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IN THE NEWS

### The fracas over Frey

ROOPA SWAMINATHAN

The author's reputation is in 'A Million Little Pieces' after he was caught out for lying. But why is the media so eager to crown heroes and look for happy endings?

'It's a world that is increasingly losing sight of the real from the wannabes...'



**JAMES FREY: The art of 'surviving'. PHOTO: AP**

AMERICAN author James Frey's book **A Million Little Pieces** is one of modern day literature's biggest smash hits. The newest darling of the literary firmament, Frey's book is a memoir based on a period of his own life that was spent in an alcoholic haze and drug-addiction. Media mogul and daytime talk show diva Oprah Winfrey called the book an exemplary tale of one man's brave journey through the rehabilitation process. While the majority of the book is based in a rehab facility, Frey also details his many run-ins with the law — being in an accident, watching his girlfriend commit suicide and spending over six months in jail.

Dream run

The book that created a lot of buzz when it was published two years back took on stratospheric levels of success when Oprah Winfrey picked the memoir in

The Hindu National Essay Contest  
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her much vaunted book club series in October 2005. Since then, the book has been in the *New York Times* Bestseller List and sold well over a few million copies. Frey also optioned the book to Hollywood for a movie deal.

It was one of the biggest success stories in modern day publishing and a welcome one at that. Because, let's face it, we live in a world that's more or less stopped reading. The publishing market (whether in the U.S., England or India) is on a downward spiral. It's also one where an upcoming writer is considered lucky if he or she can get an agent or an editor to read as much as even one page of their manuscript.

And then imagine being James Frey. You get an agent. You get a publisher. You get to be on Oprah. And you get to sell millions and millions of copies of your book. And some of the biggest stars of Hollywood like Colin Farrell, Russell Crowe and Jude Law queue up to play the lead role in the movie version. In one clean stroke, Frey went from being just another published writer to being canonised as the writer du jour. What more can a writer hope for?

I guess you can be James Frey and lie and make up stories about your heroic past.

#### When the facts didn't fit

It started when a website called smokinggun.com ferreted out a few fallacies from Frey's account. They checked the Ohio jail where Frey detailed his experience behind bars and found out that Frey had never been in jail. In his memoir, Frey also claimed to be in a horrific car crash, which killed one of his closest friends. Not true. What started as a trickle soon assumed astronomical proportions and more lies came spilling out of the book. Frey finally confessed to Oprah that he had indeed lied about his past. In the plethora of interviews he gave after the scandal broke, Frey incessantly whined that while he may have changed a few things, he did not make up the bit about being a drug addict and an alcoholic! He only embellished a few facts so that it would make for compelling reading.

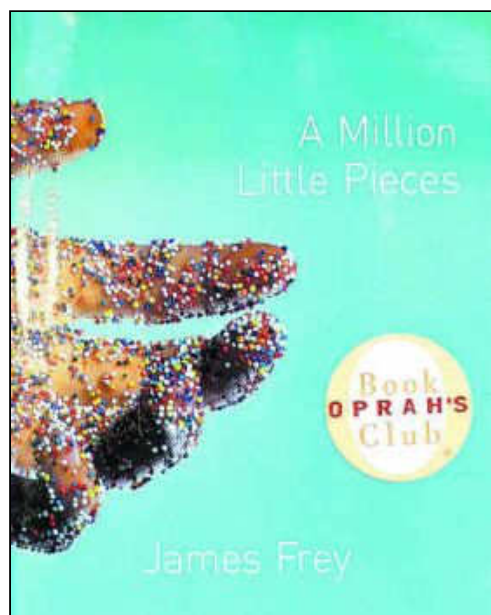
The Frey fracas has whipped up a furore here in the U.S., especially since millions of people who bought into his story of courage felt gypped by his misleading accounts of heroism. It also publicly embarrassed American icon Oprah Winfrey who tearfully claimed to have been cheated by Frey. While writers like Mary Karr and iconoclastic *New York Times* chief book reviewer Michiko Kakutani asserted the need for no embellishment in the non-fiction genre, other editors and writers felt that it didn't matter as much that the book was published. Good and bad books get published every single day. Why not James Frey's book? Their biggest beef was how Frey's talents as a writer were not considered nearly as much as the fact that he was a "survivor". Because he was a recovering alcohol and drug addict and then wrote about it.

#### Losing sight of the real

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Since the fallout over Frey's memoir, the American media and the literary and publishing world are in a huge debate over a world that is so eager to crown heroes and look for happy endings. It's a world that is increasingly losing sight of the real from the wannabes and one that takes a person who has survived the holocaust or the tsunami and another who lost some 45 pounds of his or her body weight and calls them both "survivors". As if there's no difference between them! Debates are raging over calling James Frey a hero in the same breath as those who survive years of starvation and famine and disease.

It's an argument for the ages.

In the meantime, if words like Kleenex and Xerox are arguably the most popular eponyms in the English language, after James Frey's **A Million Little Pieces**, there's a new eponym in the English lexicon. If you wish to screw someone, you simply "James Frey" them.

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