

# Addiction and the Humanities, Volume 2(2) - Frey's Million Little Lies with Oprah

February 8, 2006

Late last year, *The BASIS* discussed James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, an Oprah Book Club selection. Now this popular memoir is tangled in massive controversy. *The Smoking Gun*, an investigative website, publicly exposed the discrepancies in the memoir and accused Frey of lying about some incidents. Initially, Frey vehemently denied the allegations and even garnered support from Oprah Winfrey, as seen on *Larry King Live*. As the controversy escalated, Oprah invited Frey back to her show to clarify the allegations and hear his side of the story. On January 26th, in front of millions of viewers, James Frey admitted to inventing several parts of his memoir. It is important to note that memoir writers don't have the same artistic license as fiction writers to manipulate the facts, yet embellishing memoirs is not unusual. Armistead Maupin further articulates this issue, "I have always distrusted memoir. I tend to write my memoirs through my fiction. It's easier to get to the truth by not claiming that you are speaking it. Some things can be said in fiction that can never be said in memoir."



Image from The Oprah Winfrey Show. TM & Copyright 2005 Harpo Productions, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

In the midst of the Frey fiasco, it is important that we do not fail to consider the far-reaching consequences of these revelations. For example, Frey's repeated misrepresentations have some observers dismissing his problems because, after

all, he is an “addict” and “addicts” lie. This is a stereotype. What we know is that Frey lied, but not all people struggling with addiction lie. Frey “has ended up hurting the addicts he hoped to inspire”, as he is now the embodiment of the dishonest addict stereotype (Falcone, 2006). People with addiction battle with both addiction and social stigmatizing stereotypes. Frey’s confessions may foster a climate of suspicion that could discourage others from articulating their struggles to a disbelieving public, primed to ignore or misinterpret their voices. Furthermore, people with addiction might feel even more marginalized than they do now and, as a result, be even more unwilling to seek treatment from what they experience as a distrusting “straight” world.

On the recent Oprah show, Frey justified his lying, “in order to get through the experience of the addiction, I thought of myself as being tougher than I was and badder than I was—and it helped me cope. When I was writing the book ... instead of being as introspective as I should have been, I clung to that image”. Perhaps, *A Million Little Pieces* can still continue to inspire change, as Frey insists, “the emotional truth is still there”. Yet, for the many sufferers of addiction the inspiration (and book sales) comes at a very high price.

What do you think? Comments can be addressed to Sarbani Hazra.

## **References**

Associated Press. (2006, January 12). Oprah defends James Frey amid allegations. Retrieved from January 25, 2006, from <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/10809836/>

Falcone, L.B. (2006, January 27). Liar, liar: Oprah’s Frey fury. *Boston Herald*, p.3.

Oprah.com. (2006). James Frey and the *A Million Little Pieces* controversy. Retrieved January 30, 2006, from [http://www2.oprah.com/tows/pastshows/200601/tows\\_past\\_20060126.jhtml](http://www2.oprah.com/tows/pastshows/200601/tows_past_20060126.jhtml).