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Don't Feed the Liars!

On Fraudulent Memoirs, and Why They're Bad

For me, this all began with a conversation about James Frey. You know James Frey: he's the chap who went on Oprah with a memoir about his life as an alcoholic, then ended up having to go *back* on Oprah to get ripped into, well, a million little pieces for having made a bunch of it up. In thinking his book a calamitous thing to happen to the world of letters, I didn't imagine I was being particularly original or controversial. But then I happened to use it as an offhand example of something in conversation, and all of a sudden I found myself meeting with resistance. "What's wrong with *A Million Little Pieces*?" I was asked. "So what if it's made up? *All* memoirs are made up! If readers get something out of it, what's the problem?"<sup>1</sup>

Since then I've been curious about what exactly the problem is. Because surely there is one. What I want to do here is to make some suggestions about what it could be, why people like my interlocutor don't seem to acknowledge it, and how the world would be a better place if they did. We'll see that it isn't, in reality, obligatory to make everything up; that memory isn't completely unreliable; that we're not entirely at its mercy anyway; and that while interpretation and sequencing may change the *significance* of events, they don't change the events themselves. We'll see that there are practical, ethical, and aesthetic advantages to not being, and not rewarding, barefaced liars. We'll see that the world *needs* memoirs, just as it needs works of fiction. We'll see that fictions can do things memoirs can't do, but that memoirs can also do things fictions—even autobiographical fictions—can't do. And we'll see that the memoir genre could not survive if we took it to be, like fiction, a matter of pure invention. Trust me, I'm not

making this up.

## I

Let's start by admitting that James Frey didn't act quite as egregiously as some. Five years after Frey's memoir came out, a guy named Herman Rosenblat wrote one of his own—*Angel at the Fence*—detailing the extraordinary circumstances under which he met his wife, Roma. Herman, you see, was a young Jewish child trapped in Buchenwald, and Roma was a young German child who used to throw him apples through the fence, in a highly risky act of generosity. After the war they found each other again, got married, and lived happily ever after. Oprah called this the “greatest love story” she'd ever heard. It got turned into a children's book. It almost got turned into a major motion picture.<sup>2</sup> Then it came out that the whole apple thing was baloney; the movie got shelved, the children's book got pulled, the memoir got canceled, and poor Oprah had to recant again, just as she did with Frey.

There had already been two cases like this back in the 1990s, Benjamin Wilkormiski's *Fragments* (1995) and Misha Defonseca's *Survivre avec les loups* (1997).<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Wilkormiski, Holocaust survivor, turned out to be Bruno Grosjean, regular Swiss guy. Misha Defonseca turned out, surprise surprise, *not* to have been sheltered by packs of wolves, killed a German soldier, or wandered into the Warsaw Ghetto and then escaped. Like Grosjean, she was an average non-Jewish kid, and she was in Brussels minding her own business for the entire war.<sup>4</sup>

Similar license was taken by one Margaret B. Jones, who, in the same year as Herman Rosenblat's rise to notoriety, wrote a memoir (*Love and Consequences*, 2008) about her rough start in life as a half-Native American child living in South Central Los Angeles. It talked about

her joining the Bloods, running drugs for them, carrying a gun, and all kinds of other exciting things. In reality, Margaret B. Jones—sorry, Margaret Seltzer—turned out to be a fairly ordinary middle-class white woman, who just happened to know some gang members through her charity work.<sup>5</sup>

And then there was Norma Khouri. In 1990, Khouri was running a hair salon with her friend Dalia in Amman, Jordan, when Dalia fell in love with a Christian client and, in response, Dalia's father stabbed her to death. Khouri was more fortunate: the Christian client smuggled her out of the country, at which point she turned her story into the best-selling memoir *Forbidden Love* (2003). Except, of course, that none of the above actually happened. Having been brought to Chicago at the age of three, Khouri spent her formative years in the States; she lived there until she was thirty-one, at which point she moved to Australia with her husband and their two children. There was no extended life in Jordan, no salon, no Dalia, no dramatic rescue.<sup>6</sup>

None of these books is a “hoax”: a hoax is the kind of prank you play when you're planning sooner or later to reveal the truth, either to make a fool of someone or to prove a point.<sup>7</sup> Bernie Madoff wasn't hoaxing his customers. Donald Rumsfeld wasn't hoaxing us when he said he knew exactly where the weapons of mass destruction were. No, *Forbidden Love* and company are either delusions or lies. An error is when you say something you think is true but that turns out not to be; a fiction is when you invent a story and tell it as made up, not wanting your listeners to be misled by it; but when you say something you know is false, hoping someone else will believe it, that's a lie.<sup>8</sup>

And when it comes to lies like these, there's a moral reason—or, if you like, an additional moral reason—for looking askance at the perpetrators: you don't exploit the suffering of millions of Jews, the death of Muslim women, or the dire situation of Native Americans in order to get

famous and make yourself a buck.<sup>9</sup> At least in cases like these, the truth really does seem to matter.

## II

But what about cases that don't involve the suffering of millions—like that of multiple Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong, who somehow neglected to acknowledge taking performance-enhancing drugs in his memoirs *Every Second Counts* (2003) and *It's Not about the Bike* (2000)?<sup>10</sup> (I guess, to be fair, there's a grain of truth there: it really *wasn't* about the bike.) What about Vivian Gornick, whose memoir about her mother, called “unflinchingly honest” by the *New York Times*, reportedly turned out to include invented conversations with, of all people, her mother?<sup>11</sup> What, again, about James Frey? Armstrong, Gornick, and Frey weren't exploiting historical acts of injustice or conditions of oppression. Were they guilty of anything more serious than embellishing a story, something all of us do every day?

It seems to me that my shoulder-shrugging interlocutors must believe something like that. Or rather, they must believe one of two things: either that fiction is just as good as fact, or that fact is just as bad as fiction. Maybe all memoirs are made up, so that there's no meaningful difference between *Angel at the Fence* and the *Diary of Anne Frank*; or maybe they're not, but fictions are just as helpful, since, in the misleading words of Aristotle, “poetry is truer than history,”<sup>12</sup> and we can learn Deep Truths from stuff that's invented from whole cloth.

There's no shortage of people willing to say that all memoirs are (and should be!) made up. Burton Pike, a Robert Musil scholar, wrote that “all autobiography is fiction.”<sup>13</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, author of a Lillian Hellman memoir, said in defense of her honesty-challenged subject that “memoir is the art of lying.”<sup>14</sup> Novelist Tom Spanbauer told an interviewer that “as soon as

you open your mouth, you start lying.”<sup>15</sup> (Was he lying when he said that? Let’s hope so.) Lee Gutkind, who’s been called “the Godfather behind creative nonfiction,” informed students at a workshop that “truth is in the eyes of the beholder.”<sup>16</sup> “I embellish stories all the time. I do it even when I’m supposedly telling the unvarnished truth,” echoed Gornick. “I lie. . . . I don’t owe anybody the actuality.”<sup>17</sup> Mike Daisey—about whom more in a bit—clearly decided that the way to atone for his inventions was, I kid you not, to make a podcast series called *All Stories Are Fiction*. And David Shields, who for some reason became famous after writing *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, declared himself “disappointed not that Frey is a liar but that he isn’t a better one. He should have said, Everyone who writes about himself is a liar.”<sup>18</sup> Some pretty bracing defenses of integrity right there.

Now if you wanted to convince people that all memoirs are entirely made up, you could try a number of different gambits. First, you could appeal to the notorious unreliability of memory, as demonstrated by a host of psychological experiments by Elizabeth Loftus and others. That presumably is what Shields means when he says that “anything processed by memory is fiction” and that “the moment you start to remember and compose, you are in the realm of the imagination,” a fact he considers good enough reason—bless him—to reject the entire distinction between fiction and nonfiction.<sup>19</sup>

Episodic memory is indeed imperfect; we do indeed get it wrong about many individual details when we try to recall past experiences. That said, our memory for the broad contours of our lives, for general patterns of behavior, and for repeated events, is highly reliable.<sup>20</sup> This too has been shown by a number of studies.<sup>21</sup> Even when it comes to specific details, we don’t invent *everything*; as Michael Ross and Michael Conway put it, reconstructions constitute “relatively minor editorial revisions” and “are limited to a fraction of the autobiography.”<sup>22</sup> What is more,

there is—believe it or not—such a thing as fact-checking. One of my favorite memoirs, Georges Perec’s *W*, intersperses recollections with periodic corrections, Perec having taken the very sensible step of going around and asking other people what they remembered, to see if he was off base.<sup>23</sup> We have friends, we have family, we have diaries, we have public records; we are not completely at the mercy of our own selective memories. (James Frey could have consulted his arrest records. You and I can look at our texts and emails.) The account we end up with may not be entirely flawless, but we can do better or worse, and it’s often within our power to do better. So there’s no need to throw up our hands and say all memoirs, and memories, are 100 percent bogus; and we certainly shouldn’t deliberately lie.

If you still wanted to say that all memoirs are fictions, you could invoke the familiar fact that we often get things wrong about ourselves, or the equally familiar fact that people like to embellish their stories. But we don’t *always* get it wrong about ourselves, and we don’t usually get it *totally* wrong about ourselves: that’s why there’s a difference between Herman Rosenblat and Anne Frank. And embellishment is different from straight-up fabrication. Maybe it’s embellishment if you were attacked by two muggers and you say there were three. But when James Frey says he was “in jail a bunch of times,” and the reality is that he was in jail *zero* times, that’s not embellishment. When Frey says he was “wanted in three states,” and the reality is that he was wanted in, you guessed it, zero states, that’s not embellishment either. And when Frey says he resisted arrest and got beaten with billy clubs, while the reality is that he was “polite and cooperative at all times,” he’s taking the mickey. We don’t necessarily mind a bit of embellishment, but we do expect the core of each major event to be something that actually happened.

There’s one last recourse, it seems to me, for the die-hard “all memoir is fiction” type, and

that is to note, as Jerome Bruner does, that stories are always told from a particular point of view.<sup>24</sup> Stories organize events into shapes, and those shapes are contestable; some would even say that the mere act of shaping means that every narrative is a distortion, since events don't already come with a shape attached.<sup>25</sup> There's a grain of truth in all that, of course, but again, the perspectival nature of narration is no excuse for fudging the *facts*. If you resist arrest and get beaten with billy clubs, you are then at liberty to interpret that experience in a number of different ways: you could explain it as a result of your character, of institutional corruption, of bad parenting, of local circumstances, or of fate; you could read it as turning point in your life, an indication of your hidden desires, an indictment of society, or a sign from God. But if you *didn't* resist arrest and *didn't* get beaten with billy clubs, no amount of perspectival interpretation can make it seem like you did. Would it really be enough to say “having tea with Grandma *felt* like being beaten with billy clubs”? I rather doubt it.

Here as elsewhere, the fact-interpretation distinction is our friend. It allows us to see that while the overall shape of a narrative gives additional significance to events, and while it shines a spotlight on some events rather than on others, it doesn't miraculously produce incidents out of thin air. The fact-interpretation distinction thus prevents us conflating the diary of Anne Frank with *Angel at the Fence*. It's entirely legitimate to disagree with Anne Frank's interpretations of her experiences—as, for example, when she infers from them that “people are really good at heart” and that “the final forming of a person's character lies in their own hands”<sup>26</sup>—but only a fool or a poststructuralist would think this casts doubt on what she says about the situation of Jews in Nazi-occupied Holland. Herman Rosenblat made up the core of his story; Anne Frank did not.

As I see it, then, embellishment, unreliable memory, and perspective are not enough to

warrant the claim that all memoir is fiction. Or, as literature professors used to like saying, that “the boundary is blurred.” Why did blurred boundaries seem like such an unconditionally great thing? I get it that *some* boundaries are invidious and in urgent need of blurring, like the boundary between the mega-rich and the rest of us. But back in the day, the blurring of pretty much any boundary was treated as cause for dancing in the streets. Why? Maybe they couldn’t predict that the Snuggie Corporation would one day blur the boundary between a dress and a blanket, but didn’t they know that pesticide companies were busy blurring the boundary between science and nature? Or that Hitler had blurred the boundary between Germany and Poland?

### III

But I digress, and I’m also confirming Godwin’s Law. My point is that a James Frey defender isn’t entitled to say that all memoirs are fictions. Story form doesn’t turn a fantasy into a fact; memory doesn’t get everything wrong; most people aren’t self-deceived about the entirety of their lives; and we often have the opportunity to fact-check ourselves, whether by consulting public records, by reading our own correspondence, or by talking to friends and family members. The fact that it’s possible to write a *Diary of Anne Frank* shows that it isn’t necessary to write *A Million Little Pieces*.

At this point I imagine Frey fans turning to the other line of defense. OK, they might say, memoirs don’t *have* to be full of lies—but it doesn’t make any difference when they are. A made-up memoir can do everything a truthful one can. So what’s the problem? Just slap the label “fiction” on *A Million Little Pieces*, send it back out into the world, and watch it work its healing magic on a host of grateful readers.

This line of attack might seem to get some support from the fact that works of prose can



navigate between genres. Alphonse de Lamartine published the same narrative twice, the first time in his memoirs, the second time as a novel. Conversely, the *Mémoires du sieur de Pontis* (1678) were originally thought to be fictional, but turned out to be the memoir of an actual seventeenth-century nobleman.<sup>27</sup> There don't have to be any intrinsic features that mark off a fictional autobiography from the memoir of an existing human being.<sup>28</sup> Why not think, then, that the former is just as good at doing whatever the latter can, and so it doesn't matter at all when memoirists lie their rear ends off?

That's a nice try; but in reality, novels only have the same effect on us as memoirs if we *read* them as memoirs. David Hume was already on to this in the eighteenth century. He imagined two people reading the same book, one taking it for a true story and the other taking it for a work of fiction; "they plainly receive the same ideas," he wrote, "and in the same order," but the author's "testimony has not the same influence on them."<sup>29</sup> He even tried the experiment himself, sending a correspondent some Plutarch to read and telling her it was a novel. She enjoyed it tremendously until she realized it was nonfiction, at which point she abandoned it in disgust. (The joke's on both of them, of course, since Plutarch was a bit of a confabulator.)

In recent years psychologists have tested this hypothesis systematically, and have come up with similar results. Deborah Hendersen and Herb Clark ran a study in which subjects heard a story and were simply asked to tell it back to the experimenter. Those who were told the story was a fiction recalled up to 50 percent more details, and repeated back significantly more phrases, than those who were told it was factual.<sup>30</sup> Another study, designed by Rolf Zwaan, indicated the same increased attention to detail, as well as a compensating effect on the other side: while subjects who read a given narrative as a work of fiction did a much better job of attending to specifics, subjects who read the same narrative as a news story did a much better job

of tracking the causal sequence.<sup>31</sup> And fMRI research has shown significant differences in activation in the two conditions.<sup>32</sup> What you take a text to be determines what you do with it.<sup>33</sup>

So while *Robinson Crusoe* contains the same sequence of words when read as fact and when read as fiction, it's not really the same *work*, since it doesn't produce the same *experience*. (Following Arthur Danto, we could think of these two works as "indiscernibles."<sup>34</sup>) It doesn't make much sense for someone who knows *Robinson Crusoe* is fiction to select it as a manual for survival on a desert island. And it doesn't make much sense, conversely, for someone who thinks it's factual to wonder what Daniel Defoe was up to in inventing the character Friday, a figure who did not feature in the source material. (Poor Alexander Selkirk never met anyone on his island.)

Generally we're encouraged to read a text one way or the other, thanks to its stylistic features,<sup>35</sup> its paratextual indications, or its author going around insisting "the only things I changed were aspects of people that might reveal their identity. Otherwise, it's all true," and threatening doubters with lawsuits.<sup>36</sup> (Yes, that was Frey again. It keeps getting better, doesn't it?) As a result, we read novels and memoirs for different things, attending to different features, performing different mental operations, and retaining different information.<sup>37</sup> Reading *A Million Little Pieces* as a novel—as something we know to be invented—won't produce the effects Frey wants. Fictions can't do everything.

#### IV

Of course, fictional and nonfictional narratives have much in common. Both can make us laugh; both can make us cry; both can make us think. Both can raise important questions that they invite us to reflect on; both can model the different shapes that human lives take; both can

get us to care, in a certain sense, about the characters within them. Still, for the vast majority of stories—including the ones I’ve been discussing here—there are some very important differences, differences in how things land and what can be accomplished.

Imagine a friend telling you that the president just got kidnapped by terrorists. This is big news! (Good news or bad news? I’ll let you keep that to yourself.) Now imagine your friend says “sorry, I meant the president in the TV show I watch just got kidnapped by terrorists.” My guess is you’re not nearly as interested. Fictional presidents get kidnapped all the time. Real-world narrative information, by contrast, gets bonus points for being real. There’s a particular kind of surprise only actuality can deliver, the surprise of truth being stranger than fiction.<sup>38</sup> As a novel, James Frey’s book didn’t have this, and so it couldn’t sell.

As a paradoxical corollary, one and the same event might be a highlight if part of a (genuine) memoir but, if part of a novel, an aesthetic flaw. Think of all those moments in fictions that felt contrived to you, too good (or too bad) to be true, preposterous, credulity-snapping. Now imagine that they actually happened to someone. Wouldn’t they make for amazing episodes in a memoir?<sup>39</sup> (I once watched a film called *It’s All Gone Pete Tong*, about a DJ who managed to continue spinning records after going completely deaf. The trailer had called it “based on a true story,” and I was enthralled. You mean it’s possible to run a whole show just on rhythm and memory, like a Beethoven with turntables? Once it became clear that the film was pure fiction, it lost all interest for me. No, it wasn’t possible; it was just a very silly plot device.)

The same holds for certain forms of humor. The fact that some prisoners once laboriously tunneled their way out of jail only to emerge into a courtroom—that’s hilarious.<sup>40</sup> But mostly because it actually happened. (I could see it being mildly amusing in a *Keystone Cops* movie, but the truth gets bonus comedy points just for being real.) Conversely, if you were to read a story

involving an Englishman drinking Earl Grey tea on the beach while reading Jane Austen and wearing a sweater, you might think the author was stereotyping the poor Brits. But if what you were reading turned out to be a diary entry written by someone who'd spent a summer with me, neither of us could really complain. A novel is something its author created; like the god of her little world, she has virtually unlimited power over it. But with great power, as Jean-Paul Sartre and Stan Lee agree, comes great responsibility.<sup>41</sup> Frey wanted all the freedom with none of the accountability. Sartre would have called that bad faith. Spiderman might have called it cheating.

That freedom, of course, is a great asset to writers of fiction. One thing they can do is make sure that things hang together perfectly and produce whatever closure (or non-closure) they want.<sup>42</sup> Out in the real world, some stories end neatly, but others don't, and honest memoirists are forced to leave things the way they found them. (It's significant, I think, that Truman Capote added an imaginary ending to *In Cold Blood*, a book he nonetheless chose to call "immaculately factual."<sup>43</sup>) Literary nonfiction can do many of the things that fiction can, but it can't do all of them, just as fiction can't do all of the things memoirs can. Different horses, as my fellow Brits say, for different courses.

Another advantage fiction writers have is that they can squeeze symbolic value out of things like names. Imagine if you were to read a first-person novel featuring a narrator called Benedict Cumberbatch. Wouldn't you wonder to yourself what's behind the choice of name? Why "Benedict Cumberbatch"? Did the author want us to think of religion and high society (benediction, cummerbund)? Or of speaking (-dict) and baking (-batch)? Is this supposed to be a joke character? Are we being reminded that the book is a work of fiction? Of course, nothing of the sort would occur to you if you were reading a memoir by the actual Benedict Cumberbatch. In that case, to the question "why Benedict Cumberbatch?", the only answer would be "because

that’s his name.” Any number of things are like that in a life: our height, our birthplace, our nationality, our shoe size... We can *make* them meaningful if we want, but they don’t come with meaning built into them, because we didn’t create them.

So fictions and memoirs are different in all kinds of important ways. They offer different advantages to their writers and different experiences to us, their readers. A lying memoir does not automatically become a good work of fiction, and even a good work of fiction lacks the shock of the real. Fiction does many things considerably better—but some things considerably worse. There’s no substitute for a true story honestly told.

## V

That brings me to the crucial issue, which is that it’s not rational, in most cases, to export beliefs from works of fiction and adopt them as your own. That approach to reading is going to turn you into Don Quixote or Madame Bovary. Indeed, it’s going to turn you into a very *confused* Don Quixote or Madame Bovary, since fictions don’t typically offer evidence for the worldviews underlying them,<sup>44</sup> and accordingly the so-called “lessons” you extract will conflict wildly with one another. One day you’ll read *Crime and Punishment* and “learn” that crime doesn’t pay; the next day you’ll see *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and “learn” that you can murder whomever you want and feel just fine about it. This is no way to form your core beliefs, those that drive your behavior on a daily basis.

Exporting beliefs from well-vetted works of *nonfiction*, by contrast, is highly rational.<sup>45</sup> Existence, as philosophers say, is proof of possibility: if I find out that a campaign of civil disobedience met with success, that’s evidence that civil disobedience sometimes works. If I find out that a rehab clinic is a hellhole, that’s evidence that rehab clinics are sometimes hellholes.

And that's the real problem with *A Million Little Pieces*.<sup>46</sup> It presents Hazelden, the treatment facility Frey attended, as a kind of Dantesque horrorscape. Patients are left lying on a floor overnight! Patients beat each other up! Patients with broken noses have to get them reset on site! If you're lucky, a counselor will drive you to a crack house! This is not innocuous embellishment; this is the kind of thing that is likely, if taken as true, to deter people from seeking help. (No wonder some Hazelden doctors came forward in 2006 to deny the allegations.<sup>47</sup>)

Part of Frey's purpose in writing the book—apart, of course, from any fame and fortune he might accrue—was to encourage addicts to forgo treatment and overcome alcoholism through sheer force of will. Rather than attending meetings, they were simply supposed, in his rather vacuous catchphrase, to “hold on.” Frey was explicit about the exemplary force of his story, telling one addict “if I can do it, you can do it.” But who knows if he really “did it”? For all we know, he may have started off less addicted than he makes out, and/or may have had more help than he makes out. And it's almost certainly true that Hazelden was less gruesome—perhaps far less gruesome—than he makes out. These are dangerous fabrications, not harmless embellishments.

Novelist Stephen King explained the problem more eloquently than I can: “The cruelly ignorant assumption that addicts bring it on themselves (and thus can take care of the problem themselves) only exacerbates the problem,” he wrote. “No addict struggling to get clean before the spike or pipe can do him in deserves to be told, ‘Just pull yourself together and clean up your act like James Frey did.’ Because, dig: James Frey isn't the way you sober up.”<sup>48</sup>

Stories like James Frey's constitute real-world evidence if genuine, but not if invented. It's precisely for this reason, I suspect, that Frey couldn't get his book published as a novel, which is

what he tried to do the first seventeen times he sent it out. It's also why he managed to get it accepted for publication as soon as he updated its status to nonfiction.<sup>49</sup> And it's why he continued to lie about his lies, swearing up and down that the whole thing was true: he knew perfectly well that its veracity mattered, even though, once exposed, he went on to claim it didn't.

I'm not saying, of course, that all other memoirs are scrupulously accurate, and that this is why it's rational to trust many of their factual claims. The generic distinction between fiction and nonfiction isn't enough on its own to guarantee that kind of rationality. But fortunately we also have institutional structures that police accuracy: libel laws, slander laws, book reviews, and of course venues for public shaming such as the Oprah Winfrey Show.<sup>50</sup> Memoirists can embellish, but they can't always get away with making important things up; and we can rely on this, by and large, to guide our reading practices.

## VI

When you put it all together, it's easy to understand why some have seen *A Million Little Pieces* as a case of fraud.<sup>51</sup> James Frey made money on a book purporting to offer something it didn't: an insight into what the life of an addict is like, what treatment centers are like, and how recovery is possible. Some of the shoulder-shruggers seem to assume that all readers are, like them, distrustful of every last thing that falls into their hands, but since many readers declared themselves encouraged by Frey's example, this is clearly not the case. Furthermore, it's not clear that we'd *want* it to be the case. Who would be happy to live in a world where lies are routinely passed off as truths? Who would still read memoirs? What would be the point?<sup>52</sup>

Think of any memoir that has profoundly inspired you or someone you know, offering insight

into a situation or world they hadn't entered before, helping them to feel what it's like to be a certain kind of person or in a certain kind of experience, or motivating them to raise their game, fight the good fight, or be kinder. Maybe it's a Holocaust memoir, like Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*. Maybe it's a memoir of the Rwandan genocide, like Scholastique Mukasonga's *Cockroaches*. Maybe it's a memoir of race in America, like *Up from Slavery* by Booker T. Washington, *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Dreams from My Father* by Barack Obama, or *Cuz* by Danielle Allen. Maybe it's a memoir of grief and recovery, like Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* or Helen Macdonald's *H Is for Hawk*. Maybe it's about coming out, like Jeanette Winterson's *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* Or maybe it's about growing up neuro-atypical, like *Thinking in Pictures* by Temple Grandin. Now imagine a world where readers, chastened by their experiences with James Frey and Lance Armstrong, and marooned by the indifference of the publishing establishment, no longer believe a single word in any memoir. Would the book you love even be written in such a world? If it were, would it have any impact?<sup>53</sup> In a world without truth, what exactly would you speak to power?<sup>54</sup>

I sometimes think my shoulder-shrugging interlocutor *wants* us to live in a world like that: one where there's no oversight whatsoever, and where all works of nonfiction are an indistinguishable slurry of truths, half-truths, and outright lies. The onus would then be on readers to figure out what in there is reliable and what is not. But how exactly would they do that, if every other reference work were similarly contaminated? The result would be a globalized climate of distrust, which is just as unhealthy as a globalized climate of unthinking belief.<sup>55</sup> If we're unlucky, this climate may end up being the long-term legacy of James Frey and his ilk.



We already saw a glimpse of the damage, I think, in the case of Mike Daisey, whose one-man performance about conditions in Apple factories in China was excerpted on *This American Life*, a weekly radio program, in 2012. Daisey's central claims were true—some workers really were exposed to n-hexane gas, for example—but many of the details were invented.<sup>56</sup> *This American Life* then had to retract publicly, at which point damage was done not just to Daisey's reputation but to his cause,<sup>57</sup> and arguably—who knows?—to investigative journalism generally. (Books like *Angel at the Fence* have already been gleefully seized upon by Holocaust deniers.<sup>58</sup>) Fabrications discredit your position, offering ammunition to the enemy.

Again: if it really were true that fictions are just as effective as nonfictions in transmitting facts about the world, why would Frey and Daisey have felt compelled to conceal their inventions? Why would Daisey have declared, on each playbill, “this is a work of nonfiction”?<sup>59</sup> Why would it have been so hard for Frey to get his book published as a novel?

Don't get me wrong: there's plenty of room for fiction based on a writer's real-life experiences, including fiction so close to memoir it can be hard, at times, to see the daylight. (Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle* is a great example of that.) What there isn't room for is a work of fabrication deceptively sold as the truth. If it's true that the world is better off for the existence of novels and memoirs, and if we want to continue having both, then we need to prevent the two types of writing from collapsing into each other. Cases like Knausgaard's don't seriously threaten the distinction, but cases like Frey's do. It's imperative to make sure things labeled “memoir” are not just a pack of lies.

## VII

If what I've said is true for mendacious memoirists, it's surely even more true for deceptive

documentarians. Over an acclaimed career spanning five decades, Werner Herzog has made large numbers of films he's called "documentaries," many of which, it turns out, contain deliberate fabrications. Astonishingly, Herzog is positively proud of this. "I have, with every one of my films, attempted to move beyond facts," he says. He has a word for documentary makers who insist on getting the facts right: "morons." (I'm not exaggerating.<sup>60</sup>)

One of Herzog's films, *Gesualdo: Death for Five Voices*, is about a sixteenth-century composer named Carlo Gesualdo. In it we see the director of the Venosa museum talking about an item in his collection, a clay disc covered in mysterious runes. He reads aloud a letter from Gesualdo to an alchemist, asking for help deciphering it; Gesualdo, he says, "spent sleepless nights trying to unravel the secret of these strange symbols." But that's not what's in the letter, and the man who's holding it is not even the real museum director—Herzog just got some law professor from Milan to pose as him. Why? "The scene," explains Herzog, "reflects the fact that Gesualdo became demented in the final years of his life. He single-handedly chopped down the entire forest around the castle because he was convinced it was closing in on him" (WH, p. 314).

Another Herzog "documentary," *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*, tells the story of Dieter Dengler, a pilot who escaped from a POW camp in Vietnam. Herzog found Dengler's house full of pictures of open doors, perhaps representing his joy at being free. "I told him we had to . . . make this truth visible," Herzog reports (p. 320). So how did they do that? By staging Dengler repeatedly opening and closing a car door, something he'd never done and wasn't particularly excited to do.

These aren't by any means the only cases. Herzog admits making stuff up in *Lessons of Darkness* ("mountain ranges" that are really just heaps of dust filmed at a short distance; "this isn't a lie, just an intensified form of truth"), *Bells from the Deep* (local drunkards hired to play pilgrims; "through invention, fabrication and staging you can reach a more intense level of

truth”), *Echoes from a Sombre Empire*, *Invincible*, *Land of Silence and Darkness*, *The White Diamond*, *Wings of Hope*, and *Encounters at the End of the World* (WH, pp. 293, 301, 289–90, 289, 291, 325, 301–20). *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, meanwhile, includes “mutant crocodiles” that are neither crocodiles nor mutated.<sup>61</sup>

What Herzog claims, amazingly, is that he does all this lying in service of the truth. No, not the pathetic, paltry “truth” of facts and reality—that’s just the “accountant’s truth”—but the “ecstatic truth” of life, which, conveniently perhaps, is hard to describe. (“We can never know what truth really is,” says Herzog; “truth can never be definitively captured or described . . . the important truths remain unknown.”) According to Herzog, facts do not “have any value,” because there is no way to reach any deeper truth on their basis: “The truth in cinema can be discovered only by not being bureaucratically, politically and mathematically correct” (WH, pp. 288, 287–88, 288–89, 288).

But the fake mountain ranges in *Lessons of Darkness* don’t reveal any deeper truth; they just save on production costs. Nor does the letter in *Death for Five Voices*, or the car in *Little Dieter*. If Herzog wanted to show that Gesualdo went mad, why not mention that he chopped down a whole forest? If Herzog wanted to show that Dieter liked open doors, why not show the pictures in his house? Why on earth could he not get the same “truth” out of the actual facts?

It’s clear that a lot of people find this trickery innocuous, or even fun. Maybe they assume that everyone is in on the game. (Trust me, they aren’t.) But others worry—I think reasonably—that if enough documentaries are known to be full of lies, people will no longer believe any of them, at which point we’ll only have one type of film: fiction. In the words of Nina Golden Seavey, founder of the Documentary Center at George Washington University, that will be “a nail in the coffin of the [documentary] form.”<sup>62</sup> And we desperately need to have places to get our reliable

real-world data; otherwise everything is fake news.

About *Bells from the Deep*, *Death for Five Voices*, and *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*, Herzog once admitted “it would be misleading to call those three films documentaries” (WH, p. 286). “My documentaries,” he added, “are often fictions in disguise” (p. 289). But if so, why call them documentaries? Why not label them honestly? Why not include an indication within them that marks the difference between reality and invention? Why be part of the problem?

In a truly stunning twist, Herzog declared himself irritated with young viewers who didn’t believe the footage in *Grizzly Man* was real. It’s entirely their fault, said Herzog: “By insisting that this kind of imagery must be the result of digital trickery, they reveal themselves to be disconnected from the real world” (WH, p. 328). Oh, and “a new kind of cinema is needed that can help us . . . once again trust our eyes” (p. 327). That’s right: the cinema that will do this is his own indistinguishable jumble of truth and lies, not the works of “morons” like Errol Morris or Frederick Wiseman who foolishly think that facts matter. The very idea!

Don’t get me wrong: there’s plenty of room in a healthy society for statements that aren’t true. There’s fiction; there’s standup comedy; there’s banter; there are tall tales of fishing and courtship; there are harmless social fibs. But society as a whole benefits from the existence of venues in which we can all count on a good-faith effort at truth-telling. We need to be able to trust that our newspapers are not deliberately lying to us. We need to be able to trust that our scientists are not deliberately lying to us. And we need to be able to trust that our documentaries are not deliberately lying to us, even for the sake of some ostensible “ecstatic truth.”

## VIII

This essay isn’t a made-up story, and it offers some evidence for the claims it makes, so

maybe it's rational to draw a few conclusions from it. The first is that lying in your memoir isn't a great look, and it's also not great for society. Novels are indispensable things, but so are memoirs: there's no substitute for an interesting true story honestly told. There's a practical advantage to writing and reading honest memoirs; there's an ethical advantage; and there's an aesthetic advantage. Ethically, true memoirs don't exploit or defraud, and they don't contribute to a growing climate of distrust in facts. Aesthetically, true memoirs deliver the thrilling shock of the real. And practically, true memoirs help us to make decisions on the basis of what's actually going on.

So my moral for academics would be: let's keep our standards high. Let's not fall for the argument that all writing is fiction, that all memories are false, that all boundaries are blurred. For readers, the moral is: don't feed the liars. Don't give them your money and don't give them your time. Insist on honesty. Be offended at being lied to. (Our very indifference is a symptom of the same disease.) But keep reading things that are sincere. Memoir deserves to survive.

As for mendacious memoirists and deceptive documentarians, well, the moral for them is to stop making stuff up. You could say you don't really know. You could say you aren't really sure (*AT*, pp. 97–99). You could say your memory is faulty, like Percec did. You could call your work fiction, like Knausgaard does. Or, you know, you could just tell the truth.

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<sup>1</sup> This, more or less, is the position of writer and English professor Pam Houston: “If they [Frey’s readers] were moved, then they got their twenty-four dollars’ worth” (Pam Houston, “Corn Maze,” *Hunger Mountain*, [hungermtn.org/corn-maze/](http://hungermtn.org/corn-maze/)). For Houston, this assessment is connected to what she calls “the failure of language to mean.” If words don’t refer to objects and events in the world, then there’s no difference between a “true” statement and a “false” statement; both are equally meaningless. That’s potentially something a person could believe, but does Houston herself believe it? Elsewhere in the same essay, she discusses a piece she wrote about six women. Three of them, she says, “actually existed,” but when it came to the other three, “I made them up.” How does such a distinction—between “actually existing” and being “made up”—retain any significance if language doesn’t “mean”? Still in the same essay, Houston refers to “presidents who lie about weapons of mass destruction.” Getting vexed about lying is an excellent thing, but it only makes sense if you believe in the possibility of truth-telling, since *that’s exactly what lying is the failure to do*. If it’s terrible when presidents lie us into war (which it is), and if we can tell the difference between people who actually exist and people who are made up (which we can), then language “means,” Frey misled his readers, and maybe those readers wanted more than to be moved by manipulation.

<sup>2</sup> “Holocaust ‘Greatest’ Love Story a Hoax,” CNN, December 30, 2008. Herman Rosenblat really was a prisoner in Buchenwald, but he invented the love story. His memoir, which never got published, was rather impudently titled *Angel at the Fence: The True Story of a Love That Survived* (2008); the children’s book was Laurie Friedman’s *Angel Girl* (Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books, 2008). For details on the film version, see Gabriel Sherman, “Wartime Lies,” *The New Republic*, December 25, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Another case to consider: Lillian Hellman, the playwright and screenwriter, who claimed in her memoir *Pentimento* (1973) that she had smuggled money to the resistance in Austria. The consensus view now seems to be that this was a lie, and that Hellman was actually passing off someone else’s story (Muriel Gardiner’s, to be precise) as her own. (See, for instance, Ronald Radosh, “What Becomes a Liar Most?” *Claremont Review of Books* 15, no. 1 [Winter 2014–15].) The episode was later turned into an Oscar-winning film, *Julia* (1977). In a letter to producer Richard Roth (June 30, 1976), Hellman insisted both that “this is not a work of fiction” and that “I took the money into Germany” (Thomas Austenfeld, *American Women Writers and the Nazis: Ethics and Politics in Boyle, Porter, Stafford, and Hellman* [Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001], p. 103). Novelist Mary McCarthy famously said about Hellman that “every word she writes is a lie, including ‘and’ and ‘the’”; maybe that’s not true for everything, but the *Julia* episode does seem pretty bad.

<sup>4</sup> See Adam Kirsch, “Yet Another Writer Has Admitted Faking Her Holocaust Memoir,” *The New Republic*, May 17, 2014. Kirsch also discusses Jerzy Kosinski’s World War II memoir *The Painted Bird*, which some see as falling into a similar category. (D. G. Myers offers a bracing assessment in his review of James Park Sloan’s *Jerzy Kosinski: A Biography, First Things* 66 [October 1996]: 58–64.) *The Painted Bird* was, however, marketed as a novel. Another complicated case is *The Education of Little Tree* by Asa Earl Carter, ostensibly the memoir of an orphan raised by his Cherokee grandparents, but actually written by—of all things—a former Klansman. Had Carter mended his ways? Was he being a cynical opportunist? Was his book some kind of twisted mockery? No one really knows. (See Dan T. Carter, “The Transformation of a Klansman,” *New York Times*, October 4, 1991.)

<sup>5</sup> Although the genres are different, we might compare the cases of Kent Johnson, who allegedly posed as Hiroshima survivor “Araki Yasusada” to get some poems published, and of Michael Hudson, who did the same with purported Chinese female poet “Yi-Fen Chou.” (See Hua Hsu, “When White Poets Pretend to be Asian,” *New Yorker*, September 9, 2015.) We might also compare Daniel James, a Caucasian writer, who published *Famous All Over Town* (1983)—a novel about Mexican-American life in Los Angeles—under the pseudonym “Danny Santiago.” (See Edwin McDowell, “A Noted ‘Hispanic’ Novelist Proves to be Someone Else,” *New York Times*, July 22, 1984.)

<sup>6</sup> Malcolm Knox, “Bestseller’s Lies Exposed,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 24, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> On the difference between kinds of statement, see Harry Frankfurt, “On Bullshit,” *Raritan Quarterly Review* 6, no. 2 (1986): 81–100. “Bullshit” is when you don’t even care whether the statement is true or not. It’s worth remembering that Frankfurt had been teaching at 1980s Yale.

<sup>8</sup> This, by the way, is why it’s generally fine for comedians to embellish: we assume their stories are made up. David Sedaris, who claimed his childhood guitar teacher was a homophobe, is an interestingly difficult case. (See Alex Heard, “This American Lie: A Midget Guitar Teacher, a Macy’s Elf, and the Truth about David Sedaris,” *The New Republic*, March 19, 2007.) Most people don’t seem to have cared very much, but to me at least, Sedaris’s stories—unlike jokes—are funny only if true. So there’s no *moral* infraction here, but for some of us there’s an *aesthetic* cost to the dishonesty.

<sup>9</sup> As Deborah Lipstadt put it, Herman Rosenblat “instrumentalized the Holocaust. This is the worst possible thing you can do on so many levels.” (See Gabriel Sherman, “The Greatest Love Story Ever Sold,” *The New Republic*, December 24, 2008.)

<sup>10</sup> “I immediately issued an angry denial through our Postal spokesman, Dan Osipow. Our team had ‘zero tolerance’ for any form of doping, we said. It sounded like the usual clichéd statement, but we meant it. We were absolutely innocent” (Lance Armstrong [with Sally Jenkins], *Every Second Counts* [New York: Broadway Books, 2003], p. 73). First comes the doping, then the duping. After Armstrong finally admitted in 2013 to using banned substances, he was hit with a class-action lawsuit on behalf of hoodwinked readers—but a federal judge ruled that the First Amendment protected his right to deceive. (See Brent Schrottenboer, “Judge Supports Lance Armstrong’s Right to Lie,” *USA Today*, September 10, 2013.)

<sup>11</sup> See Mona Simpson, “A Daughter All Her Life,” *New York Times*, April 26, 1987. “Every narrator of a memoir,” wrote Simpson, “is bound—as if by a promise—to tell us the unshaved truth, however it may or may not conform to his vision. It is this raw covenant that gives memoirs an ability to shock in a way fiction hardly ever can.” But according to a number of witnesses, Gornick later admitted having invented some of the incidents and conversations (Terry Greene Sterling, “Confessions of a Memoirist,” *Salon*, August 2, 2003). So I guess the book was only flinchingly honest, the truth shaved, and the covenant cooked.

<sup>12</sup> More precisely, here’s what Aristotle has to say on the subject: “This too is not the task of the poet, i.e., to speak of what has come to be, but rather to speak of what sort of things would come to be, i.e., of what is possible according to the likely or the necessary. For the historian and the poet . . . differ in this: the one speaks of what has come to be while the other speaks of what sort [of things] would come to be. Therefore *poiēsis* is more philosophic and of more stature than history. For poetry speaks rather of the general things while history speaks of the particular things” (Aristotle, *On Poetics*, trans. Seth Benardete and Michael Davis [South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2002], chap. 9, pp. 26–27, §1451a–b).

<sup>13</sup> Burton Pike, “Time in Autobiography,” *Comparative Literature* 28 (1976): 337.

<sup>14</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, *A Difficult Woman: The Challenging Life and Times of Lillian Hellman* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), p. 339.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Patty Wentz, “Remembrance of Things Past: Bestselling Author Jennifer Lauck Says her Heart-Wrenching Memoirs Are True . . . Pretty Much,” *Willamette Week*, October 16, 2001; hereafter abbreviated “RTP.”

<sup>16</sup> This is from the blurb for a 2013 workshop titled “Making Up the Future of Truth; From Shattered Glass to Te’Oing—A Creative Experiment.” (See [emerge.asu.edu/2013/exhibits/workshop/making-up-the-future-of-truth-from-shattered-glass-to-teoing-a-creative-experiment/](http://emerge.asu.edu/2013/exhibits/workshop/making-up-the-future-of-truth-from-shattered-glass-to-teoing-a-creative-experiment/).) *Shattered Glass* is the title of a film about Stephen Glass, a journalist who lost his job for making up stories in *The New Republic*; Manti Te’o is an American football player whose girlfriend died of leukemia but then turned out not to have ever existed. For the “Godfather behind creative nonfiction” moniker, see James Wolcott, “Me, Myself, and I,” *Vanity Fair*, October 1997.

<sup>17</sup> In Madeleine Schwartz, “We Knew We Were Not Liberated and Were Never Going to Be Liberated. But We Knew What Liberation Was: An Interview with Vivian Gornick,” *The Believer*, March 24, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2010), p. 43; hereafter abbreviated *RH*.

<sup>19</sup> “The moment you start to remember and compose, you are in the realm of the imagination. . . . I reject the distinction that there is this very fabulous thing called fiction and this other thing called nonfiction” (“RTP”). The “anything processed by memory is fiction” line is in *RH*, p. 57.

<sup>20</sup> I was once at a conference where Jonah Lehrer (now famous for inventing Bob Dylan quotes) tried to convince a room full of Proust scholars that *In Search of Lost Time* shows us just how unreliable memory is: the book is obviously an autobiography, he said, and yet there are discrepancies between the novel and the life, so the only explanation is that Proust got it wrong about his past. In the question period I asked him if this meant that Proust had forgotten he was gay. Lehrer didn’t have a very good answer, perhaps because he had forgotten he was a scientist.

<sup>21</sup> Sure, says psychologist Daniel Schacter, “autobiographical memories are complex constructions. But this need not mean that we live in a world of wholly fabricated, self-serving fantasies. There are, in fact, good reasons to believe that our memories for the broad contours of our lives are fundamentally accurate,” and “people are generally accurate when reflecting on the broad outlines of their past lives” (Daniel Schacter, *Searching for Memory* [New York: Basic Books, 1997], pp. 94, 212). Compare A. D. Baddeley: “Much of our autobiographical recollection of the past is reasonably free of error, provided we stick to remembering the broad outline of events” (A. D. Baddeley, *Human Memory: Theory and Practice* [Hove: Erlbaum, 1990], p. 310). And Craig R. Barclay: “It is not the case that the meaning around which autobiographical memory is organized is a complete fabrication of life events. There is a fundamental integrity to one’s autobiographical recollections” (Craig R. Barclay, “Schematization of Autobiographical Memory,” in *Autobiographical Memory*, ed. David C. Rubin [Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 1986], p. 97). It's quite true that memory for individual incidents is often shaky, but even three-year-olds, when not fed false information, "can remember everyday events with impressive accuracy" (Schacter, p. 128); and those very "flashbulb" memories Elizabeth Loftus put in doubt can sometimes be reliable, as long as they're memories of things that concern us. Thus Californians, Schacter reports, tended to remember very well where they were when the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake occurred; Atlantans, being less directly affected, fared worse (Schacter, p. 198).

<sup>22</sup> Michael Ross and Michael Conway, "Remembering One's Own Past: The Construction of Personal Histories," in *Handbook of Motivation and Cognition: Foundations of Social Behavior*, ed. Richard M. Sorrentino and E. Tory Higgins (New York: Wiley, 1986), pp. 122–44 (139).

<sup>23</sup> During the war, Perec was sent to live with family in the Vercors and passed off as non-Jewish; his mother, who stayed behind, perished in the camps. The last time he ever saw her, he tells us, his arm was in a sling (Georges Perec, *W, Or, The Memory of Childhood*, trans. David Bellos [Boston: David R. Godine, 2003], p. 26). But no, he corrects himself thirty pages later, "my aunt is quite definite: I did not have my arm in a sling" (p. 55). Notice something very important here: the aunt does not say that Perec never had a mother, that he never lost her in the war, or even that they did not part at a train station—a specific train station, the Gare de Lyon. Perec misremembered a detail or two, but he got the main part right.

<sup>24</sup> "Stories are always told from a particular perspective," writes Jerome S. Bruner in *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 23. And this is not just because that's how things happen to go but also because there may be no alternative—no way for us all, even with the best will in the world, to achieve a "supra-perspectival version of reality" (p. 23). Bruner seems to think it follows from this that there isn't even a real world for our stories to be true to: "We come to conceive of a 'real world' in a manner that fits the stories we tell about it, but . . . we are forever tempted to tell different stories about the presumably same events in the presumably real world" (p. 103; note the scare quotes and the "presumablys"). The irony is that Bruner makes his first point by citing—guess what?—objective data. "Some eighty thousand more people die annually in the poorer than in the richer half of Britain's districts," he reports. But "this massive death toll is not [called] an epidemic. . . . Why don't we rewrite the history of epidemics to include the killer effect of poverty? The simple answer is that epidemic stories are told by medical epidemiologists, not by economists or reformers" (p. 23). Excellent point about class and epidemiology, but how is it supposed to hold if there's no objective truth?

<sup>25</sup> That's what the character Roquentin, in *Nausea*, seems to think: events become beginnings, endings, or turning points only in retrospect (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldick [London: Penguin, 1965], pp. 61–63). I generally agree, although even here we shouldn't go too far. If you make a simple plan and execute it—getting in the car to go to a shop to buy eggs, for example—your retrospective story will look no different from your plan. Some of history is like that too (albeit with more planners), which is one reason why history isn't always and only a retrospective fiction.

<sup>26</sup> Anne Frank, *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Revised Critical Edition* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), pp. 716, 712.

<sup>27</sup> Georges May, *L'autobiographie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979), pp. 191, 179.

<sup>28</sup> As Stacie Friend puts it, "Fiction cannot be distinguished from non-fiction by appeal to syntactic or semantic properties" ("Fiction as a Genre," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 112, no. 2 [2012]: 179–206 [182]; hereafter abbreviated "FG").

<sup>29</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), pp. 97–98.

<sup>30</sup> Deborah J. O. Hendersen and Herb Clark, "Retelling Narratives as Fiction or Nonfiction," in *Proceedings of the 29th Annual Cognitive Science Society*, ed. Danielle S. McNamara and Greg J. Trafton (Austin: Cognitive Science Society, 2007), pp. 353–58.

<sup>31</sup> Rolf A. Zwaan, "Effect of Genre Expectations on Text Comprehension," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 20:4 (1994), 920–933. For further discussion, see "FG," p. 200, and Stacie Friend, "Imagining Fact and Fiction," *New Waves in Aesthetics*, ed. Kathleen Stock and Katherine Thomson-Jones (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 150–169 (157).

<sup>32</sup> Ulrike Altmann et al., "Fact vs Fiction—How Paratextual Information Shapes Our Reading Processes," *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 9, no. 1 (2014): 22–29.

<sup>33</sup> See, again, "FG," pp. 201–2: "Labelling a work in one way or the other has an effect on how we read it." See also May, *L'autobiographie*, p. 180; and Paul Bloom, *How Pleasure Works: The New Science of Why We Like What We Like* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2010), pp. xii, 174. A related study, in the domain of visual art, found that images were considered more "likable" when presented as art than when presented as (non-art) photographs. See N. N. Van Dongen, J. W. Van Strien, and K. Dijkstra, "Implicit emotion regulation in the context of viewing artworks: ERP evidence in response to pleasant and unpleasant pictures," *Brain and Cognition* 107 (2016): 48–54.



<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Arthur Danto, “Works of Art and Mere Real Things,” in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 1–32.

<sup>35</sup> On stylistic features in literary texts prompting us to read them differently, see David S. Miall and Don Kuiken, “The Form of Reading: Empirical Studies of Literariness,” *Poetics* 25 (1998): 327–41. Thanks to certain “inherent properties” (p. 332) such as “foregrounding” (p. 333), literary texts invite us to deploy “special text-processing procedures” (p. 328). There’s plenty of variation here, of course, but it’s very likely true for paradigm cases.

<sup>36</sup> For the lawyer’s threats against *The Smoking Gun*, and for “it’s all true,” see “*A Million Little Lies: Exposing James Frey’s Fiction Addiction*,” *The Smoking Gun*, January 4, 2006. This article reports Frey as stating, in an interview with the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, “The only things I changed were aspects of people that might reveal their identity. Otherwise, it’s all true”; as saying, “Let the haters hate, let the doubters doubt, I stand by my book”; and as telling Oprah, “I think I wrote about the events in the book truly and honestly and accurately.” Somehow I don’t think he really thought that.

<sup>37</sup> In 2012, a tongue-in-cheek but insightful short essay in *Slate* proposed a hierarchy of fabulists, from most culpable to most innocent: journalist (Stephen Glass), memoirist (James Frey), columnist (Mitch Albom), monologist (Mike Daisey), nonfiction novelist (Truman Capote), humorous journalist (David Foster Wallace), biopic director (Tom Hooper of *The King’s Speech*), historical novelist (Dan Brown), period-piece showrunner (Matthew Weiner of *Mad Men*), humorist (David Sedaris), stand-up comedian (Louis C.K.), songwriter (Ice Cube), science fiction writer (Isaac Asimov), fantasy writer (J. K. Rowling). See L. V. Anderson et al., “Can I Make Stuff Up? A Visual Guide,” *Slate*, March 21 2012. Genre matters.

<sup>38</sup> Gossip about the rich and famous works in a similar way. A true story about a top-earning athlete getting arrested for murder is automatically interesting. In fiction, you’d need more than just this plot point.

<sup>39</sup> Compare “FG,” pp. 179–80, 190.

<sup>40</sup> This is reported as a true story by Stephen Pile in *The Book of Heroic Failures* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986), p. 44.

<sup>41</sup> Stan Lee, Steve Ditko, and Artie Simek, “Spider-Man,” *Amazing Fantasy* #15, August 1962. The final panel reads, in part, “And a lean, silent figure slowly fades into the gathering darkness, aware at last that in this world, with great power there must also come—great responsibility!” I am grateful to Patrick House for suggesting the thought about freedom.

<sup>42</sup> Writers of third-person fiction can also look inside the heads of their characters. They don’t have to speculate, or ask around; they simply know what everyone is thinking. They can know more about the characters, in fact, than the characters know about themselves. See Oliver Connolly and Bashshar Haydar, “The Case Against Faction,” *Philosophy and Literature* 32 (2008): 347–58 (351); hereafter abbreviated “CAF.” This is even the case in some first-person fiction; Proust is a good example.

<sup>43</sup> “CAF,” p. 350. For Capote’s claim that it’s “immaculately factual,” see George Plimpton, “The Story Behind a Nonfiction Novel,” *New York Times*, January 16, 1966. In fact, according to Kevin Helliker, Capote may have made up more than just the ending: see Kevin Helliker, “Capote Classic ‘In Cold Blood’ Tainted by Long-Lost Files,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 8, 2013.

<sup>44</sup> On this point, see Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 384; Paisley Livingston, *Literature and Rationality: Ideas of Agency in Theory and Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 82; Joshua Landy, *How to Do Things with Fictions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 28. Of course, *some* of the background assumptions in works of fiction—such as human beings having blood in their veins, not custard—are reliable. But others are false. Whales, for example, are not fish (sorry, Herman Melville). Sound doesn’t travel in space (sorry, almost every sci-fi movie). And love doesn’t cure mental illness (sorry, *Silver Linings Playbook*).

<sup>45</sup> This can’t, of course, be a universal principle: a few authors, like Proust and Parmenides, build arguments into their fictions. And if you’re interested in the Civil War, and all you have to hand is (a) a recklessly tendentious history book written by a segregationist and (b) a carefully researched novel, you’d certainly be more rational to base your opinions on the latter. Still, if all you want are the facts, a well-regarded history book is a better option than a well-regarded novel. You should probably read the novel anyway—but for other reasons.

<sup>46</sup> Lying, writes Harry Frankfurt, deprives us of knowledge we need: “The most irreducibly bad thing about lies is that they contrive to interfere with, and to impair, our natural effort to apprehend the real state of affairs” (Harry Frankfurt, “On Truth, Lies, and Bullshit,” in *The Philosophy of Deception*, ed. Clancy Martin [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], p. 37). See also Helena de Bres, *Artful Truths: The Philosophy of Memoir*, Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 2021, chap. 3; hereafter abbreviated *AT*.

<sup>47</sup> “Ms. [Debra] Jay and the other counselors said they had decided to speak publicly because they feared that Mr.

Frey's portrayal of rehabilitation was more likely to scare people away than lead them to seek help. . . . Mic Hunter, a psychologist who worked for four years at Hazelden-related treatment centers in Minnesota, said Mr. Frey's book made him angry. . . . 'So many people have negative feelings about treatment to begin with. Why would anybody want to send anyone to a treatment program where they would be treated like this? He is claiming it is true, but it's not.'" (Edward Wyatt, "Treatment Description in Memoir Is Disputed," *New York Times*, Jan. 24, 2006.)

<sup>48</sup> Stephen King, "Stephen King on James Frey's *Million Little Pieces*," *Entertainment Weekly*, February 1, 2007. Compare Seth Mnookin: "Unfortunately, because *A Million Little Pieces*—one of the best-selling books about drug addiction ever written—has been trumpeted as an unflinching, real-life look into the world of a drug addict, it has helped to shape people's notions about drug abuse. . . . For those struggling with their own substance-abuse issues, *Pieces* sends the message that unless you've reached the depths Frey describes, you don't have anything to worry about—you're a Fraud. And if you do have a problem, you don't need to necessarily get treatment or look to others for support; all you need to do is 'hold on'" (Seth Mnookin, "Picking Up the Pieces: How James Frey Flunked Rehab, and Why His Fakery Matters," *Slate*, January 12, 2006).

<sup>49</sup> "When the book was finished, he touted it around various publishing houses in New York. It was rejected by 17 in all, including Doubleday, which would eventually become his publisher. The problem, it seemed, was that Frey was promoting it as a novel, a work of fiction." (Laura Barton, "The Man Who Rewrote His Life," *The Guardian*, Sept. 15, 2006).

<sup>50</sup> Compare, to some extent, Stacie Friend, "Believing in Stories," in *Aesthetics and the Sciences of Mind*, ed. Greg Currie et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 228–48 (231).

<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, James Frey (and publisher Random House) chose to settle a lawsuit from readers who claimed they had been defrauded. See Motoko Rich, "James Frey and His Publisher Settle Suit over Lies," *New York Times*, September 7, 2006.

<sup>52</sup> As Helena de Bres puts it, "If memoirists lie often and are known to, readers of memoirs will be increasingly disinclined to believe what they write. This loss of trust is a real threat to the survival of the genre" ("AT," p. 87).

<sup>53</sup> James Frey's book met with success precisely because most people do *not* include significant falsehoods in their memoirs, with the result that the reading public still has a fair degree of confidence in them. For now.

<sup>54</sup> As Michael Lynch puts it, in his excellent book *True to Life: Why Truth Matters*, "Give up on caring about truth and you give up . . . speaking truth to power" (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005, p. 160). Some folks, like Richard Rorty, actually seem to have believed that a truthless world would be an improvement: "the very idea of a 'fact of the matter' is one we would be better off without" (*Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], p. 193). On the contrary, said Hannah Arendt in advance, "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction . . . and the distinction between true and false . . . no longer exist" (*The Origins of Totalitarianism* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973], p. 474).

<sup>55</sup> In the words of eighteenth-century philosopher Frances Hutcheson, "Suppose men imagined there was no obligation to veracity, and acted accordingly; speaking as often against their own opinion as according to it; would not all pleasure of conversation be destroyed, and all confidence in narration?" (*A System of Moral Philosophy in Three Books*, vol. 2 [London: A. Millar, 1755], p. 31). I am grateful to Helena de Bres for bringing this line to my attention.

<sup>56</sup> "There were no underage workers he'd spoken with, [and] there was no man with a maimed hand" (Joshua Topolsky, "Why Mike Daisey Had to Lie to Tell the Truth about Apple," *Washington Post*, March 21, 2012). At least two people have stated in print that Daisey deceived them to their faces, offstage. "He insisted to me that he actually had seen all the horrific things he talked about in his show. He looked me straight in the eye and told me he had really met those people," wrote Dan Lyons (Dan Lyons, "The True Victims of Mike Daisey's Lies May Be Those Chinese Workers He Championed," *The Daily Beast*, March 20, 2012, hereafter abbreviated Lyons). "Daisey told me he had indeed met a number of children employed by Foxconn, some as young as 11," echoed Adrian Chen. "This was a lie" (Adrian Chen, "How I Was Duped By Mike Daisey's Lies," *Gawker*, March 19, 2012).

<sup>57</sup> "He was wrong that embellishing his story would help," argues Max Fisher. "Now, the story isn't Chinese labor abuses anymore. The story is Daisey's own dishonesty, which tinges everything he touched—the made-up details as well as the truth behind them—as compromised and untrustworthy. . . . By lying, Daisey undermined the cause he purported to advance" (Max Fisher, "Worse Than Kony2012: The Tragedy of Mike Daisey's Lies About China," *The Atlantic*, March 16, 2012). Dan Lyons agrees: "What worries me is that now that Daisey has been discredited, people will think that all of this stuff about bad conditions in China was made up, and there's nothing to worry about, nothing to see here, and the plight of the Chinese workers will be forgotten. If that happens, the real victims of Daisey's false claims might end up being the workers in China themselves" (Lyons).

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<sup>58</sup> I won't add any links here, for obvious reasons, but I will say that an interview of Rosenblat on YouTube received comments from Holocaust deniers. This worry was raised by Motoko Rich and Joseph Berger in their article about Rosenblat: "Holocaust survivors and scholars are fiercely on guard against any fabrication of memories because they taint the truth of the Holocaust and raise doubts about the millions who were killed or brutalized" (Motoko Rich and Joseph Berger, "False Memoir of Holocaust Is Canceled," *New York Times*, December 28, 2008).

<sup>59</sup> Dave Mosher, "Largely Unaltered Show Goes On for Fact-Challenged Apple Monologist," *Wired*, March 17 2012.

<sup>60</sup> *Werner Herzog: A Guide for the Perplexed (Conversations with Paul Cronin)* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), pp. 288, 329; hereafter abbreviated WH.

<sup>61</sup> Forrest Wickman, "Fact-Checking Herzog's 'Ecstatic Truth': Are Those Alligators Really Radioactive Mutants?" *Slate*, May 13, 2011.

<sup>62</sup> Nina Gilden Seavey, in Christian Toto, "Filmmakers Blurring Line between Documentary, Drama," *Washington Times*, January 10, 2011. Geoff Dyer agrees: "The manipulations and inventions manufactured by Werner Herzog in the higher service of what he calls 'ecstatic truth' leave the defences of documentary at large dangerously lowered" ("Based on a True Story': The Fine Line between Fact and Fiction," *The Guardian*, December 6, 2015). And writing about another documentary that seamlessly included fake footage—Martin Scorsese's *Rolling Thunder Revue*—Owen Gleiberman echoed the sentiment: "Fake news, as we've learned, is more than just a lie. It's a virus that infects the truth around it. You no longer know what to believe" ("Why Did Martin Scorsese Prank His Audience in *Rolling Thunder Revue*? Even He May Not Know," *Variety*, June 15, 2019). I echo it too.