How True Does a Memoir Have to Be?

That question has been the basis of an ongoing debate kicked off by the revelation, three years ago, that much of James Frey’s best-selling “A Million Little Pieces” was made up. Unfortunately, it has never been adequately answered. Commentators have tended to gravitate to oversimplifications: one side asserting that every word in a book sold in the non-fiction section of the store must be fact-checked and air tight, the other that “memoir” implies memory, which implies a not-the-truth but my-truth subjectivity bordering on cane blanche.

A better, more nuanced answer would recognize the complexity of the issue. Here’s the basis of an ongoing debate kicked off by the revelation, three sessions ago.

The chart below, rating some recent and not-so-recent memoirs, attempts to quantify this process. Obviously, the chart itself has a strong element of subjectivity, both in some of its metrics (especially E) and in the interpretation of the final score. For me, a memoir “passes” if it scores roughly 65 or more. For others the threshold may be 40, or 80. In fact, such a notion of personal judgment is part of the point. Clear-cut cases exist only on the extremes, the completely discredited “Love and Consequences” on one end, Rousseau’s “Confessions” on the other. In the large middle, an informed reader has to make the call.

Use this worksheet to find you how your favorite memoir – or your own – measures up to notable autobiographies in history. Every memoir starts with 100 points.

A. Demonstrated inaccuracies. Subtract 0-40 points.
B. Does the book reflect negatively on identifiable people (dead or alive), or is it clearly in service of proving political or moral positions? Subtract 0-25 points.
C. Did the author try to corroborate facts with outside sources? Add 0-5 points.
D. Some word-for-word dialogue is necessary but it is factually problematic. Subtract 1 point for each percent of text composed of dialogue.
E. Cliches, flat writing and poor word choices suggest a lack of mature and considered reflection on the past. Subtract 0-15 points for bad writing.
F. Statements in text laying out clear ground rules via a “truth” Add 0-10 points.
G. Self-deprecation or self-criticism. Add 0-5 points.

A. Demonstrated inaccuracies. Subtract 0-40 points.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>St. Augustine</th>
<th>Jean-Jacques Rousseau</th>
<th>Vladimir Nabokov</th>
<th>Ernest Hemingway</th>
<th>Augusten Burroughs</th>
<th>James Frey</th>
<th>Margaret Jones</th>
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<tr>
<td>“Confessions”</td>
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<td>“Speak, Memory”</td>
<td>“A Moveable Feast”</td>
<td>“Running with Scissors”</td>
<td>“A Million Little Pieces”</td>
<td>Love and Consequences</td>
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| Final score | 101 | 106 | 69 | 48 | 29 | 20 | 90 | 88 | 69 |

Three words: stealing the ribbon.

Heartfelt, but at times lays it on a bit thick.

“The power of memory is prodigious, my God.”

“I will now call to my mind past foolishness, and the carnal corruptions of my soul; not because I love them, but that I may live thee, O my God.”

I have concealed nothing that was ill, added nothing that was good, and if I sometimes used some indifferent ornamentation, this has only ever been to fill a void occasioned by my lack of memory; I may have supposed to be true what I could have been so, never what I knew to be false.

Almost everyone mentioned in the book comes of poorly (see, most egregiously, chapter 17, “Scott Fitzgerald”).

Burroughs’ style is polished and readable; yet ultimately is wearying.

Frey’s writing has some force but is done by bathos and eccentric capitalization.

Example: “Well, ill sis, might as well get some sleep, am nothing to do but wait an see what happens in the morning. You kool, though?” This prompts the question, what is the difference between “cool” and “kool”?

Karr gives her ex-husband (who comes off badly) a pseudonym. This will conceal his identity to anyone lacking access to Wikipedia.

Williams takes a few shots at familiar targets—“I was always a mystery to me how someone like Sinatra, who could sing with such heart-melting tenderness and sensitivity, could also act with the most coldhearted cruelty.”

Statement on copyright page: “This is a work of fiction. The events and experiences detailed within are all true and have been faithfully rendered as the author has remembered them, to the best of her ability.” A nice try, but oddly legalistic.

The AP assigned eleven reporters to fact-check the book and about the best they could come up with one minor incongruity regarding her reaction to a court ruling.

See all references to McCain campaign manager Steve Schmidt: to Kane Couric and to liberals.

Better than some.

Your Memoir

Mary Karr
Andy Williams
Sarah Palin

2009
2009
2009