

A MILLION LITTLE PIECES OF FACT, FICTION OR FANTASY?

Comments on the Million Little Pieces, Frey/Oprah Story.

By Carolyn Hayes Uber

Distinguishing between fiction and non-fiction isn't that hard.

The novelist creates people, places and events for us to interpret. Generally, the writer is aiming for believability – that helps us connect with the story. So they draw upon real experiences and weave them into a tale we hope will entrance us for three hundred pages and their publisher hopes will sell thousands of books.

The memoirist, on the other hand, tries to honestly to interpret people, places and events plagiarized from an uncertain and unreliable memory. We still want to be entranced and the publisher still needs to sell books. Perhaps, therein, lays the problem – or at least the temptation. Can he or she chronicle the truth as interestingly as the novelist can spin a story?

How does the reader know the difference? The jacket tells them so. Bookstores require shelving categories printed on the back of the book so lowly-paid clerks can put them on the right shelf – and we trust that the books in the non-fiction section are, just that, not fiction, but the truth.

Is there a “gray” area between veracity and fantasy? Absolutely. Readers understand that no one documents their life on the outside chance they made need it for reference in their future memoir. No one wants to read a colorless “this happened, then that happened” memoir.

Where do memory and imagination blur and cross lines?

When I remember my brother and I having our tonsils out – I was six, he was four – how much am I actually remembering? Do I really remember him jumping on the bed in his short and backless hospital gown, flashing his bare bum, to my utter mortification? Am I remembering stories my parents recounted? Or am I supposing what the event was like, based on my knowledge of my kid brother's likely behavior? Does it matter? Does the characterization of the event make it a more interesting story? Well, sure. Is it a fabrication? No, I don't think so.

If I'd said, we spent three weeks in the hospital due to complications, rather than overnight, THAT would be fiction, and if I further purported it to be a memoir (which is shelved in the non-fiction section) THAT would be crossing the line from gray to black and white.

When James Frey said he spent three months in jail – and it was really overnight – THAT too was pure fiction – not adding color and nuance to an event – and he very well knew so. I don't think anyone could mis-remember being incarcerated for several months. Come on!

This book had red flags all over it, the biggest being it was submitted to 17 publishers AS A NOVEL and rejected. That Doubleday, the eventual publisher, would only take it on as a memoir is somewhat understandable to me as a publisher. Fiction is a hell of a gamble. For every novel that sells even modestly, there are tens of thousands that don't make the radar screen at all, and hundreds of thousands that never get published. According to Nielsen Book Scan, 93% of titles in bookstore distribution sell fewer than 1,000 copies. Ever.

So who shares the responsibility for this debacle in this age of carefully scripted and often embellished “real life” played out in 27 minutes of an hour long “reality” television show?

The author? Absolutely. You can't be smart enough to write that well and not know which parts you played too loose with the truth.

The publisher? Probably. They wanted a book that would sell. They knew the manuscript in front of them was “based” on fact, so they simply gave it back and said remove the fiction. To an admitted “drug addict and criminal”.

Oprah? Maybe. Her quick defense of the author, based on the greater good of the message, is definitely getting into a gray area of its own.

The reading public? A respected colleague told me today that he won't be buying or reading the book as his reaction to the unethical actions of the author. He's some three and a half million copies behind the curve, but I think his vote still counts.