

The Truth about Lying

Everybody does it, and perhaps they should

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Tim O'Brien, the American writer and National Book Award winner, said that when his memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* was published, no one even checked to see if he'd ever been to Vietnam. He made this confession on a warm day in 1999 to a class of students at Humber College in Toronto. O'Brien was the star speaker at the college's summer creative writing workshop (where I was then director), and his audience sat in rapt attention, taking in his every word. Here was a master revealing his secrets. O'Brien then recounted the sad story of the day he received his military draft notice. He said he was working in a pig slaughterhouse, took off his bloody apron, went home, packed a few things, stole his mother's car, and drove up toward the Canadian border. He stayed in a fishing lodge, took out a boat on the Rainy River and was within a stone's throw of Canada's shores when he decided to return—to do the "cowardly" thing and go to Vietnam. His tale was spellbinding and many in his audience cried.

Then he told us the story was a lie.

In fact, the day he got his draft notice he'd gone to a golf course. Yet an anecdote about playing a round of golf would not tell the truth about how he felt. He said the writing must serve a higher purpose than merely recounting events. It must be true to the experience. "You have to tell the truth in fiction," O'Brien told us, "even if you have to lie."

Let me amend Tim O'Brien's wise observation: "You have to tell the truth in literature, even if you have to lie." All great authors lie. They have to, regardless of the genre they've selected. There is no such thing as absolute truth in writing, whether it serves fiction, non-fiction, theatre, history, geography, or the Bible. A Palestinian will tell a different story of the last ten years from an Israeli. I once had the privilege of studying with Marshall McLuhan and, after the class had discussed one of his most celebrated observations about the effects of media on perception—that "linear man" developed a strong sense of self while the self of "electronic man" dissolves—one of the students asked McLuhan what facts he'd used to arrive at this truth. McLuhan said, "Anyone can tell the truth with the facts. It's when you don't have the facts and tell the truth that you're special."

This insight has taken on great resonance in light of the controversy that has surrounded the January 2006 revelation that American author James Frey's memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, contained plenty of fabrication. He claimed, for instance, that, besides being an alcoholic and drug addict, he was a repeat criminal and had spent three months in jail. In fact, he was once held in an Ohio police station and released hours later on \$733 bail. He also claimed, falsely, to have had root-canal surgery without anesthesia. (While this is possible in cases in which an abscess is so far gone an endodontist fears an injection would spread the infection dangerously—I had such a procedure performed by an eminent endodontist without anesthesia for this very reason—it is rare precisely because it is so painful.)

Almost instantly, Frey became a scapegoat and his memoir, which was a bestseller, was discredited. Though Frey had initially presented his manuscript as fiction, he was doing so at a time when the fiction market was depressed. Publishers wanted non-fiction so that was what he gave them. Frey has since lost his agent, and the new edition of his book comes with a disclaimer. His most public and powerful supporter, Oprah Winfrey, chastised and humiliated him on national television.

As its name implies, memoir depends for its accuracy on memory. Tobias Wolff, author of the grim memoir *This Boy's Life*, writes, "Memory has its own story to tell. Memoirists are not writing proper history but rather what they remember of it, or, more accurately, what they can't forget."

So if James Frey did not tell an absolute truth but rather told his version of drug addiction and recovery, of hell and

redemption, if he made up some details or embellished the facts, it was in the service of a higher truth about death and resurrection. It was his truth and therefore it was genuine. Otherwise, millions would not have believed him. After all, even after Frey was exposed, his book remained on the bestseller lists for months.

He may have been lying but he was not faking. There is a difference, and it is the salient difference. There is no trickery or fakery in the book, just the experience of a man who has endured much and lived to tell the tale—or his take on it. Before I picked up the book, I watched my daughter and wife—both discriminating readers—stay up late into the night to get through it. The book is compelling precisely because Frey knew what was required to fill out the narrative. Even the life of a drug addict must have slow bits, and Frey was smart enough to leave those bits out. Is that a form of deception.

If so, Frey is not the first memoirist to massage the facts to sculpt his narrative, and the company he keeps might surprise some purists. Henry David Thoreau, for instance, pretended in his great non-fiction work *Walden* that he slept under the stars and cherished the universe as it was created. He didn't. He slept in a house in Concord, often at his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson's place. But he needed *Walden's* non-fiction narrator to masquerade as a woodsman. Being at one with nature allowed the narrator to transcend the self more successfully than being a sleeper in a plush bed in town. William Zinsser, in his introduction to *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoirs*, notes :

We like to think that Thoreau went home to Concord and just wrote up his notes. He didn't. Thoreau wasn't a woodsman when he went to the woods; he was a writer. Memoir writers must manufacture a text, imposing narrative order on a jumble of half-remembered events. With that feat of manipulation they arrive at a truth that is theirs alone, not quite like that of anybody else who was present at the same events.

What we must ask ourselves is how accurate memory is. William Loizeaux of Johns Hopkins University has observed that “The aspirations of memoirs are different from those of fiction or non-fiction, and the measures by which they are judged should also be different. A good story is important. Factuality is important. But the ultimate question about a memoir is this, “Out of how deep and considered a life does it spring?”

During the twentieth century, a number of American writers led by Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer, and Truman Capote spawned a form of reportage that came to be known as the “New Journalism.” Some quite rightly called it the “New Fiction.” Wolfe characterized the style as one in which the story is told in scenes rather than historical narrative, in third person but with forays into the characters' heads and with close observation of everyday details. It was still non-fiction, its practitioners insisted, but a new kind, one more suited to literary meditations than to newspaper articles. Such writing even won support from its subjects. At the 1972 Democratic convention, George McGovern described gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson's coverage of the election as “the least factually accurate but the most truthful portrait of the campaign.”

The New Journalism was used to great advantage by Truman Capote. He turned his attention to ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances in his landmark work, *In Cold Blood*, the story of the grisly murders of the Clutters, a Kansas family of wheat farmers. The book, the story of whose creation recently found success in the Oscar-winning movie *Capote*, remains a brilliant amalgam of true crime and Capote's vivid imagination. *In Cold Blood* tells the story of Perry Smith and Dick Hickock, two disaffected young men who, in a desperate act, massacred the Clutters and their young children, making off with \$40 and a couple of household items. Truman Capote told their story as they recounted it, often verbatim, but he added rich, psychological detail of his own. He appears to have had mixed feelings about one of the killers, Perry Smith. Both the author and killer had come from emotionally distant families that had experienced alcoholism and suicide. Capote was small and very much alone like Smith, and the writer (unlike Smith) was gay to boot. His ambivalent feelings about Smith surface repeatedly: he describes one scene in which the murderer placed a comforting pillow under Kenyon Clutter's head before aiming the gun barrel at his temple.

While the new journalists played fast and loose with the facts, memoir writers have traditionally taken even greater liberties. One of the great hoaxes of recent years was the harrowing story of a young boy in Auschwitz, told in Binjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*. It turns out that the author was never a young Polish Jewish boy. He was a Swiss Catholic boy—and one who was born too late to have lived such a life. My problem, once I found out the truth, was that the book was and is a great achievement for the life its creator

imagined and portrayed. I can appreciate that the need for the tale to be true for Wilkomirski must have been overwhelming. What a desperately sad story. And out of what a desperately sad state of mind.

The reality is that every writer grapples with the wish to tell the truth and the need to bend it for a higher purpose. For the longest time, I wanted to tell the story of growing up as a Hungarian Jewish boy in Canada. Finally, an idea hit me: a young, Hungarian Jewish boy is invited to his friend's place for Christmas lunch. His house has no Christmas decorations, no tree, no lights, no Santa, no carols—oh, those blessed carols flowing through our hearts. He always has to go back to school after the holidays and lie about what he got. But not this time. This time, his pal Larry Wilson has invited him for Christmas turkey. He is so enchanted with the brilliantly lit world that he hunts all over town for just the right gift, and there it is at his very own corner store, lurking behind the porcelain Elvis heads and Lassies: a plaster cast of the Last Supper, all twelve holy men, gathered around a table. When he presents this to Larry, his friend doesn't know how to react. He gives Jacob comic books in return. Jacob is stunned, mortified. He runs home just in time to catch his family lighting the Hanukkah candles to begin the festival of lights. In 1996, my story became *The Gift*, a children's book published by Greenwood Press.

The year the book came out, a radio producer asked me to read *The Gift* on the air during the Yuletide season. When I arrived at the studio, I was taken aback by the good woman's emotion. We had never met before but she stopped me on the way in for a hug. She thanked me and told me the story was powerful and moving. Suddenly, I felt embarrassed. Had I deceived her by making up such a tale "Was that an actual story" was the way she put it after our embrace. Decision time...I nodded yes. I didn't have the heart to say that it hardly matters, or that making up things is where the art is. You see, I needed a narrative expansive enough to convey my sadness as a child at the closing of the year. As my own dear grandfather once said, "Telling the truth depends on ability, not honesty."

The question is were the intentions pure and noble. If they were, give the writer of fiction, memoir, biography, history, or whatever else his or her *donnée*, as Henry James once described it. How well has the writer accomplished what he set out to do. In dealing with James Frey's fall from grace, Victoria Brownworth, author of *Rock Hudson (Lives of Notable Gay Men and Lesbians)*, articulated a question in the *Baltimore Sun*:

Is a lie not a lie when it is told by a writer. Apparently, some writers—most notably James Frey at the moment—want us to think so. Readers may presume fiction to be invented, but they expect non-fiction to be the truth and nothing but. That is the expectation wrought by the prefix *non*—not fiction means not made up. Thus, when a writer does lie—and that is the word for it—he subverts the line between fiction and non-fiction. And that makes readers wonder whether all writers lie.

True. Readers may "wonder" but great writers take a more measured view. *Walden*, the story of a woodsman immersed in nature, was, in fact, written by a part-time woodsman, but one with an eye on us—on future generations alienated from nature and now contemplating its value. Whether one wrote a memoir and the other a novel hardly matters in the grand scheme. Thoreau saw a bigger truth, a more important one. Our being insulted by Thoreau's factual liberties or James Frey's fabrication of his past is a small price to pay. And I have a confession to make: it wasn't my grandfather who said, "Telling the truth depends on ability, not honesty." I came up with that one, but it sounded wise and grandfatherly when it occurred to me, so I ascribed it to someone more mature in years to give it greater authority.

Which brings me back to Tim O'Brien and the story he told at Humber College, a tale about a young man heading off to a war he did not understand, one that spoke a universal truth about all wars. A particularly astute fan of O'Brien's work would have caught on quickly: the story he recounted was recorded in his brilliant book of fictional stories, entitled *The Things They Carried*, which was nominated for both the 1990 Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. In it, there is a story much like the one he told at Humber, called "On the Rainy River." The story is a piece of fiction. The name of its protagonist is Tim O'Brien.