

## **Fake memoirs seem sign of times**

**EDWARD NAWOTKA; Bloomberg News**

Last updated: February 12th, 2006 02:35 AM (PST)

Only a hermit could have missed the uproar over James Frey, who lied about his troubled past in his best-selling memoir, "A Million Little Pieces."

First reported by Web site [www.thesmokinggun.com](http://www.thesmokinggun.com) last month, the news prompted a rebuke from U.S. talk-show host Oprah Winfrey and helped unmask other fakers.

Author JT Leroy, for example, seduced literary insiders by telling them he was a bisexual West Virginian in his 20s who was dying of AIDS. "He," The New York Times reported, is actually one Laura Albert, a 40-year-old mother from San Francisco.

Then there's memoirist "Nasdiij," who said he was a Navajo suffering from fetal alcohol syndrome. LA Weekly and The Charlotte Observer have confirmed that he's Tim Barrus, a white writer of gay erotica.

To try to understand what's going on, we turned to David Callahan, author of "The Cheating Culture" (Harcourt, 366 pages, \$14), a book that explores the recent rise of plagiarism, accounting fraud and other forms of dishonesty. Callahan will publish a new book, "The Moral Center," in September.

### **With so many fraudsters selling books these days, what's happening to publishing? You shared an agent with "Nasdiij." Is fraud becoming more prevalent?**

It's hard to know if there's more of it – or if there is just a spate of these coming to light. Cheating and deception by their very nature want to go undetected. I'm reluctant to say that literary fraud is on the increase. Incentives are on the increase. In the world of writing, we live in a winner-take-all economy. James Frey is making millions while the typical writer is barely paying the rent.

### **Why don't they just publish novels?**

We live in a self-revelatory age, a culture of narcissism, and want to share in other people's inner lives. Novels don't cater to that in same way that memoirs do. Everybody wants to break out and be one of the stars. One of the ways to do that is to tell a larger-than-life story.

### **So is there a fraud genre in literature?**

There is a long tradition in the memoir business of exaggerating the truth. There's also a hoax genre as well. Remember "Hitler's Diaries"? That was a hoax.

### **Does that mean we need to make some allowances for the memoir genre? Surely Casanova made a few things up.**

Unless we do, there will not be interesting memoirs. No one has total recall, especially when it comes to writing about personal events. The only way to keep readers involved is to take some licenses in terms of fleshing out conversations and scenes. But is it OK to go on for five pages? No. There's a consensus that James Frey crossed the line.

### **Do you think Frey believes that what he did was wrong?**

Yes, but the question has to be, "Would he do it again?" The choices are write a dull memoir and sink without a trace or make up stuff, sell 3 million copies and have to apologize and be humiliated. I think he'd pick option B. A lot of people would. The gains from cheating outweigh the downsides.

### **How so? Some critics have called for him to donate his \$3 million to \$4 million in royalties to charity.**

Then he can turn around and sell another book about his lying problem. You know James Frey will be back with some redemption story, just as Martha Stewart came back with hers. We live in the kind of society that loves to tear people down and to build them back up again.

### **Is this why some readers forgive Frey?**

Readers want to be entertained. They read to be moved. Some may feel betrayed because they were manipulated.

### **Some are even bringing legal action against him.**

That's silly.

What role do the media play in this? Has reality television changed our perception of reality?

The media are constantly raising the bar on how sensational something has to be to get people's attention. It's not surprising nonfiction authors try to feed that appetite. This is about our addiction to the sensational.

### **Are you surprised by the amount of attention this has gotten?**

Nobody died, was hurt or lost money – except, perhaps, for the cover price of the book. Nothing bad happened to anybody, yet this has gotten more coverage than the genocide in Sudan. It just shows you how much the media love a good scandal.

Originally published: February 12th, 2006 02:30 AM (PST)