get to her fast enough. It's not clear that the girlfriend even existed.

No one doubts that Frey was a drug addict or that he was in a rehab program. But is there anything more in his account that we can rely on?

I think that's a critical question. I know people who forced themselves to read the book, despite its often crude and graphic descriptions, because they wanted to understand more about the inner life of an addict. They have family or friends who are addicts and they want desperately to know what their struggles feel like so that they can empathize better and be of greater help. They also want to believe that someone can emerge from a life of addiction and be healthy and

successful. Frey's "memoir" pretended to promise them that. By lying Frey betrayed them.

What surprises me is the number of people who have said that it doesn't matter whether the book is true or not. "It's a good story of redemption" they say, "and that's what we need."

Now, I agree that we need redemption. As a Christian, it's hard for me to think of anything *more* important. And we need *stories* of people who have experienced redemption. Nothing is more compelling and reassuring than the testimony of a person whose life has really been turned around. When St. Paul says, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life," we believe him in part because we know of the night-to-day transformation of his own life.

But a fictional account of "redemption" gives us very little reason to believe. I honestly hope that James Frey is free of his addictions, but for all I know his story could simply be a Hollywood-ending fiction that plays to our fantasies just so it will sell books.

James Frey's story is not unique, of course. Many people lie. In the past few months the celebrated South Korean scientist Hwang Woo-suk resigned in humiliation in the full glare of world media for having fabricated results of his human cloning and embryonic stem cell research. David Edmonson, the president of Radio Shack, lied on his résumé about having a degree in theology from a Bible college? It's almost as if pretense and exaggeration have become a business norm. In *The Cheating Culture* David Callahan writes that "as the race for money and

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status has intensified, it has become more acceptable for individuals to act opportunistically and dishonestly to get ahead.”

Good Friday will soon be here again. The Bible tells us that when Pilate was interrogating Jesus, he asked, “What is truth?” What do you think he meant by that? Did he mean, “Life is often so complex that it’s really hard to separate reality from appearance”? That makes Pilate a sympathetic character in the Easter drama. We can pity a man with heavy responsibilities having to decide with limited information. But if that’s what Pilate meant, why did he come out from his council chamber and say, “I find no fault in this man”? And if he found no fault, why did he turn around and have Jesus publicly taunted, humiliated, beaten, and finally killed?

No, when Pilate said “What is truth?” I think he really meant, “What has *truth* got to do with it?” Pilate was a politician who needed to protect his position of power. If it meant ignoring the truth, if it meant calling an innocent man guilty. . . “well, a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do!”

That has been the devil’s seduction from the beginning. Truth is not the only thing that matters. But it matters a lot. Finding it, telling it, living by it, can be very hard work, very courageous work. But it’s the right thing to do—as we know only too well once we’ve been on the receiving end of a lie. Living truthfully cost him his life, but I want to be like Jesus, not Pilate, or James Frey.

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