“This is a True Story”: The Value of Non-Truth in Creative Nonfiction

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the relationship between creative nonfiction and truth through an analysis of James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* and David Sedaris's *Naked*. Creative nonfiction is currently situated as a subcategory of nonfiction which subjects it to all nonfiction's caveats, especially with regards to truth. Both texts were criticized for containing non-truths and thus infringing on the contract created between author and reader through the nonfiction categorization. In both cases, the controversy was based on a generalized definition of nonfiction as writing that is true. This thesis responds to and disputes such a generalized definition of nonfiction and argues that effective creative nonfiction writing can contain non-truths. Discussion of the reaction to Frey's text serves as an impetus for the discussion of truth in creative nonfiction, and unveils glitches in the categorization system used by publishers and libraries, which labels books as either fiction or nonfiction. Further, the controversy exposes an unwavering reliance on those categorizations by readers despite textual clues that are perhaps contradictory to a purely factual reading. The analysis of Sedaris's *Naked* demonstrates the value of utilizing fictional elements in a creative nonfiction text and validates Sedaris's use of the nonfiction label even for writing that contains fabrications. Together, the analyses reveal important questions about the assumptions a reader should make about texts based on labels. This thesis finds the nonfiction label, in particular, overly broad and questions why many readers accept nonfiction as a verifiable contract for truth, instead of utilizing their own, perhaps more sophisticated, sorting mechanisms for determining truth from non-truth.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION: BEHIND THE BEARDS

> "'reality' is one of the few words that means nothing without quotes" (Nabokov, from the "Afterword" to *Lolita*).

The popular reality show *Duck Dynasty* features a family in Louisiana who built a handmade duck call business into a multi-million dollar company. The show, which highlights the Robertson family more than the business or hunting, focuses on the current CEO of Duck Commander, Willie Robertson, who is the son of the company's founder, Phil Robertson. The Robertson men all sport heavy beards and resemble the long-lost swamp cousins of ZZ Top. The thirty-minute show combines scenes involving family members as they go about their daily routines, where they continually play the role of fish out of water, with one-on-one interviews of the cast reacting to those scenes from their own lives. It is the traditional "reality" show format. In every episode, they inevitably find that doing things their way, which might not be the typical corporate way, yields success for them. The show always wraps with a value-laden voiceover by Willie involving a rejection of the hands-off, buttoned-up approach of the traditional corporation. However, the show is not exactly real. The *New York Times* describes *Duck Dynasty* as "guided reality," which signifies real people, acting as themselves in scenes that *could* actually take place, but didn't (Genzlinger, "Lured in"). According to Willie

Robertson, "[the producers] create a few scenarios for us to function in, but it's all real reactions" ("The Duck Commanders").

The guided reality method for filming *Duck Dynasty* does not seem to curb the popularity of the show. The second season finale was watched by 6.5 million viewers, making it the most-watched show in A&E Network history ("*Duck Dynasty* Finale"). In a season one episode, "Sauvignon Beard," Willie supposedly buys a vineyard, sight unseen, and the family works together to produce enough wine for the grand opening. The episode features Lucy and Ethel style physical comedy, complete with members of the family knee deep in a barrel of grapes. However, the family didn't actually purchase a winery. The winery pictured in the episode, Landry Vineyards, even posted a notice on its Facebook page assuring customers who watch the show that the owners did not sell, but they are "enjoying Duck Dynasty entertainment and hope you are also!" (Landry Vineyards). The episode itself does not disclose this falsification. In the episode, the family purchases the vineyard and produces a batch of wine that Willie's brother compares to "a cross between doe urine and jalapeno juice" ("Sauvignon Beard"). During the final voice-over, Willie says maybe the winery will still be a good space to rent out for weddings.

The designation "reality television" might actually alert viewers that the program will take certain liberties with the truth. Reality television encompasses a wide variety of shows on the air today, including competitive shows, such as *Survivor*, *The Apprentice,* and *American Idol*; "docu-soaps" like *Jersey Shore*, the *Real Housewives* series, and Duck *Dynasty*; and shows such as *American Pickers* and *House Hunters*. The genre is only

limited by what it cannot be: a scripted, studio program with actors paid to play roles other than themselves. Although "reality television" was once a broad term that included documentaries and news programs, the term has since been narrowed in public opinion (Hall 516), and now reality television is more likely associated with a show like *Keeping up with the Kardashians* than with a news program like *60 Minutes.* The key feature of reality television programs is they are non-scripted and depict "real people playing themselves" (516). Studies of viewer perceptions about reality television have shown that audiences understand the concept of producer manipulation, meaning that producers stage, direct, and edit scenes and that characters' personalities as seen in front of the camera may be exaggerated or even contrived (516). Hall suggests viewers' understanding of the mechanisms of reality television programs aids engagement with the show because viewers "monitor the cast for moments when their artifice breaks down and they reveal their 'true' selves" (516). Therefore, audiences experience the show as aired, but also with an awareness of fissures in the surface-level aspects of the show that expose behind-the-scenes motivations or aspirations.

Basically, audiences understand the shows aren't an exact representation of reality. The expectations about what is now categorized as reality television are more about an interest in the characters, many times both on and off the screen, than as a source of information. Audiences seem undaunted by knowledge of fabrication in *Duck Dynasty* because they aren't nearly as interested in the day-to-day operations of the family business as they are in watching Uncle Si dress up like a Christmas elf to entertain a group of children ("I'm Dreaming"). Audiences tend to accept, within certain defined

limits based on the overall purpose of the show, fabricated portions of many reality television shows. For example, it was leaked in 2012 that the popular Home and Garden Television (HGTV) show *House Hunters,* where prospective homebuyers view three homes and then ultimately decide to purchase one of those three, was staged to the point that the buyers appearing on the show have already closed on the chosen property; therefore, the other two properties are merely dummies set up for the buyers to view. HGTV explains that they produce the show in this manner to "maximize production time" and that when the prospective buyers view the homes, they are still able to "capture their authentic reactions" ("*House Hunters* Fake?"). According to the network, "viewers enjoy the vicarious and entertaining experience of choosing a home," and despite these producer manipulations, the show still offers that experience ("*House Hunters* Fake?"). *House Hunters* remains a popular show for the network and airs at least five nights a week.

Similarly, a show such as *Survivor,* which premiered in 2000, is now known to recruit actors and models to serve as contestants on the show (Denhart). However, the use of ready-to-film contestants has not hurt *Survivor's* popularity because the essence of the show—individuals competing in a remote environment—is not diminished. Viewers accept the shifts that must be made to convert an actual event, or the staged version of a possible actual event, to a thirty-minute or one-hour television program, especially if these modifications do not usurp viewers' main reason for watching. In some ways, the staging of potential homes for purchase or using more camera-ready faces is not much different than Julia Child's pre-cooked chicken fricassee already in the

oven. When it comes to the magic of television, contemporary viewers seem to understand the tricks.

The acceptance of the blurring between fact and fiction on television is a result of audience awareness. Viewers don't necessarily feel duped by shows like *Duck Dynasty* because they tune in with a certain amount of skepticism. The reality television format alerts the viewer to suspend belief. If *Duck Dynasty* began with an introduction by Leslie Stahl and featured Morley Saefer wandering the swamps of Louisiana with members of the Robertson family, then viewers would expect facts, and they would not tolerate a staged vineyard purchase as part of the program. Certain television formats imply certain relationships with the truth. Recently, Animal Planet aired a science fiction show titled *Mermaid: The Body Found* about the discovery of a mermaid body on the beach, which featured actors playing scientists who gave interviews about the ramifications of the discovery, including the ubiquitous government conspiracy. The show mimicked the documentaries often aired on the Discovery Channel that provide real information mixed with artfully shot footage and expert commentary (*Mermaid*). The show aired twice during the summer of 2012 and caused enough misperception to prompt the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to issue a statement denying the possible existence of "aquatic humanoids" (Radford). The parody was confusing to viewers and, much like the news bulletin format used by Orson Welles, may have tampered with the contract offered to viewers through established formats. As a documentary, *Mermaid: A Body Found* caused viewers to make assumptions about life beyond the small screen. The show itself is a "fanciful mix of state-of-the-art

computer generated animation, historical fact, conspiracy theory and real and faked footage sprinkled with enough bits of scientific speculation and real science to make it seem plausible" (Radford). According to *New York Times* television reviewer, Neil Genzlinger, "If you know those ground rules, it's a rather enjoyable and intriguing piece of work, in the same vein as 'The Blair Witch Project'" ("One More Reason").

Knowing the rules is an important component of how viewers interact with television programs. Watching a documentary that changes a viewer's fundamental understanding of the existence of mermaids is drastically different than watching a science fiction show about the discovery of a mermaid on a beach. Those rules do not simply relate to whether or not the program depicts actual events. Television doesn't just have two distinct categories of programs: those that are considered reality and those that feature scripts and actors. The types of programs and the rules for watching those programs are much more nuanced. Television viewers must negotiate a wide variety of images, including those from reality television programs, actual footage on news programs, dramatic reenactments, and documentaries that feature a blend between actual and real, scripted and non-scripted. Viewers must distinguish all of these ways of viewing from fictional television, which can often be crafted to resemble reality. Despite the seemingly complex process of negotiating reality on television, networks continue to air programs that require viewers to reassess the rules. And viewers continue to tune in.

As opposed to television viewers, readers may not be comfortable enough with the rules to be quite so adaptable. Members of the reading public might not understand

the differences among fiction, nonfiction, and the spectrum between. Perhaps, readers are responding to publishers and critics who remain tethered to the dualism of fiction and nonfiction. Maybe readers don't understand the shifts that are required to convert an actual event into a compelling written story, or possibly the definition of nonfiction is still overly broad like the earlier definition of reality television. Reality television has evolved into its own term (as ironic as that term might be) that comprises unscripted shows and excludes news magazine shows like *60 Minutes* and *Dateline*. The world of television is no longer divided into two general categories, reality and non-reality, but into divergent categories that approach real events in a multitude of ways, each with its own loose organization of guidelines based mainly on what audiences will accept. However, the world of literature is still in many ways firmly bifurcated. There is fiction and nonfiction. Period. Even the creation of a term such as creative nonfiction does not bridge the gap between fiction and nonfiction in the sense that *anything* nonfiction is still expected to be true, no matter the style of writing.

According to Eric Heyne, in his article, "Where Fiction Meets Nonfiction: Mapping a Rough Terrain," part of our culture insists on making distinctions between fiction and nonfiction (323). Heyne suggests interest in the division goes back to teaching children the difference between what is real and what is imaginary and then further distinguishing between "make-believe and lying" (323). For example, telling children Santa Claus rides a sleigh with flying reindeer around the globe in a single night is acceptable, but a child telling his parents his brother broke the vase, when he didn't, is not. This distinction relates to purpose, similar to the way the purpose of a reality

television show dictates which aspects can be fabricated and which must be organic. Telling a child about the magic of Santa is perceived as acceptable because it perpetuates the magical aspects of childhood and is associated with a joyful tradition; however, a child's lying about breaking a vase is a willful avoidance of responsibility.

Our culture's relationship to the truth is complicated. In the case of nonfiction texts, such a relationship is further complicated by the added dimension of retelling. Whereas the Robertson family can react to staged scenarios in real time in front of the camera, in a nonfiction book or essay, everything must be recreated from scratch. Everything in a text is fabricated. Even the most serious journalistic report deviates somewhat from the truth in the sense that the author determines what to share and in what order. In that way, the author of a news report re-writes the events in his or her own words, even if the report is deemed an honest account of the events. A gap still exists between what actually happened and the retelling of those events. Further, the nonfiction text forms a completely new relationship with the events it sets out to retell. David Lehman in his book, *Matters of Fact: Reading Nonfiction over the Edge*, describes how readers of nonfiction are involved in the text as they read it, but are also constantly making connections between the text and the outside world (3). The connections outside the text comprise "the edge" that readers of real-life accounts must engage. Lehman suggests the writer, reader, and subject of nonfiction texts engage in a transaction, which places nonfiction on a "multireferential plane" that "implicates" the text in the events it retells (4). Thus, nonfiction is accountable.

However, not all nonfiction writing is journalistic, or created for the purpose of relaying information. Creative nonfiction, which can include personal essays, memoirs, autobiographies, new journalism or literary journalism, cultural criticism and other journal-style articles (Hesse, "Who Owns" 251; Root and Steinberg xv; Gutkind, "What is Creative Nonfiction"), is often written for a variety of purposes other than merely retelling. Creative nonfiction works are still under the heading of nonfiction, though, and therefore are expected to retain a certain level of truthfulness, as opposed to reality television, which is a separate category for shows that are based on real-life, but are often not completely devoted to telling the truth. The problem with compound terms might be where to place the emphasis. Is creative nonfiction creative writing that contains nonfiction elements or nonfiction writing written creatively? The term does not evade controversy, especially in regards to a creative nonfiction text's relationship to the truth.

This thesis promotes a definition of creative nonfiction that allows a space for creative writing that contains nonfiction elements. Chapter two explores the perceptions of creative nonfiction among composition scholars, journalism scholars, and practicing authors. Specifically, the chapter suggests that creative nonfiction has its own characteristics apart from devotion to truth-telling and thus questions attempts to validate (or incriminate) creative nonfiction works based solely on verification of facts. Chapter three discusses the controversy surrounding James Frey's memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, culminating from the selection for Oprah's Book Club, leading to an investigation that revealed the memoir was, at least in part, a fabrication, and resulting

in public humiliation for Frey. Chapter four analyzes David Sedaris's book, *Naked,* in response to a 2007 article published by Alex Heard detailing specific non-truths within Sedaris's work. A response to Heard offers the opportunity to explore the writing produced by Sedaris that blurs the hard line many critics want to draw between genres. The conclusion, chapter five, implicates the categorization system utilized by libraries and the publishing industry that forces authors to declare their work as either fiction or nonfiction. Further, the conclusion urges critics and the reading public to engage in their own sorting mechanisms for truth, as opposed to placing blind faith in a possibly ill-suited categorization system. Analysis of these works by Frey and Sedaris reveals a complex relationship between the writing itself, the actual events, and the claims by the publishers and authors about the level of truthfulness. Both Frey and Sedaris rely on nonfiction events to craft hybrid stories in the forms of memoir and essays that do more than simply retell. They reshape. Possibly, the relationship between fiction and nonfiction is recursive, and as long as we all know the rules, creative nonfiction, or maybe "creative reality," can continue to capture audiences without the need for Watergate-style exposés every time a memoirist veers into the ditch of fiction.

Chapter II

NONFICTION VS. FICTION: SMACK DOWN

> "These are my fancies, by which I try to give knowledge not of things, but of myself" (Montaigne in "Of Books").

The term nonfiction is ambiguous and broad by definition. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) entry reads, "Nonfiction *n.* Prose writing other than fiction, such as history, biography, and reference works, esp. that which is concerned with the narrative depiction of factual events; the genre comprising this." Fiction is the standard, and all prose that is not within the limits of fiction is considered "non." Philip Lopate describes the irony of a "genre defined by what it is not" ("Curiouser" 3) and relates nonfiction to other notable "nots" including the Anti-Christ and anti-matter (3). Robert Root notes the definition suggests nonfiction is everything that is not "a more specific and circumscribed form of writing," namely fiction, but, Root adds, nonfiction is not defined by what else it is not, as in "not poetry" and "not drama" (243). Fiction is defined by the *OED* as "the act of fashioning or imitating." Fiction's main caveat is that it is not real, so maybe it is important that nonfiction encompasses everything that fiction leaves untouched. Nonfiction is therefore an enormous category—the negative space is larger than the positive.

The genres of fiction, poetry, and drama are defined by form, and nonfiction is defined somewhat awkwardly as fiction's form but used to narrate factual events. By confining fiction to "prose writing," the *OED* exempts a genre such as poetry from the necessity to serve facts first. Poetry can be factual or make-believe, and the poet is not necessarily obligated to disclose the poem's relationship to truth. Only fiction and nonfiction provide readers with guidelines about their relationship to reality. Poetry regularly blends fiction and nonfiction, especially through the use of metaphor. The poet is free to decide—these feelings are best discussed through this mode—even if the events, as described, never actually happened. A reader of Walt Whitman does not question a hybridization of reality and fictionalization. A reader may expect honesty of emotion (whatever that means) from a poet, but would a reader express shock if she learned that Whitman never observed a he-bird, a she-bird, and their "four light-green eggs spotted with brown" (Whitman 988)? In many ways, the blend between real emotions and fictional accounts serve as metaphors and create richness in certain poetry.

Creative nonfiction has been termed the fourth genre, based on the division common in creative writing programs and literature courses that categorize the first three genres as fiction, poetry, and drama (Root 245-6). Robert L. Root, Jr. admits reservations with the term, based partly on the fact that the use of "fourth" may serve as a permanent rank (247). According to Root, nonfiction should be designated the first genre because nonfiction precedes fiction in the sense that reality can't be imitated "unless you have a way to report and record reality in the first place" (247). However,

one of the great debates within the analysis and production of creative nonfiction concerns the nonfiction part of the term and the relationship and obligation to the reality it seeks to record. According to Dan Shen and Dejin Xu in their discussion of unreliability issues in autobiography, the possibility of any dispute about "degrees of fictionalization" in nonfiction is based on the fact that "there exists an extratextual reality for distinguishing the fictional from the factual" (45), an issue that does not present itself in fiction. Fiction is non-referential and nonfiction is referential.

Adding the adjective *creative* before nonfiction helps separate narrative or literary styles of nonfiction from fact-based styles of nonfiction, but creative nonfiction is still a broad category, containing diverse forms of writing. The compound term is generally defined by the relationship to fact (nonfiction) and how it is written (using creative writing techniques). Creative nonfiction can be humorous, enlightening, profound, or heart-wrenching, but rarely does the category include writing that is merely informative. Creative nonfiction can include personal essays, memoirs, autobiographies, new journalism or literary journalism, and formal essays such as cultural criticism and other journal-style articles (Hesse, "Who Owns" 251; Root and Steinberg xv; Gutkind, "What is Creative Nonfiction). The use of the term creative nonfiction helps to distinguish certain kinds of nonfiction by excluding news reports, textbooks, informative prose, manuals, and instructions. In some ways, creative nonfiction is a catch-all for writing that has literary elements, such as narrative, scene, dialogue, and character development, but is considered nonfiction, even if that determination in itself is somewhat slippery. Creative nonfiction works have gained

prominence in popular culture and are often found on *The New York Times* best seller lists, thanks to persistence of the memoir craze set off in the 1990s with such works as Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* and Tobias Wollf's *This Boy's Life* (Gutkind, "What is Creative Nonfiction;" Zinsser). The popular public radio program, *This American Life*, regularly features creative nonfiction pieces in the form of personal essays or literary journalism and is credited for launching the career of author David Sedaris. In addition to being regularly featured in longstanding respected periodicals like *The New Yorker*, creative nonfiction has its own self-titled journal, edited by Lee Gutkind, dedicated solely to publishing creative nonfiction works.

A succinct definition of creative nonfiction is difficult because the genre contains a wide variety of forms, which have various purposes. For example, autobiographical writing categorized as creative nonfiction, such as memoirs or personal essays,[1] might serve a purpose that supersedes an obligation to tell the truth. J.A. Cuddon's *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* provides no specific definition of memoir (or personal essay), but instead directs readers to the definition of autobiography. Cuddon's definition, which spans four pages and begins succinctly

[1] The term essay by itself is ambiguous and difficult to define. According to Holman and Harmon's *A Handbook to Literature*, essay is defined as "a moderately brief prose discussion of a restricted topic" (186).The definition continues, "Because of the wide application of the term, no satisfactory definition can be arrived at; nor can a wholly acceptable 'classification' of essay types be made . . . classifying the essay has eluded human skill" (186). The editors attempt to distinguish between the informal essay, which often includes "the personal element . . . humor, graceful style, rambling structure, unconventionality or novelty of theme, freshness of form, freedom from stiffness and affectation, incomplete or tentative treatment of topic" and the formal essay, which is characterized by "seriousness of purpose, dignity, logical organization, length" (186). *The Handbook* suggests that even these distinctions are not clearly delineated at all times (186). For the purpose of this thesis, the term "personal essay" will refer to a type of writing similar to *The Handbook's* characterization of the informal essay.

enough with "An account of a person's life by him-or herself" (63), is quick to address the presence of non-truth in autobiography:

> Memory may be unreliable. Few can recall clear details of their early life and most are therefore dependent on other people's impressions, of necessity equally unreliable. Moreover, everyone tends to remember what he or she wants to remember. Disagreeable facts are sometimes glossed over or repressed, truth may be distorted for the sake of convenience or harmony and the occlusions of time may obscure as much as they reveal. (63)

Cuddon continues, "An autobiography may be largely fictional," and he cites Rousseau's *Confessions* as "case in point" (63). According to Cuddon, "They [autobiographies such as Rousseau's] are unreliable as literal truth; they have a different literary value" (63).

Another type of creative nonfiction, new or literary journalism, is based solely on the reliability of its "literal truth." According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, the American new journalism movement[2] responded to an influx of current events where truth appeared stranger than fiction, such as the American involvement in the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, which "required the artistic resources of the novelist to capture its enormities" (Baldick 228). Perhaps new journalism is akin to television news' dramatic reenactment. Gutkind, whose journal *Creative Nonfiction* undoubtedly shapes conceptions about creative nonfiction, is a new journalist and thus places emphasis on the *nonfiction* part of creative nonfiction, namely that the writing be

[2] The *Oxford* distinguishes the American movement of the 1960s and 70s from the British new journalism movement of the 1880s.

"true." Gutkind has published books about organ transplantation, children's hospitals, childhood mental illness, baseball umpires, and his newest book is notably titled *You Can't Make This Stuff Up!* Gutkind is writing about these topics. They are not just themes; they are subjects, characters, discoverable objects. Creative nonfiction writing, as defined by Gutkind, "offers great flexibility and freedom, while adhering to the basic tenets of nonfiction writing and/or reporting" ("The Five Rs" 3). The flexibility exists in the fact that creative nonfiction writers can be "poetic and journalistic simultaneously" (3) and they are "encouraged to utilize fictional (literary) techniques in their prose" (3). Gutkind uses "true stories well told" as the most succinct and accurate way to describe the genre (Gutkind, "What is Creative Nonfiction?"). However, "true stories well told" might not be the most accurate definition for all forms of creative nonfiction, especially autobiographical writing that is by definition a somewhat unreliable version of events. A memoir, for example, might be more like a collage of experience, where the final product creates a new story, not a well-told version of an existing story.

Journalism scholar Roy Peter Clark connects honesty to the integrity of nonfiction in his article, "The Line between Fact and Fiction," published in Gutkind's journal, *Creative Nonfiction*. Clark suggests any writing that contains non-truths should not claim the status of nonfiction (6-7, 13). Clark also denies the usefulness of "creative nonfiction" because the term, among others such as "nonfiction novel," "real-life novel," and "docudrama," blurs the line between fiction and nonfiction (13). For Clark, if creative nonfiction is considered nonfiction, then it must meet the honesty standard of nonfiction. The inclusion of Clark's article in the journal *Creative Nonfiction* makes

claims about what should be considered nonfiction (creative or otherwise). According to Clark, any trace of fiction contaminates the whole work. Clark cites the use of composite characters as an example that should not be tolerated (11); if composites are used, then they "violate the contract with the reader not to mislead" (11). Clark refers to such a fabrication as a slippery slope leading readers to question how else they might be fooled (11). For Clark, if a reader is told a work is nonfiction (despite the appearance of any preceding adjectives), then it should be completely true. However, this is a complex process; readers and authors don't exchange texts with a gentlemen's handshake.

Readers rely on information from publishers and library classification data, which categorize prose as either nonfiction or fiction. Such categorization systems do not necessarily alert readers to the varied relationships to truth that can exist within the different types of nonfiction writing. Gutkind's and Clark's definitions of creative nonfiction cater to this binary, cementing creative nonfiction as a subcategory of nonfiction; however, the definition might not be suitable for all forms of writing that are currently considered creative nonfiction. In essence, Gutkind, with his journal *Creative Nonfiction*, has adopted the term to apply to a specific type of writing, such as new journalism, and thus denies the term to other types of writing, such as autobiography.

Lopate, who like Clark also questions the need for the adjective creative as a preface to nonfiction ("Curiouser" 10), presents a different definition of nonfiction than Clark and Gutkind. Besides the expectations about truth that differ between fiction and nonfiction, Lopate argues that the experiences of reading fiction and nonfiction are "fundamentally different" ("Curiouser" 5). For Lopate, the presence of the author's

consciousness as he wrestles with his subject on the page is what makes nonfiction so appealing ("Curiouser" 5). Such a description acknowledges the referentiality present in nonfiction that surpasses mere fact-checking. Lopate describes the divergences between fiction and nonfiction: "In the short story or novel, a fictive space is opened up in which the reader tends to disappear into the action, even to the point of forgetting one is reading. In the best nonfiction, it seems to me, you're always made aware that you are reflecting, by being engaged with a mind at work, not falling into a dream" ("Curiouser" 5). Maybe, fiction is designed to pull a reader in, and nonfiction is designed to allow a reader to reflect out. In autobiographical nonfiction, such as personal essays and memoirs, the author's subjectivity often serves as subject matter. With an author such as David Sedaris, the reader is engaged more with Sedaris's interpretation of events than with the actual events themselves.

A review of *The New York Times* best seller lists for fiction and nonfiction[3] reveals an interesting distinction between fiction and nonfiction books related to the author's subjective interpretation. Many of the fiction books' descriptions read like historical accounts, but the descriptions do not mention the presence of the author's perspective. For example, in Ken Follett's novel *Winter of the World*, the short description offered by *The Times* is "Members of five interrelated families from five countries grapple with the historical events of the years 1939-40" ("Best Sellers—Hardcover Fiction" 23 Dec. 2012). In *The Black* Box by Michael Connelly, the description reads, "The Los Angeles detective Harry Bosch links the bullet from a recent crime to the killing of a young female

[3] This analysis refers to the best seller lists from the week of December 23, 2012.

photographer during the race riots of 1992 ("Best Sellers—Hardcover Fiction" 23 Dec. 2012). The nonfiction descriptors include terms that describe the book as a particular person's interpretation of a particular subject. For example, the number one nonfiction hardcover book on the list for this particular week is *Killing Kennedy* by Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard. The short description of the book reads, "The host of *The O'Reilly Factor* recounts the events surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy" ("Best Sellers—Hardcover Nonfiction" 23 Dec. 2012). Number three on the list is Jon Meacham's *Thomas Jefferson*, described as "Pulitzer prize-winning journalist celebrates Jefferson's skills as a practical politician" ("Best Sellers—Hardcover Nonfiction" 23 Dec. 2012). The differences, just looking at the best sellers, seem less about topic and more about perspective. For example, Willie Nelson's nonfiction *Roll Me Up and Smoke Me When I Die* is described as "The musician muses on family, friends, Texas and life on the road" ("Best Sellers—Hardcover Nonfiction" 23 Dec. 2012). The interest that places the book on the best seller list is not a desire to acquire facts about Nelson, but a desire to engage with Nelson on whatever level the relationship between author and reader affords. Further, the works as presented above become more than "prose writing other than fiction;" they are characterized by the perspective offered by a particular author.

If nonfiction privileges the author's perspective, then does it matter if all the details are true? Maybe more importantly, why might it be problematic to label a nonfiction work as fiction simply because it contains some non-truths, even minor ones, like composite characters? Such a solution—changing status from nonfiction to fiction—is not always simple. In some cases, no matter how far the truth is stretched, the

resemblances to real-life are still too strong to change sides. Bronwyn Williams describes writing a fictional story and using an actual day spent at the ocean with his brother and his girlfriend as the "catalyst for the story" (295), but when his brother read the story, he was hurt by the inaccuracies. "But I didn't say any of that," his brother claimed (295). Williams's attempts to reassure his brother the story was fictional didn't ease his brother's concerns because the similarities were too numerous and "potentially embarrassing" (295). The scenario presented by Williams raises some meaningful issues, especially for writers such as Sedaris who base their nonfiction essays[4] on real people. Nonfiction is "prose writing other than fiction," but fiction is not all prose writing that contains non-truths. When Sedaris writes an essay about his mother, he is not writing fiction even if the entire essay is fabricated. She was a real person. She is referential. The essay reflects out through the reader's understanding of her either as formed by that individual essay, through personal acquaintance, or most likely through the amalgamated image of "David Sedaris's mother" created through Sedaris's essays.

The portraits of fiction and nonfiction that appear from analysis of library classification systems reveal a strict binary between fiction and nonfiction based on certain types of reading. In Dougas Hesse's essay, "The Place of Creative Nonfiction," he explains that many nonfiction books are categorized by the subject of their content, as opposed to being placed under the category of "Language and Literature" (237-8). Such a classification emphasizes the subject matter and encourages readings that might be geared more towards information gathering. For example, Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* is

[4] Within this thesis, David Sedaris's work, as presented in *Naked*, will be referred to as essays. The book is referred to as a collection of essays.

under the larger category G, “Geography, Anthropology, Recreation,” and the subclass GV, “Recreation, Leisure” (“Library of Congress”). Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* has a call number that begins with H, for “Social Sciences,” and the subclass, HV, for “Social pathology. Social and public welfare. Criminology” (“Library of Congress”). Hesse compares these content-based categorizations to novels, which are all classified under P for “Language and Literature,” notwithstanding the particular novel’s subject (Hesse 238). Hesse proposes the absurdity of cataloguing *Crime and Punishment* under K for “Law” (238). According to Hesse, the location of books on shelves is “metonymic of more complex questions regarding creative nonfiction’s place in English studies” (238), but the issue seems bigger than just English studies because by definition it at least includes library science, and libraries distribute books to the reading public based on these classifications.

In a text from the field of library science, *The Classification of Fiction: The Development of a System Based on Theoretical Principles*, Claire Beghtol makes the following distinction between fiction and nonfiction: “The world of documents may be divided initially in a conventional way, i.e., those works that are thought to arise primarily from the imaginations of their creators and those that are thought to arise from a rational faculty” (7). First, such a statement confirms that libraries abide by a *there is fiction and then there is everything else* mantra. The labeling of something as “from the imagination” places it in a parallel universe and thus declares it as non-referential. Use of the term “rational faculty” is somewhat troubling (especially as presented in this statement as an entity that is in opposition to imaginative writing), but

possibly it simply denotes that the writing, like rationality itself, is based on something—that it has a reference. However conventional this division might be, the qualifying factors are entirely subjective, even admittedly so with the double use of the phrase: "thought to arise." Who is doing the thinking in this case? Also, exactly how much constitutes "primarily," and why is fiction the only beneficiary of partial credit? Who decides? Certainly, the information from the publisher plays an important role, even if the library classification system includes close examination of documents prior to classification. With a memoir, for instance, the real authority on whether the writing is "from the imagination" or "from a rational faculty" can only be answered by the author or other individuals who share the same references.

James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* is categorized as nonfiction with a call number that begins "HV" for "Social Sciences" ("Library of Congress"), placing it in the same class as *In Cold Blood.* The book is then further organized into the subclass "Drug habits. Drug abuse" ("Library of Congress"). When Frey's memoir was originally published, it did not contain any information from the publisher or author that situates the book in reference to actual events. However in all copies published after the Oprah-Gate scandal in 2006, the publisher includes a note on the copyright page that reads, "This book is a combination of facts about James Frey's life and certain embellishments. Names, dates, places, events, and details have been changed, invented or altered for literary effect. The reader should not consider this book anything other than a work of literature" (Frey, 2006 Copyright page). The Library of Congress data, classifying the book under "Social Sciences," appears directly under this publisher's note. Interestingly, David

Sedaris's *Naked* was given a Library of Congress call number beginning with P, for "Language and Literature," and the subclass PS for "American Literature." The Library of Congress cataloguing information appears directly under the author's note that reads: "The events described in these stories are real. Other than the family members, the characters have fictitious names and identifying characteristics" (Sedaris, *Naked* Copyright page).

Naked is considered "biography," which is why it received the literature designation. What is interesting is that Frey's work was not considered biography—his topic took precedence to *his* story. *A Million Little Pieces* and *Naked* both appeared on the *New York Times* best seller lists for nonfiction. However, Frey, classified under social sciences, received such significant backlash after *The Smoking Gun* website claimed Frey lied about portions of the memoir that he was publicly humiliated by Oprah Winfrey, dropped by his publisher, and referred to in certain writers' circles as "the F word" (Kraus 246). When Sedaris was exposed by Alex Heard in an article published in *The New Republic* for fabricating events in multiple essays, Sedaris emerged unscathed. One year after Heard's article, Sedaris published another collection of essays (with the same publisher) and included an author's note that stated, "The events described in these stories are realish" (*When You Are Engulfed in Flames* Copyright page), perhaps toying with Heard's allegations.

Frey's memoir is designated nonfiction and therefore not literature, and Sedaris's collection of essays is presented as literature, even though the publisher expressly defines the book as referential. However, the two books have more in

common than their classification statuses might imply. Both are written in first person. Both are narratives. Both use their own character as a way to engage with the world around them. Both contain non-truths. Both contain a certain referentiality that anchors their stories outside the text itself. However, if their library classifications are any indication, then they serve two distinct purposes: one as a testimony about addiction, which explicitly places the memoir as a reference to the complex process of recovery for at least one individual, and the other as a work of literature meant mainly to entertain. Labels, such as fiction and nonfiction, arm readers with the rules. However, the rules are complex, and an understanding of nonfiction as "true" and fiction as "make-believe" is somewhat naïve.

Even if not all of the events described in a nonfiction text actually happened, there is still some benefit for the reader in making connections outside the text. According to Lopate's discussion of the personal essay, "so often the 'plot' of a personal essay, its drama, its suspense, consists in watching how far the essayist can drop past his or her psychic defenses toward deeper levels of honesty" ("Introduction" xxv). Such a discussion applies to a reading of James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*. A reader armed with the knowledge that Frey fabricated important elements does not necessarily engage in a fictional read. The process still involves reflecting outward, even if those reflections are based on efforts to determine which parts are real and which are inhibited by his defenses (voluntary and involuntary). The fact that James Frey exists and is a character in his own memoir is its own form of nonfiction. Reading for the ways that James Frey constructs himself in his writing is a certain type of reading that emerges

from the memoir, post-controversy. Such a reading is different both from a strict nonfiction reading that expects information with an unwavering devotion to fact and from a reading of the memoir as a complete work of fiction divorced from any reference to the extratextual world.

The quality of nonfiction writing like Frey's may be in dispute, but the important distinction here is that the fabrications do not make the writing fiction; the fabrications merely make it bad nonfiction. Lopate adds, "[if] the essayist stays at the same flat level of self-disclosure and understanding throughout, the piece may be pleasantly smooth, but it will not awaken that shiver of self-recognition—equivalent to the frisson in horror films when the monster looks at himself in the mirror" ("Introduction" xxvi). The issue for Frey, detailed in chapter three, is that he wrote himself as the monster staring in the mirror (literally at the end of the memoir), when in fact he never faltered from a flat level of self-disclosure. Chapter three analyzes the controversy surrounding James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* to further explore the rhetorical implications of non-truth in nonfiction. Chapter four argues against Alex Heard's article, "This American Lie," which suggests David Sedaris's work is fraudulently labeled as nonfiction. Both instances involve fact-checking investigations that place the writing in direct dispute with references outside the text. Also, in both instances, the term at issue is nonfiction. In the case of James Frey, even the term memoir is used as a means to classify the book under the heading of nonfiction. As for Sedaris, the issue that prompts Heard's investigation is the classification of Sedaris's work as nonfiction, specifically with regards to placement on best seller lists, like *The New York Times.* Nonfiction is a broad

category of documents, and even narrowing the field with the use of the term creative nonfiction does little to alleviate the ambiguity. Both investigations centered on the simple fact that nonfiction writing should be true, no matter how it is defined, and this thesis responds to and disputes such a generalized definition of nonfiction.

Chapter III

THE BLACK SHEEP

> "the underlying message of redemption in James Frey's memoir still resonates with me" (Oprah Winfrey, from a call-in to *Larry King Live*).

Creative nonfiction, which includes memoirs like James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, has more to offer readers than just the facts; however, when those facts are in dispute, the entire work is often viewed as tainted. In some ways, it is the notion of "truth" that makes nonfiction, even personal writing like memoir, appealing. Bronwyn Williams distinguishes between fiction and nonfiction:

> There is a power in the retelling of real events in real lives that is different from the power of fiction. Different and important. We tell stories to one another, to understand one another, in part because they are true. That is, after all, why creative nonfiction appeals to us. The nonfiction writer says to the reader, "Such things can happen, have happened, and as human beings we must struggle to make meaning of them. (296)

When readers interact with a memoir, they have different expectations than they might have with a fictional novel, the same way television viewers might interact differently with a documentary program than with a science fiction program. *A Million Little Pieces*

was controversial, not because certain facts were embellished or even completely fabricated, but because it was published as a memoir, not as fiction. The memoir[5] narrates Frey's history of addiction and recovery, and for many readers, including Oprah Winfrey, this publication status offered a contract that suggested, at the very least, a good faith effort at writing the truth. Readers believed the events in the memoir "can happen, have happened," and part of the process of reading was working to "make meaning of them."

When Winfrey selected *A Million Little Pieces* for her book club, it became the best-selling nonfiction book of 2005 ("Interview with James Frey"). However, when the website, *The Smoking Gun* (*TSG*), published a detailed investigation, titled "A Million Little Lies," claiming Frey had fabricated major plot elements, controversy ensued. *TSG* notes its initial interest in Frey was simply to locate a mug shot for its website ("A Million Little Lies"), which is part of its mission to provide "exclusive documents—cool, confidential, quirky—that can't be found elsewhere on the Web" ("About"). When the site was unable to locate mug shots of a man who claimed to have been arrested fourteen times in multiple states, the editors questioned Frey's claims about his altercations with the law ("A Million Little Lies"). *TSG* specializes in displaying documents from government agencies and court files on its website, and the investigative report focuses on Frey's supposed criminal activity. For the most part, the article refutes Frey's claims that he was a criminal who was wanted in three states and

[5] Although this chapter deals partly with the (mis)labeling of Frey's work as a memoir, for the sake of consistency, the book will be referred to as a memoir throughout the chapter even when that status is explicitly in dispute.

spent three months in jail after his release from an addiction treatment facility ("A Million Little Lies"). *A Million Little Pieces* is not necessarily about these charges, and Frey argues in an interview with Larry King shortly after the *TSG* article was published that the refuted details only comprise eighteen pages of his 430-page memoir ("Interview with James Frey"). However, the fact that Frey was a Criminal, with a capital C, permeates the entirety of the memoir. The mantra he continually repeats to himself, appearing numerous times throughout the memoir, is "I am an Alcoholic I am an Addict and I am a Criminal" (Frey 74).[6] Further, the fact that Frey "skipped bail" and was wanted on multiple charges during his time in the treatment facility serves as an important impetus for the plot, which begins after Frey's criminal acts and ends before he serves his jail time. In essence, the portions of the book about Frey's criminal past and incarcerated future are vitally important to the development of his story. And they are not true.

After *TSG* published the investigation, which also challenges many smaller discrepancies in the memoir, Frey appeared as a guest on *Larry King Live* to discuss the claims. Frey suggests that despite the non-truths, *A Million Little Pieces* is still comfortably within the category of memoir. His conversation with King proceeded as follows:

> FREY: I mean, I've acknowledged that there were embellishments in the book, that I've changed things, that in certain cases things were toned up,

[6] Unless noted otherwise, all citations from James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* will refer to the 2004 Anchor Books paperback edition.

> in certain cases things were toned down, that names were changed, that identifying characteristics were changed.
>
> There's a great debate about memoir and about what should be most properly served, the story or some form of journalistic truth. Memoirs don't generally come under the type of scrutiny that mine has.
>
> KING: People reading a memoir expect it to be a true story, whether it's Alan Alda doing a memoir of his life or James Frey doing a memoir of his, that the facts written down [are] as they happened or their perception of their happening.
>
> FREY: It's an individual's perception of what happened in their own life. This is my recollection of my life. A lot of the events I was writing about took place between 15 and 25 years ago. A lot of the events took place while I was under the influence of drugs and alcohol. I still stand by my book. I still stand by the fact that it's my story. It's a truthful retelling of the story. (“Interview with James Frey”)

It is difficult to imagine that even the cloudiness created by elapsed time or drugs and alcohol could confuse an individual about spending three months in jail. For many critics of Frey, the fact that he was an addict should have been enough without fabricating a criminal past. However, at this point of the controversy, Frey’s position as either a con-man or an author who embellished to get to a larger truth was not firmly cemented. During the Larry King interview, Winfrey called the show and supported Frey, stating on the air,

> And I feel about "A Million Little Pieces" that although some of the facts have been questioned—and people have a right to question, because we live in a country that lets you do that, that the underlying message of redemption in James Frey's memoir still resonates with me. And I know that it resonates with millions of other people who have read this book and will continue to read this book. ("Interview with James Frey")

Winfrey suggested during this interview that the non-truths do not affect the overall message of the memoir. However, she quickly recanted. Two weeks after Frey's appearance on *Larry King*, Frey made another appearance on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, where Winfrey chastised Frey for lying to her, lying in his memoir, and lying to the millions of readers that she delivered to him.[7] James Frey was instantly branded a liar and a fraud. The name James Frey became a symbol for deception, objectified to the point that the name itself took on its own sinister meaning without regard for the individual, James Frey. Post-controversy, the conversation about truth and nonfiction pits absolute honesty at one end of the spectrum and James Frey at the other.

However, Frey didn't write *A Million Little Pieces* under the pretense of presenting a fact-based account of addiction and recovery. He wrote a book and then shopped for a publisher. During his interview with Larry King, Frey describes shopping the book initially as a novel without success, and then when the book was picked up by Nan Talese, Frey adds, "I'm not sure if they knew what they were going to publish it as.

[7] In a 2011 follow-up interview with James Frey, Winfrey apologizes for her lack of compassion during his second appearance on the show. According to Winfrey, even during interviews with "murderers" and "child molesters" she has tried to approach the individual with compassion, and Winfrey confesses she did not do this with James Frey ("James Frey: Five Years Later").

We talked about what to publish it as. And they thought the best thing to do was publish it as a memoir" ("Interview with James Frey"). The same text that was unpublishable as a novel was somehow publishable as a memoir. According to Nan Talese's comments on the *Oprah* Winfrey *Show*, post-controversy, her publishing house was unaware of any fabrications in the memoir ("Oprah's Questions"). Talese's comments certainly raise questions about the ethical obligations of publishers. Her comments also raise the issue of why Talese was willing to take the risk of publishing a possibly untrue memoir (either the publishers did not verify the truth of the memoir, or they did and published it anyway), but not willing to take the risk of publishing it as a novel. Accurately told or not, *A Million Little Pieces* is an autobiography. The memoir is a particular construction of James Frey's character, created by James Frey. Maybe James Frey is incapable of constructing himself truthfully, and in that sense even the lies are nonfiction.

James Frey committed no crime until he agreed to allow his publisher to label *A Million Little Pieces* as nonfiction. The first offense led to a succession of lies that piled on charges against the author post-publication. When Winfrey introduced the book as a selection for her book club, she presented the account as a historical and therefore factual account to a large selection of viewers who may not be experienced literary consumers. Frey implicated himself in public as he proceeded to talk about events in the memoir regarding his fictional incarceration as if they actually happened. Nonetheless, if the analysis of Frey's writing was isolated from the author's inappropriate behavior, in essence, if Frey were afforded the fiction treatment, then maybe his work could speak

for itself. *A Million Little Pieces* makes no textual claims about its relationship to the truth. There is no publisher's note in the original edition; there is nothing that states, "This is a true story." Beyond its placement within the genre by publishers and library classification data, the memoir does not offer a contract for its readers. The only indication within the memoir is that on the third page, the narrator is referred to as "James," and then on page nineteen, the narrator introduces himself more fully as "James Frey." The main character's sharing a name with the author is the main evidence suggesting the memoir might have happened to a real person. Name sharing alone should not be enough of a reason to enter into a verifiable contract about truth. However, it does not require a six-week investigation by *TSG* to find holes in Frey's story.

The opening paragraph of the memoir begins with Frey waking up from a drug- and alcohol-induced binge alone on a commercial airplane, his clothes "covered with a colorful mixture of spit, snot, urine, vomit and blood" (1). Anyone who has ever flown on an airplane or been through security might question this scene. The memoir continues with Frey receiving caps on two teeth and root canal surgery without any anesthetic, local or general (63-72). The scene is intensely portrayed, and maybe metaphoric, but at face value it seems highly unbelievable. The memoir wraps with Frey confessing to a priest some twenty-two pages of digressions starting with running over his preschool teacher with a Big Wheel (394) and ending with beating a priest almost to death in a church in Paris (405-6). However, sandwiched between these specific, verifiable instances, there are three hundred pages of the characterization of Frey, the

narrator. The narrator portrays himself as a volatile and damaged bad boy, dealing with an extreme case of addiction. Even at a treatment center in the company of grown men who have hit rock bottom because of their addiction, men who have lost their homes and families, men who are crackheads and murderers, Frey as a twenty-three year old alcoholic, addict, and criminal presents himself as the worst of the bunch. Frey continually mocks the reports by other patients about their levels of use. When a former patient and famous rock star, who "talks about what he calls the national obsession with his lips" (Frey 177), speaks at a lecture, Frey is not impressed and silently refers to him as a fraud. Frey thinks if he was in his normal frame of mind (juiced, super-addict), then he would "tell him that if I ever heard of him spewing his bullshit fantasies in Public again, I would cut off his precious hair, scar his precious lips, and take all his goddamned gold records and shove them straight up his ass" (177). Even Steven Tyler was no match for the hardcore drug and alcohol abuse of Frey.

However, for those solely concerned with checking facts, the character development within the memoir is less important. Personalities cannot be verified with court documents. Emotions cannot be pinned down. The fact-checkers at *TSG* can verify that Frey never served the jail time, and they can let witnesses provide insights about his past, but how can they prove the most pervasive and important aspect of the memoir: James Frey's own interpretation of James Frey? In many cases, the author might be the worst source for a truthful portrayal of himself, but verifying the truthfulness of an author's own depiction of himself is certainly subjective. Therefore, memoirs like Frey's inherently contain non-verifiable truths. For memoirist Maureen

Murdock, a chief question for the author of memoir is "What meaning, what value do I attach to how my life has unfolded?" (12). The process of writing the memoir alters the author's relationship to the past by resituating the past, plucking memories from one moment and aligning or contrasting them with memories from another moment. The product is not equivalent to the parts. If an author fabricates events to create a new characterization of himself, then he is attaching value to how his life unfolded, even if that meaning is one of confusion or disconnect. Maybe, for an author like James Frey, he found greater value in the "what ifs" than in the truth.

If the understanding of nonfiction, including memoir, is that it must be "true," then fabrications like those made by Frey produce only misperception. With such a narrow definition, maybe a reader's only choice is to read for information, the way one might read a news story. Once that information is deemed unreliable, then what remains is useless. Part of the interest in reading the memoir, not as a testimony of addiction and recovery, but as a journey with the author as he attempts to attach value to the way his life unfolded, is noting the cracks between the contrived performance of James Frey, the character and narrator, and James Frey, the actual person. The characterization of Frey in *A Million Little Pieces* is James Frey playing it up for the cameras and putting out an image that is perhaps based on how he wants to be perceived (this is, after all, the real value in writing one's own story). However, disbelief in the narrator's claims or belief in the narrator's created façade does not void interest in the value of the memoir. Instead, it creates another level of depth for readers to negotiate, a space for interaction beyond the surface level narrative. Readers function

as detectives who try to piece together an accurate version of a character in disguise. The nonfiction status is fundamental to this way of reading that involves making connections from within the pages outward to the world.

The main issue with *A Million Little Pieces* is that goods delivered were not as promised. Frey didn't play by the rules. However when it comes to memoirs, the rules are not clearly defined even to the most experienced readers. After the controversy involving James Frey, *Writer* published an interview with a panel of authors including Susan Cheever, Roy Peter Clark, Maria Flook, Rick Moody, and William Zinsser. The authors were asked first to define memoir and then to comment specifically about the relationship between a memoir and the truth. The responses vary. In their definitions of memoir, the authors used words such as memory, experience, nonfiction, story, and literary or literature (Johnson 20-1). When asked "to what extent can a memoir writer take 'fictional liberties'?" the authors' positions diverged, much like the debate about creative nonfiction, into two distinct camps, one that prohibits any fictional liberty and relies on fact-checking and pinning things down and the other that sees memoir not as merely retelling events as they happened, but relying on past events to tell a new story. According to William Zinsser,

> You [the writer] must arrange a narrative trajectory that holds the reader's interest and connects these various pieces of your life. That can often mean collapsing two events into one, various ways of altering a time sequence to make it more the way a playwright does, [compressing] events to form a narrative that is coherent. You may not be true to

> exactly who did what and who said what, but you must be true to the essential truth. (qtd. in Johnson 22)

Perhaps, it can be argued that the "essential truth" might be better expressed through particular non-truths. It depends on the story that an author wishes to tell. If the story or the "essential truth" dictates a deviation from the actual truth, then should the story be abandoned in favor of meeting the guidelines of a certain categorization? Susan Cheever argues, "I don't write to the genre, I write to the reader" (qtd. in Johnson 22). But according to strict nonfictionalists (Clark, Moody, and Gutkind, for example), even the slightest detour towards non-truth places writing in the fiction category, as if changing genres were simply a choice.

Technically, James Frey was not a fraud until he agreed to publish his work as a memoir, and even at that point it was not a slam dunk case, given the ambiguous definition of memoir. However, Frey piled up charges by bringing the non-truths from his memoir into the public sphere where they immediately became lies. According to the *TSG* investigation, Frey continually discussed his altercations with the law and his supposed time served in jail during book signings and in interviews ("A Million Little Lies"). As is the case with many public image defamations, it is often not the act itself, but the cover-up that is troubling. When Winfrey presented *A Million Little Pieces* on her show as part of Oprah's Book Club, she simultaneously instructed her audience how to read the memoir: as a true story about a real person's struggle with addiction and recovery. During her introduction of Frey she used comments such as "You want to meet the man who lived to tell this tale" and "I kept turning to the back of the book to

remind myself, 'He's alive. He's okay'" ("A Million Little Lies"). The memoir was presented to the public (and Oprah's introductions for her book club selections place authors on an unprecedented national stage) as the reporting of actual events lived by an actual person and, even more specifically, as a story that captured interest because he "lived to tell the tale." Frey could not have been naïve to the discrepancy between Winfrey's vision of the factual nature of his memoir and the actual facts. However, maybe his crime was less about conning the literary and publishing worlds, Oprah Winfrey, and the public, but about getting caught up in a chance for fame. What he did was wrong, but was it enough to vilify his name, even among non-readers, and to destroy and completely devalue his work? Maybe.

Disregarding the errors of judgment that Frey made place post-publication, there are two plausible, retrospective solutions to the conflict surrounding *A Million Little Pieces*. First is that the book should have been written differently (or not at all). Large plot discrepancies should not exist, especially those that make it seem like the protagonist was in jail for three months when in reality he was only held for a few hours before being released on bond. Even the members of the literary community who aim for "essential truth" probably find such whoppers to be problematic. Second is that the memoir should still exist in its current form, but should have been published differently. The issue with this solution is that a publication category that is an exact fit may not exist. The memoir is based on the life of James Frey. Even if many, or even all, of the scenarios created within the memoir are fabricated or manipulated by the author, the character of James Frey may still be reacting authentically. The publishing world is stuck

in a two-party system. *The New York Times* has two number one best sellers each week, and to be in the running, the publisher and author must clearly establish the product as either fiction or nonfiction. Nan Talese seemed to feel that *A Million Little Pieces* had the best chance on the nonfiction ticket.

Frey should have questioned such a categorization. He could have retracted his book back into obscurity. At some moment during the process, he chose to accept the lie that was created when *A Million Little Pieces* was branded a memoir. Perhaps, he became the Criminal that up until that point only existed within the pages of the memoir. He wrote his own destiny. When Frey sat on Winfrey's couch during his first interview, he appeared as the Alcoholic, Addict, and Criminal he wrote himself to be. Oprah interviewed a literary character about his addiction and difficult path to recovery. In many ways, this was his biggest crime. The lies on the page are nothing compared to the lies on the couch. When Frey was brought back to *The Oprah Winfrey Show* after the *TSG* investigative report was published, after Frey appeared on *Larry King Live*, and apparently after Winfrey decided that she would not be humiliated, he appeared as James Frey, the author. The second appearance was a behind-the-scenes look at Frey's process of writing, which included not only embellishing, but also making up large integral plot elements. Frey, forced to defend himself, admits that during his recovery he clung to a fabricated image "of myself as being tougher than I was and badder than I was," and that image is what appears in the book ("Oprah's Questions"). Winfrey asks, "And did you cling to that image because that's how you wanted to see yourself? Or did

you cling to that image because that would make a better book?" ("Oprah's Questions").

The either/or question presented by Winfrey suggests a writing choice made solely to make a book "better" is an unconscionable act that willfully deceives readers in pursuit of greed. However, Frey didn't necessarily set out to write a fact-based account of his life up through his twenty-third year, and he certainly didn't expect to be sitting on Winfrey's couch in front of millions of viewers admitting he lied. Frey responds, "Probably both" ("Oprah's Questions"). As a reader, it is difficult to implicate Frey on these charges alone. His publisher, Nan Talese, joined Frey on the couch during his second appearance, dodged any responsibility, and denied any knowledge of the lies presented in the memoir. She stated that she "read the manuscript as a memoir" ("Oprah's Questions"), and "an author brings his book in, says it is true, it is accurate" ("Oprah's Questions"). Ultimately, Frey was responsible. His name was defamed. What is most interesting about the exchange between Frey, Talese, and Winfrey is that Winfrey bases her questioning of Talese on the fact that she should have been skeptical. Winfrey tells Talese, "One of the reasons why we're all so taken with the book is because it feels and reads so sensationally that you can't believe that all of this happened to one person" ("Oprah's Questions"). Then why did she believe?

Winfrey claims she relies on publishers to determine the believability of books and tells Talese, "I think the publisher has a responsibility because as the consumer, the reader, I am trusting you. I'm trusting you, the publisher, to categorize this book whether as fiction or autobiographical or memoir. I'm trusting you" ("Oprah's

Questions"). It is difficult to imagine that Winfrey, who has built an empire on getting people to tell their stories, loses the ability to decipher the truth from lies when presented in print. Adding "this is a true story" isn't all it takes to elicit unwavering belief. Genres should exist to alert readers to certain ways of reading, but they should not pigeonhole writers into strict classifications, nor should such classifications be unquestionably accepted by readers as law. Authors draw from personal and imagined experiences in their writing, and categorizing prose into nonfiction or fiction is not as easy as submitting to a lie detector test. Both television and film rely on hybridizations between fact and fiction. Shows like *Law and Order* regularly develop plots that are "ripped from the headlines," and filmmakers rely on real-life, historical accounts for big box office payoffs. Often, history makes its largest impact on popular culture when it is retold through film and television. The recent film *Zero Dark Thirty*, a drama that depicts the decade-long hunt for Osama Bin Laden, not only mixes fact with fiction, but also shapes the public's interpretation of real events. Eric Heyne suggests, "Many of the most interesting contemporary narratives challenge us to sort carefully among different conventions for truth-telling" (331). Such a "sorting mechanism" is more complicated than the "binary choice would imply" (331).

While promoting his book, Frey made terrible decisions. He sat on Oprah Winfrey's couch, the repository of "reality," and lied. He carried out the lies in multiple interviews and book promotion events. However, the lies only matter because of how his book was published, as nonfiction, not as a story, but as a retelling of fact. The stamp of nonfiction merged James Frey the character to James Frey the author and created the

environment for lies to grow. Non-truths can only exist if there is a truth for reference. Arguing for James Frey is an argument against honesty and Oprah, but maybe it is an important argument to consider. Maybe his work is like reality television: entertainment that uses real people and places them in fabricated situations. If television viewers can grasp a blend between the real and the imagined, then surely readers can do the same. More importantly, the argument grants writers the freedom to tell the story they want to tell, especially in memoir when the author is writing to make sense of his own character. During Frey's interview with Larry King, he stated, "I'm certainly never going to write another book about myself" ("Interview with James Frey"). For critics of Frey, that is likely positive news, but how many other writers might be encouraged to take the same stance because of this controversy? How many publishers are gun-shy about memoirs? How many stories have been lost? Fact-checking, post James Frey, is to memoir writing as TSA security screening, post-911, is to airline travel. Taking another look at "The F word" might be an important part of understanding nonfiction, especially memoirs and other types of autobiographical writing. Fact-checking cannot always correctly diagnose the problem. When an author writes about himself, he rewrites his past, and dispute can sometimes disintegrate into a million little pieces.

Chapter IV

THE FUNNY GUY

> "Acting is different than posing or pretending. When done with precision, it bears a striking resemblance to lying" (Sedaris, from *Naked*).

When Oprah Winfrey introduced James Frey's work for her book club, she said, "You want to meet the man who lived to tell this tale" and admitted that while reading she had to flip to the back cover and assure herself "He's alive. He's okay" ("A Million Little Lies"). Thus, Frey's work was presented as having value because it had actually happened. He lived it. He survived. As argued in chapter three, the real issue for Frey, notwithstanding the lies he told post-publication, was the marketing of his book towards a certain type of reading. *A Million Little Pieces* was not just presented as a memoir, which might afford some distortion of truth, but as a true story about recovery and addiction. Beyond the negative consequences for Frey and his career, the controversy also prompted a fact-checking shakedown across the world of nonfiction. In the post-Frey world, every fact was suspect, every author who claimed nonfiction and thus a stake at a spot on *The New York Times'* best seller list was a possible culprit. This increased scrutiny extended to humor writers like David Sedaris. In his article, "This

American Lie," writer Alex Heard suggests that the non-truths in Sedaris's essays go "beyond the boundaries of comic exaggeration" (36).

Humor writing has a peculiar relationship with truth. Humor relies not just on exaggeration but also on metaphor to get to the punch line, which often means that the humorous parts of the writing are by default, not true. Humor writing elicits the emotional response of laughter, and authors, such as Sedaris, regularly blend real anecdotes with metaphors that serve as commentary. Poetry engages in a similar emotion-evoking project. The poet uses imagery to gain emotional depth. An example provided in chapter two recalls Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and his detailed account of a he-bird who loses his she-bird. Whether or not Whitman actually witnessed such an event is not important, and the thought of fact-checking the occurrence is comical. The poem is not about the birds. The birds are like actors hired to play a certain role; they serve as a metaphor for a greater truth.

In an essay titled "Cyclops" in *Naked*, Sedaris describes riding in his mother's car one night when she accidentally hit an animal in the dark:

> We covered our heads against the rain and searched the darkened street until we found an orange cat coughing up blood into the gutter.
>
> "You killed me," the cat said, pointing at my mother with its flattened paw. "Here I had so much to live for, but now it's over, my whole life wiped out just like that." The cat wheezed rhythmically before closing its eyes and dying.

> "Shit," my mother repeated. We walked door to door until finding the cat's owner, a kind and understanding woman whose young daughter shared none of her qualities. "You killed my cat," she screamed, sobbing into her mother's skirt. "You're mean and you're ugly and you killed my cat."
>
> "She's at that age," the woman said, stroking the child's hair. (50-51)

The reader knows some of the dialogue in this passage is fabricated because Sedaris has included the words of a dying cat. Further, Sedaris admits to exaggerating, telling a reporter for the *New Orleans Times-Picuyane*, "I exaggerate wildly, for the sake of story. Mostly in dialogue" (qtd. in Heard 37). The conversation with the cat owner's daughter could certainly be interpreted as exaggerated, and it is not clear if the cat's owner actually said, "She's at that age," or if Sedaris also added that dialogue for effect. Sedaris doesn't present the cat's words differently than the humans' words. There is no demarcation between the real and the imaginary within the essay itself. However, Sedaris is not trying to create a fantasy world of personified animals. The cat dialogue is used to show how it felt when he saw the orange cat coughing up blood in the gutter—an exaggeration on its own. The remaining dialogue between the cat owner, her daughter, and Sedaris's mother can be read similarly.

In many ways, it doesn't really matter how much of the dialogue is true. "Cyclops" is about the persistent, terrifying, and exaggerated warnings Sedaris's father

gave to all of his children about life's hidden dangers. Throughout the essay, Mr. Sedaris presents outlandish examples of what could happen, and Sedaris takes caution:

> Danger was everywhere and it was our father's lifelong duty to warn us. Attending the country club's Fourth of July celebration, we were told how one of his Navy buddies had been disfigured for life when a cherry bomb exploded in his lap. "Blew his balls right off the map," he said. "Take a second and imagine what that must have felt like!" Racing to the farthest edge of the golf course, I watched the remainder of the display with my hands between my legs. (48)

Sedaris describes how his father's warnings have altered his own choices, including the decision not to drive: "I surrendered my permit and never drove again. My nerves just couldn't take it. It seemed much safer to hitchhike" (51). In the context of the essay, it may not even matter if the cat scene took place at all. The essay is not about the cat. His dad's Navy buddy and the talking cat underscore what could happen if he is not careful. The cat is just playing a role.

According to Kylie Cardell and Victoria Kuttainen, Sedaris's "family-based serial memoirs" contest the line between fiction and nonfiction (100). The passages from "Cyclops" challenge the established binary of fiction as make-believe and nonfiction as fact-based. Roy Peter Clark's article, "The Line Between Fact and Fiction," describes the complexities of getting at the truth for the nonfiction writer, noting the "fictive nature of memory" and the refractions created by particular points of view that make the "truth" seem unreachable (6); however, argues Clark, "even though you can never get it

[the truth] . . . you can gain on it" (9). For Clark, this is the contract the writer makes with the reader, and any alterations to this contract, including humor, must be "transparent or disclosed" (7). Disclosure might occur in an author's note. On the copyright page in *Naked*, Sedaris notes, "The events described in these stories are real. Other than the family members, the characters have fictitious names and identifying characteristics" (Copyright page). Sedaris admits to altering descriptions of characters, but he does not explicitly disclose other liberties. How is the reader supposed to know exactly where the boundary of "characteristics" ends? Clark's idea that the humor must be "transparent" seems even more problematic. Transparency would likely include Sedaris's dying cat, but how is the reader expected to know when Sedaris exits absurd exaggeration and circles back to truthdom?

In "This American Lie," Heard attempts to distinguish between comedic exaggeration and lies in Sedaris's essays. Heard's article was published in 2007, one year after the James Frey controversy, but Heard preempts critics by stating, "I can almost hear throngs of NPR listeners saying, *uh oh, is this guy about to give my man Sedaris the James Frey treatment?"* [emphasis in the original] (36). Despite his assurance that he would not be giving Sedaris the "James Frey treatment," the investigation is eerily similar. Heard spent "several weeks" (36) fact-checking four of Sedaris's books. Heard contacted sources with intimate knowledge of the events in Sedaris's essays, including childhood friends, a former school principal, a nurse from a mental institution where Sedaris interned in the 1970s, and a man who took lessons from the same guitar teacher as Sedaris in the seventh grade. Heard combed old newspaper clips, spoke with Sedaris

and one of his sisters, and even visited Sedaris's father, Lou, in the Sedaris family home. The real difference between *The Smoking Gun* article and Heard's article is *The Smoking Gun* commenced a smackdown, igniting a firestorm of controversy that eventually exploded on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* in front of millions of viewers. Frey lost his publisher, his career disintegrated, and his name was reduced to a symbol for fraud. Heard's article was less of a slam dunk. Perhaps, the article was widely read in certain literary circles, a locus of sophisticated readers who are already privy to many of Sedaris's conventions, but the article didn't seep into the mainstream, and it certainly didn't sink, or even dampen, Sedaris's career. In 2008, one year after Heard's article was published, Sedaris's *When You are Engulfed in Flames* debuted at the top of *The New York Times* best seller list ("Best Sellers—Hardcover Nonfiction" 22 Jun. 2008).

Heard's main argument is that even for humor writing, Sedaris's use of fabricated material goes too far to be considered nonfiction. *Naked*, which contains dialogue from a dying cat, appeared on *The New York Times* best seller list for nonfiction when it was published in 1997 (Heard 35). Heard suggests the publisher categorized Sedaris's work as nonfiction because "nonfiction is bankable in a way that fiction is not" (38). According to Heard, "It's fine to use absurdly embellished descriptions for laughs—this is an essential tool for any humorist. If I write, 'I was so hungover, I threw up my own skeleton,' you know I'm kidding" (36). According to Heard's example, the humorist must use embellishments that are incapable of being true to assure the readers which parts are real and which are added for comic effect. In Sedaris's passage about running over the cat, the cat speaking directly to Sedaris's mother and pointing at her with his

"flattened paw" certainly falls into this category. However, much like Heard's example, that outlandish embellishment isn't necessarily funny. Talking cats and overtly overstated comparisons herald their approach and alert the audience like a bad laugh track. Sedaris hasn't made his living with talking cats or puked-up skeletons; his humor is more subtle.

Sometimes the reader doesn't know Sedaris is kidding—his humor is not always transparent. Also, the exaggerations, where he deliberately makes stuff up, are not always isolated to just the funny stuff. Heard determines that Sedaris's liberties with the truth matter because the nonfiction label presupposes certain obligations through reference to real people who appear as characters in events that may not have taken place, speaking words they never uttered. In an interview with Lania Knight for *The Missouri Review*, Sedaris admits he takes efforts to avoid hurting the people he loves by giving them an opportunity to read his work before publication (Knight 80). Obviously, though, the members of Sedaris's immediate family are not the only characters who appear in his work. Heard suggests that Sedaris should issue "Oprah moment apologies" to many of the extras who appear in his essays and specifically calls out Sedaris for his treatment of members of a nudist colony in New York, Sedaris's former guitar teacher, and the "grouchy" portrayal of Sedaris's own mother, Sharon (Heard 36), who died in 1991 (Carlin). According to Heard, Sharon Sedaris is "one-dimensionalized into a sarcasm-dispensing cliché" (Heard 36). Most likely, the guitar teacher and the nudists were not polled for approval, and based on the renderings created by Sedaris of these

characters, such approval may have been denied, but suggesting that Sedaris unfaithfully portrayed his dead mother for the sake of laughs is quite an allegation.

A closer examination of *Naked* develops an image of Sharon Sedaris as neither one dimensional nor a cliché. In almost all of the seventeen essays in the collection, Mrs. Sedaris emerges as the one person who seems to understand young Sedaris. She is portrayed as a sharp, but overwhelmed woman with a witty tongue. The very first essay in *Naked*, "Chipped Beef" begins with young Sedaris imagining himself in a family with significant wealth, glowing skin, and no sisters. The essay begins, "I'm thinking of asking the servants to wax my change before placing it in the Chinese tank I keep on my dresser" (1). Sedaris continues for four pages until the dream cloud is pierced by Sedaris's mother: "'Oh for God's sake,' my mother said, tossing her wooden spoon into a cauldron of chipped beef gravy" (2). *Naked* begins with a metaphor: Sedaris's mother cuts through his bullshit.

In "The Incomplete Quad," Sedaris writes about bringing home a quadriplegic girl from college in an effort to show his family how responsible he has become. His father gives her his watch, and his brother and sisters "reacted as though I had brought home a sea lion. They invited their friends to stare from the deck as I laid Peg on a picnic blanket in the backyard" (148), but Mrs. Sedaris calls him into the kitchen, shoves money into his hand, and whispers, "I don't know what kind of a game you are playing, mister, but you ought to be ashamed of yourself" (149). After weeks of using Peg for attention and for garnering free stuff from strangers, his mother knocks the wind out of sails with a single blow. On the bus trip back to college, Sedaris's mood sinks, and he questions,

"How was it that by the time we left my parents' house, *I* was considered the cripple" (149).

Most of the essays in *Naked* take place between Sedaris's childhood and his college-aged young adult years. Mrs. Sedaris is presented through the frame of her son, and throughout *Naked*, Sedaris establishes a bond with his mother that is perhaps built on an understanding neither of them received elsewhere. At the end of "Chipped Beef" Sedaris writes about finding his mother crying in her room, pregnant with her sixth child:

> I caught her in the bedroom, crying in the middle of the afternoon.
>
> "Are you sad because you haven't vacuumed the basement yet?" I asked. "I can do that for you if you want."
>
> "I know you can," she said. "And I appreciate your offer. No I'm sad because, shit, because I'm going to have a baby, but this is the last one I swear. After this one I'll have the doctor tie my tubes and solder the knot just to make sure it'll never happen again."
>
> I had no idea what she was talking about—a tube, a knot, a soldering gun—but I nodded my head as if she and I had just come to some sort of a private agreement that would later be finalized by a team of lawyers. (6)

From this scene alone, presented six pages into *Naked*, it is difficult to accept Heard's notion of Mrs. Sedaris as a "one-dimensionalized sarcasm-dispensing cliché" (36). Also, it is difficult to understand why Mrs. Sedaris would appear in an article that sets out to

"figure out what is untrue in Sedaris's books" (Heard 37). Heard doesn't know Sharon Sedaris; he can only interview people who knew her and come up with various subjective sketches to collaborate his own subjective reading from essays written after her death, by her son. In the article, he only recounts one conversation that disputes Mrs. Sedaris's depiction in Sedaris's work, and that was from a childhood neighbor who said the depiction was, Heard paraphrases, "a little off" (38). Maybe that is why Heard's exposé served less of a punch than *The Smoking Gun* article about Frey. Heard didn't stick to verifiable facts. Most of the "gotchas" from Heard's article conclude with the admission that he knows for sure it didn't happen that way because Sedaris verified the events were made up in a personal phone interview.

The only real non-subjective "facts" from Sedaris's work that Heard identifies relate to the description of a mental institution in the essay "Dix Hill" from *Naked*. Heard tracked down a sixty-two-year old registered nurse who has worked at Dorothea Dix Hospital since 1969, and after he faxed her a copy of the essay, which describes Sedaris's summer spent interning at Dorothea Dix, the nurse responds, "He's lying through his teeth!" (qtd. in Heard 36). In the essay, Sedaris refers to Dorothea Dix's buildings as "Gothic," and according to Heard's source, "There's no Gothic anything on Dix Hill. The main building, McBryde, is a huge, wide Tuscan revival structure slathered with stucco" (36). However in the essay, it is clear that Sedaris is describing the building as it appeared to him—as a child—and not from the perspective of an architectural historian. This description appears halfway through the first paragraph of the essay that begins, "Growing up in Raleigh, North Carolina" (73), hinting from the start that the

essay involves childhood interpretations. Here is the full text of the excerpt that refers to the Gothic structure of the buildings: “Designed by the same people who brought you Dreary Orphanage of Forsaken Children and Gabled House Haunted by Ghost of Hatchet Murderer, Dorothea Dix was a bleak colony of Gothic buildings perched upon a hilltop near the outskirts of town” (73). The description of the mental hospital is preceded by the names of two obviously fictional locations, which add to the effect of the dreary appearance of Dorothea Dix, at least in the narrator’s childhood memories, and create an identifiable scene for the readers. The image of a Gothic building helps generate the view through the character’s eyes more so than a description that includes “Tuscan Revival slathered with stucco.” Sedaris continues, “Whenever we passed the place, my sisters and I would stick our heads out the car window, expecting to hear a hysterical voice cackling, ‘I’m mad, I tell you, Mad!’” (73).

This essay is not a brochure for Dorothea Dix, but Sedaris’s interpretation of a place that seemed spooky to him at the time. Also, later in the essay, once young Sedaris actually goes inside Dorothea Dix—moving away from the vantage point of a kid viewing the buildings from the distance of the backseat of a car—he states, “Clarence led me across the grounds to an ivy-covered building that, except for the bars covering the windows, resembled the sort of dormitory one might find on a respectable college campus. *Up close* these buildings were quite nice until you went inside” [emphasis added] (76). Sedaris calls his own reliability into question, but Heard ignores this addition. It certainly seems acceptable for Sedaris to describe his mother’s family’s coat of arms as picturing a “bottle of Scotch and a tumor” (78), but it isn’t acceptable for him

to describe the buildings at a local mental hospital as “Gothic?” When should a satirical author like Sedaris be truthful and when should he not, exactly? Who decides?

Heard uses the faulty description of the buildings—the only portion of the essay that can be definitively disputed—as evidence that Sedaris is in the business of making stuff up. Heard’s real interest is the depiction of Sedaris’s interaction with the patients, interactions that Heard knows didn’t happen only because Sedaris himself admits to fabricating them. The scene Heard showcases involves Sedaris and his mentor, “Clarence,” moving an elderly female patient onto a gurney, and according to Heard, “you are supposed to think it really happened” (35). Sedaris writes, “When the sheet was lifted, I was shocked to discover that this woman was naked. I had never before seen a naked woman and hesitated just long enough for her to lurch forward and sink her remaining teeth into my forearm” (*Naked* 76). It is questionable how Heard knows the reader is supposed to assume the scene really happened. When considering the scene from the context of the essay as a whole, it seems highly plausible to read the scene as a metaphor, not just for a good laugh, but for a more profound impact.

The essay presents perceptions of mental illness from different vantage points. Sedaris, as narrator, faces sad conclusions about healing among the mentally ill and questions the general population’s (and hence his own) position as teetering on the edge of sanity: “Pitch one too many fits or spend too much time brushing your hair, and that might be the first sign. There could be something hidden away in any of our brains, quietly lurking there. Just waiting” (77). “Dix Hill” isn’t *about* Sedaris’s childhood experiences volunteering at a mental institution. Even though Heard describes the “long

and detailed scene" (Heard 36) of the interaction with the adult female patient, the actual scene only takes place within one paragraph, and his entire tenure at Dix comprises less than half of the entire essay. The experience (or perceived experience, or even wildly exaggerated experience) at Dix creates a space for Sedaris to discuss something much more personal. Dix is a stereotype. There is something symbolic about the narrator's description of the naked woman on the cot, and she supports Sedaris's theme of how things might appear different from varying perspectives. The lifting of the woman's sheet functions as a metaphor. Further, what seems to concern the narrator throughout the story is his position on the sane side of the narrow insane/sane divide. Although Sedaris may or may not have been bitten by a patient at Dorothea Dix, the details of such an experience serve as a concrete expression of his sensitivity to the contagion of mental illness.

When Sedaris's mother informed the kids they would have to spend their summer doing community service until they were old enough to get a paying job, Sedaris says, "My older sister, Lisa, signed up as a candy striper at Rex Hospital and as for me, I knew exactly where I was headed" (74). Then Sedaris describes how his maternal grandfather was taken away for electroshock treatments when his mother was sixteen years old:

> He had been suffering from the D.T.'s, a painful hallucinatory state marking an advanced stage of alcoholism. My mother visited him every day, and often he had no idea who she was. Once, thinking she was a nurse, he attempted to slip his hand beneath her skirt. The experience

> left her with a certain haunted quality I very much admired. She'd looked into the face of something horrible, and I wanted to know what that felt like. (74).

First, this is yet another image of Mrs. Sedaris as a complex character and not the one-dimensional sarcasm-dispenser read by Heard. Second, it is from this statement that Sedaris enters Dorothea Dix. Maybe, the point of the essay isn't about exaggerating a boy's experience at a mental institution for comic effect, but an attempt to discover a more sinister truth. Phillip Lopate argues that the interest of nonfiction is in following "a really interesting, unpredictable mind as it struggles to entangle and disentangle itself in a thorny problem" ("Curiouser" 6), an apt description for Sedaris, especially in "Dix Hill." The scene of the young Sedaris at Dorothea Dix is sandwiched between the description of Mrs. Sedaris visiting her father at the mental hospital as a teenager and a paragraph where Sedaris returns to his mother's car with a new perspective and, again, a better understanding of her. Sedaris compares his experience with his sister, who spent her day "on the maternity ward, offering patients a selection of ladies magazines and paperback novels" (77). His sister still has the vantage of the Gothic buildings perched on the hill, but his mother knew the architecture of mental illness far too well: "Lisa didn't understand what I was talking about, but my mother did. Every night, rattling the ice cubes at the bottom of her highball glass, my mother knew exactly what I was talking about" (78).

"Dix Hill" isn't a feature article about Sedaris's internship at Dorothea Dix Mental Hospital; instead, it is a multidimensional story about how Sedaris has come to

incorporate his experiences in a way that informs his understanding of the infection of mental illness. The essay is not funny; it is dark and revealing. Lopate describes how an essayist can "awaken that shiver of self-recognition—equivalent to the frisson in horror films when the monster looks at himself in the mirror" ("Introduction" xxvi), and Sedaris's moment of reflection in the backseat of his mother's car provides such a shiver. He gets there, even though all the events are not true. Cardell and Kuttainen suggest Sedaris's "storytelling desire" is to "recount relational autobiographia" and "to recount what is funny" (105); however, limiting Sedaris's essays to *autobiography that is funny* ignores the greater emotional impact. Sedaris is criticized for embellishing beyond what it acceptable (by some undefined standard) for humor writers. Perhaps in humor writing, the only parts that are given the green-light for make-believe are the funny parts. But who decides which parts are meant to be funny? In Heard's own example of an acceptable exaggeration for laughs—puking up his own skeleton—he confuses humor with description. The skeleton bit is a metaphor. Maybe the line can induce laughter, make someone nauseous, or maybe just make a reader sad, but the real point is that it is used to make a connection: if readers can imagine how it feels to puke up their own skeleton, then they might understand how he feels. Sedaris is doing the same thing with his crazy woman on the cot.

Heard takes issue with the fact that Sedaris is writing under the domain of nonfiction and insists that "even if you allow for an extra-wiggly definition of *exaggerate*," Sedaris is out of bounds (35). Sedaris disagrees. When asked if he considers his work to be fiction or nonfiction, Sedaris responds, "Nonfiction. I've always

been a huge exaggerator, but when I write something, I put it on a scale. And if it's 97% true, I think that's true enough. I'm not going to call it fiction because 3% of it isn't true" (Cruz). The essays in *Naked* are autobiographical. If designated fiction, then those essays lose their referentiality outside the text. According to the definition of nonfiction from writers like Lee Gutkind, Roy Peter Clark, and even Alex Heard, Sedaris loses his claim to those references with even a three-percent margin of error (a number, Heard would probably suggest, based on his article, is considerably shy). Maybe Sedaris's popularity, even post mini-controversy, proves them wrong. As Heard admits, "he could label his next book 'hallucinations' and it would sell" (38). Actually in 2010, Sedaris published *Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk*, a collection of short stories starring talking animals acting out complex issues of human nature, and it earned a spot on *The New York Times* best seller list for hardcover fiction ("Best Sellers—Hardcover Fiction" 17 Oct. 2010).

Sedaris wins. When asked, "So do you exaggerate?" Sedaris responds, "Boy, do I. And if it weren't for the *New Yorker* fact-checkers, I'd do it more" (DuShane). Sedaris's essays might be categorized as humor, but maybe there is something to be learned through an examination of why his "lies," done with precision, make his writing better. Sedaris's work stands up to literary analysis usually reserved for works of fiction. Labeling Sedaris a humor writer sells him infinitely short. Sedaris doesn't need the crutch of humor's exaggeration clause to fabricate portions of his essays. His writing is effective, and maybe instead of giving him the James Frey treatment, it is more beneficial to examine how Sedaris mixes pieces from his life to create new stories that stimulate a wide range of emotional responses. Sedaris doesn't limit himself by "writing

to the genre" (Susan Cheever qtd. in Johnson 22). He uses the tools of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction instead of being confined by any particular genre's conventions. Writers can learn from him. Perhaps when critics are too concerned with verifying the references outside the text, they miss the valuable clues presented within the text itself.

Chapter V

BREAKING OUT OF THE BINARY

> "After all my dark nights of the soul, false starts, bewildering journeys, my final task is like any other writer's: to drag the chaos of life out of the shadows and wrestle it into a story" (Carolyn Kraus).

In a 2007 interview with Lania Knight of the *Missouri Review*, David Sedaris questions the anger felt by many readers of James Frey's memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*: "James Frey wrote a book saying, 'I'm a fucked-up alcoholic.' And then people read the book, and now they're saying, 'That drunk lied to us!' Well, he kind of warned you in advance that he was a fucked-up alcoholic" (qtd. in Knight 79-80). Sedaris adds, "I think autobiography is the last place you would look for truth. Biography, maybe, but not autobiography" (qtd. in Knight 80). Maybe, the real issue for Frey was that *A Million Little Pieces* was not even read as autobiography, but as a testimony of recovery from addiction. The memoir is shelved, by libraries that utilize the Library of Congress classification system, in the "Drug Habits/Drug abuse" section.[8] Perhaps this is why Frey's lies were toxic. If Frey's text was read as a testimony of his success in the difficult and dangerous process of recovery from drug and alcohol abuse, especially by those facing the same challenge, then the truth matters.

[8] The Valdosta State University library uses this system.

Stephen King published an article responding to the controversy about James Frey and noted lying is a way of life for most addicts. King discusses his own experience as "a drunk both active and sober" and his time spent in "basement meetings where they drink coffee and talk about the twelve steps" (King). According to King, readers should understand that not lying—being accountable—is part of the recovery process and a major emphasis of recovery programs that rely on the twelve steps. However, Frey's character in the memoir describes the twelve steps as "the replacement of one addiction for another" (223). When Frey's treatment center counselor gives him a First Step Workbook, Frey uses a black crayon to print in large letters, "I don't need this bullshit to know I'm out of control" (200). Despite the fact that Frey's counselor tells him she has "never seen anyone stay sober and survive in the long term using anything but AA and the Twelve Steps" (222), the final sentence in the memoir is "James has never relapsed" (432). Frey presented himself as the exception. Reading Frey as a testimony of recovery is dangerous (maybe even life-threatening) for those readers who wish to replace "James" with their own name. Maybe this is why Oprah Winfrey was so tough with Frey. However, perhaps the memoir was misread and ultimately misunderstood.

The legacy of misguided reading post-Frey led to Alex Heard's reading of Sedaris. Armed with only the facts, Heard misread Sedaris and missed out on the potential value of Sedaris's essays. Instead of following the clues within the text itself, Heard obeyed the rule that creative nonfiction must be true.[9] Even with a small amount of leeway granted for comic exaggeration, Heard fails to adjust his own reading to accept the

[9] Chapter two provides a discussion of the importance of truth in (creative) nonfiction from Lee Gutkind and Roy Peter Clark.

moments where Sedaris veers from truth for effect. Sedaris's interaction with the female patient on the cot in "Dix Hill" caught Heard's interest precisely because it seemed unbelievable: "Wow. Call me a skeptic, but that didn't seem likely" (Heard 35). Instead of investigating Sedaris's work, why didn't Heard just trust his instincts and accept Sedaris's interaction with the woman on the cot as unlikely? Maybe the issue with assigning labels to books that advocate certain ways of reading is those labels prevent readers from making their own assumptions. In Sedaris's case, reading his essays as collections of verifiable facts misses the provocative forest for the hilarious trees.

Labels are problematic. In an attempt to place things into certain categories, those things have to be generalized. It is similar to an individual checking a box signaling ethnicity on a form. A choice of one box separates the individual from everyone in all the other boxes and joins the individual with others who checked the same box: we are Hispanic, not Pacific Islander, not Native American, not Caucasian. However, many individuals identify with more than one box, but they are forced to make a singular choice. In doing so, they relinquish a claim to part of themselves that might fall into the other categories (this discussion does not even get into the problematic nature of the categories themselves, some defined by skin color and others by geographical locations). Putting people—or documents—into categories with artificial, pre-defined labels establishes limits. Further, it creates the space for generalizations that are based on the identity of the group, not the individual.

In the world of publishing, there are two main categories for book-length works of prose: fiction and nonfiction. The designations serve multiple functions. Most simply, the categorization directs libraries and booksellers where to shelve the books. Although there are likely exceptions, the large chain booksellers seem to rely on a system that mirrors the library. The fiction books are placed together, shelved by author's last name, and the nonfiction books are organized, separate from fiction, by topic or style. For example, nonfiction books about religion might be grouped together, apart from books about history, biographies, or humor books (again, the categories themselves are problematic because of their incongruity—history and religion indicate the subject and humor is a style). The categorizations of fiction and nonfiction also relate directly to the marker of success in publishing, pole position on *The New York Times* best seller list. In effect, the labels relate to marketing. *The Times* has two best sellers each week, one for fiction and one for nonfiction.

Even the use of the term creative nonfiction continues to uphold the binary because it is a subcategory of nonfiction, not a distinct genre, at least in any system outside academia.[10] Best seller lists and libraries do not include creative nonfiction as a separate genre, and as established in chapter two, creative nonfiction itself is broad and includes multiple forms of writing that might elicit different ways of reading and varied relationships with the truth. Lee Gutkind, who is the editor of the journal *Creative Nonfiction* and a literary journalist, abides by the rule that the writing must be nonfiction first—that it must be true—and then creative second. Thus, Gutkind

[10] See chapter two for a discussion of Root and Steinberg, who define creative nonfiction as the fourth genre.

reestablishes the bifurcation that such a term might alleviate. Phillip Lopate, who underscores the value of nonfiction beyond its truth-telling function, questions the term creative nonfiction because it suggests some level of insecurity. Lopate prefers the term "literary nonfiction" but still finds the need to add a positive-value adjective somewhat problematic ("Curiouser" 3).[11] However, Lopate's conceptualization of nonfiction applies to the writing produced by Sedaris and maybe, very generously, even by James Frey. For Lopate, the real art of nonfiction is in following the author's consciousness ("Curiouser" 5). Lopate mentions authors such as Montaigne, Woolf, Charles Lamb, and Joan Didion as examples of the type of nonfiction that are not "true stories well told" as defined by Gutkind ("What is Creative Nonfiction?"), but as "glorious thought-excursions" (Lopate, "Curiouser" 6).

Lopate's definition of nonfiction steers the emphasis away from nonfiction as merely a form of retelling and towards a definition of creative (or literary) nonfiction as a process of creating. When a personal essayist or memoirist recycles the past to create a new story that serves the present, the truth is in a constant state of flux. The nature of the art is to combine experiences to create new truths. In Sedaris's essay "Dix Hill," the narrator revisits his seventh-grade volunteer experience at a mental hospital to understand how his conception of mental illness was formed. Sedaris creates the truth—even if he had to lie to get there. Also, this is precisely why authors such as

[11] Lopate uses the term nonfiction without any qualifier, but the article is the published version of his key note address at the NonfictionNow conference. His audience is members of the academic fields of creative writing and literary studies, where the term is already narrowed from the library definition that might also include manuals, history books, and other informative documents. Although Lopate's point about preceding adjectives that serve only to flatter the insecure nonfiction writer is well-taken, adding "creative" or "literary" before nonfiction is useful outside of academia to limit the conversation to certain types of texts.

Sedaris are unwilling to part with the nonfiction label, as restricting as it might be. Carolyn Kraus describes the importance of retaining the status of nonfiction for her memoir, which is about her father, a man whose life was clouded with mystery and whom she had only met twice since she was a toddler (245). According to Kraus, "My manuscript included memory-filled accounts of long vanished events. It was crammed with recollections and invented dialogue. Many details were based on impressions. For all that, the memoir was decidedly not fiction. This point mattered to me" (246). When an author surrenders the right to declare, *this is my story*, then the writing loses value.

Not only is there a personal stake for the author, but the significance of many stories resides outside the text itself. Frey admits to initially shopping his infamous memoir as a novel without success ("Interview with James Frey"). When Nan Talese purchased the memoir, her publishing house decided to publish it as a memoir ("Interview with James Frey"), which places the memoir in the nonfiction category. The nonfiction label disassociated Frey's memoir from all the other books labeled fiction and united the memoir with all other books labeled nonfiction. However, just like choosing the box that best reflects one's ethnic identity, it often isn't a choice at all. Autobiographical writing that fails the fact-checking test cannot simply be re-categorized as fiction. The referentiality outside the text is part of the nonfiction writing itself. However, staking a claim on that outside reference is the act that places the author at risk of being called a liar. According to Dan Shen and Dejin Xu, verifying "degrees of fictionalization" is only possible with nonfiction where there is "an extratextual reality for distinguishing the fictional from the factual" (45). Phillipe

LeJeune states, “If you, reader, judge that the autobiographer hides or alters a part of the truth, you might think he is lying. On the other hand, it’s impossible to say that a novelist lies” (qtd. in Miller 539). The nonfiction writer is confronted with the paradox that the possibility for lies exists only once he declares his writing as nonfiction. James Frey initially tried to publish *A Million Little Pieces* as a novel, which would have eliminated any dispute about the novel’s relationship to actual events. However, Frey was unable to sell the book as a novel. Without the real-life Frey, without the embodiment that says, even after all this, “He’s Alive. He’s okay” (“A Million Little Lies”), maybe the reader is left wondering who really cares.

Depending on the library, Frey’s book is either shelved in the biography section, next to biographies of Sigmund Freud, or in a section that features books about addiction and recovery, including self-help books and psychiatric or scientific books on the subject.[12] When Frey topped *The New York Times* best seller list, he shared the spotlight with a diverse group of nonfiction titles including Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (repopularized after release of the movie about Capote), Augusten Burroughs’s *Magical Thinking*, and George Carlin’s *When Will Jesus Bring the Pork Chops?* (“Paperback Nonfiction”). Shelving systems and best seller lists are more than just organizational tools or markers of success: they offer readers clues about how to approach texts. However, readers may take the clues as contracts. When Oprah Winfrey grilled James Frey and his publisher, Nan Talese, on national television, speaking for

[12] These library shelving descriptions are based on the location of Frey’s memoir in the Lowndes County Public Library, which uses the Dewey Decimal System, and Valdosta State University’s Odum Library, which uses the Library of Congress system, respectively.

herself and the "millions of readers" who felt betrayed by the scandal, she tells Talese, "I'm trusting you, the publisher, to categorize this book whether as fiction or autobiographical or memoir. I'm trusting you" ("Oprah's Questions"). The statement raises multiple issues. One is the suggestion that readers should place unwavering trust in for-profit publishers, and the other is that such designations—fiction, memoir, autobiography—are well-defined and that each has its own distinct and consistent way of reading.

When Frey's memoir is placed in the biography section, he shares tenancy with biographies on Benjamin Franklin, Terri Garr, Al Gore, Ron Goldman, Hitler, Hoda Kotb, Hulk Hogan, Regis Philbin, Michael Phelps, and four shelves of Kennedys. There are neighboring titles such as Andrew Morton's *Tom Cruise: The Unauthorized Biography*, Anne Heche's *Call Me Crazy*, and Ellen DeGeneres's *Seriously . . . I'm Kidding*. DeGeneres's book begins, "The truth is, last June I was driving through a tunnel while I was on the phone with my agent and my cell service was spotty. I said, 'I just got a great IKEA table for my breakfast nook.' My agent thought I said, 'I've got a great idea for my newest book'" (1). It is difficult to imagine a reader who would approach DeGeneres's book in the same way as the biography on Benjamin Franklin or the unauthorized biography of Tom Cruise, which by title alone promotes a way of reading that emphasizes speculation (why wasn't it authorized?).

It is also difficult to imagine a singular way of reading the small sampling from the nonfiction best seller list. Certainly, Carlin is not expected to adhere to facts; he is writing humor, much like DeGeneres. His title alone is a hall pass to exaggeration.

Capote has status. *In Cold Blood* is the archetype of the nonfiction novel (Root 247-8). The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* credits *In Cold Blood* as the first important example in the American new journalism movement (Baldick 228). However, even with Capote there are multiple ways of reading that might complicate the novel's relationship to the truth. According to Eric Heyne, a reader may focus more on Capote's interpretation and less on accuracy or may read the book as accurate and therefore neutral (Heyne 328); alternatively, readers who have their own interpretations of the events may engage in a reading that places Capote's account directly in dispute. The existence of readers who share the same references tends to dwindle with time.

Augusten Burroughs, if that is even his real name (it isn't), was exposed in 2007 for fabricating portions of his memoir, *Running with Scissors* (published before *Magical Thinking*). The biggest issue for Burroughs was there were individuals who shared the same stories and thus were able to read the memoir, place the events in dispute, and then exercise their right to tell their version of events. In an interview with *Vanity Fair*, a woman who grew up with Burroughs admits to being shocked by what Burroughs wrote, based on the fact that "It was filled with things that she believed were categorically false or had been wildly embellished" (Bissinger), but also because Burroughs exposed deeply painful parts of this woman's life without her consent. According to the woman, Burroughs wrote about events that "occurred 20 years earlier and had been horribly painful for her—so painful that she had spent years in therapy trying to overcome them and had never told her own daughter about them" (Bissinger). Basically, it is the true parts of the memoir that were the most devastating. Maybe Burroughs should have lied.

James Frey attempted to sidestep dispute about shared references by killing off most of his characters at the end of his memoir. In what reads like an afterword to the memoir itself, Frey provides a list of the current whereabouts of all his characters: "Michael . . . died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound," "Warren fell off the back of a fishing boat . . . his body has never been recovered," "Ed was Beaten to death in a bar fight," "Matty was shot and killed outside of crackhouse," "Lilly committed suicide by hanging" (431). All the patients who are not dead are either serving life sentences or in mental institutions (431). The treatment center's employees are all listed as still working at the clinic (431), obligating them to confidentiality. Perhaps these people never existed at all. Frey was attempting to tell his own story; maybe these extra characters don't matter. The real question is whether or not it is better to make people up or to write about real people in an unflattering and perhaps harmful way? The treatment of Frey by the public, members of the literary community, and Oprah Winfrey privileges truth, even if it is hurtful.

These issues bring forth important questions about how books are categorized and presented to the public and how those categorizations affect the way books are read. Publishers share some blame for pigeonholing authors into discrete categories that might not be an exact match. When readers rely on these categories for the rules about how to approach the texts, then they might be deceived. As established in chapter three, James Frey's first crime against literature was when he accepted the memoir category, which is a subcategory of nonfiction. Readers expected truth. They got a million little lies. However, James Frey wanted to publish his memoir as a novel.

According to Frey, he spent almost nine years trying to write the book: "I didn't go to graduate school. I didn't ever have a writing teacher. I just sat in a room alone for years trying to write a book. Trying to figure out how to write a book. Trying to figure out if I could do it" (qtd. in “James Frey: Five Years Later”). Frey adds, “Nobody wanted to publish [*A Million Little Pieces*] as a novel. At a certain point, I got the opportunity to publish it as a memoir . . . It wasn't necessarily how I imagined it, but I wanted it published. I wanted it out in the world, and I said yes" (qtd. in “James Frey: Five Years Later”). Frey’s choices were fiction or nonfiction. There is not a category for wildly exaggerated memoirs based on a mischaracterization of self.

Despite the problematic infrastructure created through profit-driven publishing houses and possibly outdated library systems, there is blame to be shared by readers. It is difficult to fault readers for reading *A Million Little Pieces* as if James Frey stood before them with his right hand on the Bible, especially because that is how the book was promoted by Frey, his publisher, and Oprah Winfrey. This is one reason why David Sedaris serves as such a strong example of how different texts, similarly categorized, can be read in different ways. In Alex Heard’s article, “This American Lie,” Heard initially suggests that Sedaris has been protected from receiving the *James Frey treatment* because of his classification as humor. According to Heard, the lies written by Sedaris are “beyond the boundaries of comic exaggeration” (36), as in they are beyond Jesus bringing the pork chops and beyond Ellen DeGeneres entering into a book deal because of miscommunication’s reigning cliché: driving through a tunnel. Heard alleges Sedaris is not just exaggerating: he is lying. Apparently, there is a difference. For Heard, humor

writers, especially those categorized as nonfiction like Sedaris, are only supposed to lie for laughs, and even then it should be "absurdly embellished" (36). How else will readers know when the lies stop and the truth telling begins?

Heard argues that Sedaris's obligation to tell the truth matters because people, especially people who appear as characters in his books, can be hurt (did the truth help Burroughs's unwilling character?). Chapter four argues against Heard's allegation that Sedaris unfavorably portrayed his own mother, who is no longer living. Heard also suggests that Sedaris should apologize to residents of a nudist colony in upstate New York. Is it too obvious to mention that the residents seem perfectly comfortable being exposed? Heard also questions Sedaris's depiction of his former guitar teacher, pseudo-named Mr. Mancini, in an essay where Sedaris describes an unsuccessful attempt to connect with the teacher in what seems eerily like a coming-out story gone wrong.[13] Heard's dispute is based on an account from another former student, forty-nine-year-old L.M. (Sam) Hawkins. According to Hawkins, "My recollections of the character represented as Mr. Mancini are not the same as David Sedaris's" (qtd. in Heard 37). Maybe Mr. Hawkins, a Kentucky State Police Officer, never performed a Billie Holiday version of the Oscar Meyer Wiener song for Mancini, only to be told, "I don't swing that way—you got it?" (*Naked* 29). Maybe that never happened to Sedaris either.

Analysis of Sedaris's texts in this thesis, especially in response to Heard's article, demonstrates that he not only exaggerates but also fabricates dialogue and events in his

[13] Sedaris's guitar teacher appears in at least two works by Sedaris. One is in the essay "Giant Dreams, Midget Abilities" in *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, which is categorized as nonfiction, and the other is in the fictional story "My Manuscript" in *Barrel Fever*. Although given different names, the description of the guitar teacher is nearly identical in both instances.

essays and not just for humor. Perhaps, as explored in chapter four, Sedaris fabricates events to serve as metaphors, for example his use of the crazy woman on the cot at Dorothea Dix. In many ways, the crazy cot lady serves the same purpose as comic exaggeration. When Ellen DeGeneres suggests she entered into a book deal because of bad cell phone reception, readers do not take her literally. They do however suppose that she didn't plan to write another book, at least not in the traditional sense (certainly not in the nine-years-in-a-room-alone sense, a la James Frey). Sedaris's crazy lady on the cot is more dark and twisted than funny, but it serves the same purpose. Savvy readers might not believe that a seventh-grade Sedaris was actually bitten by a resident of a mental hospital, but they might suppose he was concerned that mental illness was infectious. Sedaris's career was not harmed by Heard. In many ways, Sedaris's readers know how to read him. Maybe the text itself trains the reader to negotiate between the real and the imagined. The first essay in *Naked*, "Chipped Beef," begins with a fantasy, but there is no disclosure to the reader that the first four pages are all taking place in the imagination of childhood Sedaris. There are clues, certainly, but nothing definitive until on page four when Sedaris's mother cuts him off: "Oh for God's sake," she says (4). The reader is transported into the Sedaris kitchen, suddenly knowing everything in the preceding pages was make-believe. Despite the location of *Naked* on any shelf or on any list, no matter what it says on the copyright page, Sedaris offers his own contract to the reader: this book plays with the boundaries between fact and fiction.[14]

[14] At the Lowndes County Public Library, *Naked* is shelved in biography. However, Sedaris's other collections of essays, including *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim* and *Me Talk Pretty One Day* are shelved in a different area of nonfiction containing other humor books. Sedaris's *When Squirrel Seeks*

Readers who pay attention to the clues in the text itself might benefit from a more informed reading, one that avoids the misguided fact-checking escapades pursued by Heard. In many ways, James Frey's notorious memoir offered its own contract that was ignored in favor of adhering to the description of its label (isn't that the definition of stereotyping?). The form of the memoir does not resemble a fact-based approach to the events of Frey's life. Frey uses a minimally punctuated style; his prose clings to the left margin in short, choppy lines. He uses no dialogue markers or quotation marks, and he randomly capitalizes improper nouns. He repeats lines throughout the memoir for poetic effect. The form of the memoir alone contests a categorization that prescribes a factual reading. Also, as described in chapter three, the clues offered in the details of the text, for instance the first paragraph that describes Frey on a commercial airliner "covered in a colorful mixture of spit, snot, urine, vomit and blood" (1), further promotes skepticism. When Nan Talese appeared on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* with Frey post-controversy, Winfrey admits to Talese, "one of the reasons why we're all so taken with the book is because it feels and reads so sensationally that you can't believe that all of this happened to one person" ("Oprah's Questions"). Heard said the same thing about Sedaris's "Dix Hill." Neither could believe the stories were real, and then they were both shocked to find out they were right.

Winfrey and Heard are sophisticated readers. Winfrey requires no introduction; Heard is the author of *The Eyes of Willie McGee* and *Apocalypse Pretty Soon*, the editor of *Outside* magazine, and a contributor to *The New York Times Magazine*, *New Republic*,

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Chipmunk is shelved in the fiction section. In Odum Library on Valdosta State University's campus, all of Sedaris's books are shelved in the American literature section.

Slate and *Wired* (“Alex Heard”). Both Winfrey and Heard claim they abandoned their own instincts and placed their trust in the label of nonfiction. When goods delivered were not as promised, both admit to feeling tricked. When Frey appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* post-scandal, Winfrey describes the incident as “embarrassing and disappointing” (“Oprah’s Questions”). *A Million Little Pieces* was labeled a memoir, and memoirs are categorized under nonfiction. The nonfiction label suggests a certain relationship to the truth, and when a nonfiction book, even a memoir, is found to be significantly untrue, readers feel their trust has been violated. However, the labels are too broad, and many readers accept them as contracts of truth, when they are perhaps merely organizational tools.

The James Frey controversy exposed more than Frey’s lies. The controversy revealed that many readers lack the confidence to make their own decisions about truth, at least when it shows up in print. However, the public is wholly capable of filtering truth from non-truth without explicit disclaimers. When a celebrity sits in a chair on a late night talk show and utters the line, “This is a true story,” viewers don’t automatically believe. As Americans, we didn’t believe our President when he looked directly into the camera and said, “I did not have sex with that woman.” Many did not believe the next president when he told us Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction or our current president when he said that his wife liked his mom jeans. Why then do we feel duped when we read a memoir only to discover it to be untrue? Television viewers accept a blurring of the lines between reality and drama, for example the “guided reality” method of filming many popular reality shows, like *Duck Dynasty*.

The rules for negotiating levels of truth in television and film constantly change. New forms create new rules and viewers adapt. Maybe the issue with the notion that nonfiction, no matter how creative, must be completely true is that it presupposes a certain level of ignorance among readers. The labels only need to be regulated—fact-checked—if readers are unable to make conclusions about what to believe on their own.

Chapter VI

AFTERWORD

A Writer's Journey

> "Everything is autobiography: If I were to write a love story between Mother Teresa and Abba Eban, it would no doubt be autobiographical, but it wouldn't be a confession. All my work is autobiographical, but I've never confessed" (Amos Oz qtd. in Nancy Miller).

I wrote a short story for a fiction workshop while I was an undergraduate creative writing student. The story, written in first person, was about a girl in her early twenties, living in Austin, working as a file clerk in a law firm. She was lonely and desperate, and the main qualities she looked for in a friend were a heartbeat and a shared enthusiasm for happy hour. Throughout the story, she befriends a strange set of characters, including the alcoholic secretary from her office and a blind guy who was constantly starting bar fights while his Pit Bull guide dog sat on a barstool drinking directly out of a pint glass. My fiction class hated it. During our workshop they commented that it seemed "sad," and I don't think they meant in the sympathetic way, but more in the way that *sad* becomes a synonym for *loser*. They also had difficulty finding any significance to the story. One student, after a long explanation about why the story didn't work, concluded, "I mean, who cares?" I sat quietly, pretending to make

notes on my draft. I knew the real reason the story didn't work was because I was trying to pass off my nonfiction work in a fiction class. I didn't own the events. Without my stamp of approval, those pathetic parts of my life lost their significance; they were no longer ingredients in the recipe that created me; they were just anecdotes that could lead anywhere. The significance to the story was the twenty-eight-year-old undergraduate student sitting across the classroom nervously clicking her pen.

I have since revisited the events from that story and reassigned them to various personal essays. My friendship with the secretary is humorous in a self-loathing kind of way, especially when I include that she was the one who wanted to stop being friends because she felt uncomfortable when I invited her over for Thanksgiving dinner—just the two of us. I was saving my vacation days, so I could go home for an extended break at Christmas, which meant I had to sacrifice Thanksgiving, but the thought of eating alone seemed worse than inviting a middle-aged alcoholic secretary to my apartment for a four-course meal. "Wait, will this mean we are lesbians?" she asked. She didn't show. I went to a movie alone and then came home and ate a turkey sandwich. Telling the story in my terms is useful to me.

When I retrospectively examine the events of my life, I can reshape them to build up to where I am today. However, the process of rewriting inevitably toys with issues of truth. There is nothing that stands out as explicitly untrue about my friendship with the secretary, but what I didn't share—the fact that I knew this lady had serious issues and despite that I kept dragging her out to bars—depicts my character in a deceitful way. Also this story is probably safe from fact-checking because I don't

remember her name. I am not even sure I recall what she looks like. When I picture her, I may confuse her image with the image of the firm's client who confessed to me she would be using her settlement money to get a boob job. Although the secretary was real, she has become a metaphor.

The controversy that erupted after James Frey published his memoir, *A Million Little Pieces* and then was subsequently humiliated—by Oprah Winfrey no less—for lying, was negative for writers, especially those like me who are interested in autobiographical projects. Not because my personal writing is full of lies, but because I engage in storytelling. I write to create meaning where there once was only memory. But sometimes I lie. I make stuff up because it helps the story, or I change the order of events because it makes more sense. Sometimes I lie because I wish it to be that way. The power of writing about my own past is the process of rewriting. I control what goes onto the page. I control how I am written.

I never expected to write a thesis that defends James Frey (and definitely not one that implicates Oprah Winfrey). I was interested in responding to Alex Heard's article about Sedaris because I was sure that he was wrong. I had to mention Frey. If I was going to write about truth, then his name was part of the baggage. Frey made me nervous. I did not expect Frey to become an entire chapter. He is the bad guy, the example that everyone gives about what not to do with memoir. But how is my writing different than his? Frey was my crazy lady on the cot, reaching out to bite me. Maybe, I leave out a detail here and embellish a relationship there, and next thing I know I am writing about my eighty-seven days spent in jail with a roomie named Porterhouse. I

had to solve Frey. He shouldn't have lied while promoting the book. He damn sure shouldn't have lied to Oprah. However, I accept his apology, even though I am not sure he ever really offered one.

In 2008, James Frey published *Bright Shiny Morning*, a novel that chronicles a group of unrelated characters living in Los Angeles. A single line on the page opposite the copyright information reads, "Nothing in the book should be considered accurate or reliable." In the novel, Frey blends fictional characters with facts about Los Angeles. *Bright Shiny Morning* was well received by critics. According to *New York Times* reviewer, Janet Maslin, "[Frey] stepped up to the plate and hit one out of the park," and "He became a furiously good storyteller this time" (Maslin). Frey published again. He recovered. At the beginning of *A Million Little Pieces*, Frey's character is barely clinging to life. He is wounded. He endures pain, literally taking it in the cheek as he sits in a dentist's chair forced to suffer through a painful procedure with no anesthetic. Then little by little, he improves. He holds down food. He sleeps without nightmares. He dismisses Alcoholics Anonymous and the twelve steps, and he works on getting better on his own terms. Eventually, 429 pages into the memoir, he looks himself in the eyes: "I look into myself. Into the pale green of my own eyes. I like what I see. I am comfortable with it. It is fixed and focused. It will not blink. For the first time in my life, as I look into my own eyes, I like what I see. I can live with it. I want to live with it. For a long time. I want to live with it. I want to live" (429). The most generous analysis of *A Million Little Pieces* might declare it predictive of James Frey's future. He wrote it, and it *became* true.

Maybe truth is not linear. Maybe truth circles back, gathers speed, morphs, rises and disintegrates. I understand how Frey crafted his book. Sometimes the truth doesn't reveal itself until the words dance across the page, and sometimes pride gets in the way and cripples an author. The most pervasive deception in *A Million Little Pieces* is that Frey presented himself as "tougher" than he was and "badder" than he was (Frey qtd. in "Oprah's Questions"). Frey presented a façade. That is his biggest crime on the page. The challenge in my analysis of Frey was to straddle indictment and defense. I cannot let Frey be used as a means to eradicate all non-truth from nonfiction. Look at Sedaris. The ability to blend the real and not-so-real is an important literary tool.

The writing Sedaris produces takes guts and the willingness to be vulnerable. Sedaris doesn't kill off his characters in the end. His characters are out there, reading and disputing his accounts. Well, most of them. As a writer, I was particularly moved by Sedaris's depiction of his late mother, and I may not have made those connections without the impulse to respond to Heard. Sedaris published his first book in 1994, three years after his mother passed away from lung cancer (Carlin). In *Naked*, Sedaris's mother pulls him aside, calling him out for using a paraplegic girl for some kind of personal gain, and whispers, "I don't know what kind of game you are playing, mister, but you ought to be ashamed of yourself" (149). Sedaris adds, "It was an actual whisper, designed only to be heard by me" (149). His mother knew his secrets. Perhaps, it was only after she died that he felt the freedom to tell his story, in his way. Sometimes an audience of millions pales in comparison to an audience of one who knows you better than you know yourself. More than the desire to protect Sedaris from the clutches of

the lie detector cuff, I responded to him as a fellow human being who has a right to tell his story on his terms.

It angered me that Heard would call Sedaris's depiction of his own mother into question. She is gone. In the final essay in *Naked*, titled "Naked," Sedaris is asked by a nude woman in a sauna what he would wish for if he could only have one wish. He ponders the question, "I thought of having my mother back, but often these are trick wishes. I might ask for my mother and receive an urnload of talking ashes that would complain bitterly at the sight of her son racing back and forth across the room like a bloodhound" (271).

As a writer, I get it. Fact-checking is a process of dispute. It is the depiction of events as written versus the depiction that emerges from the accumulation of documents, statements from witnesses, and people who know the real story. When an author declares his work as nonfiction and chooses to write about events that have references outside the text itself, the author submits to the possibility of disagreement. What it really comes down to is how much the author can take and, maybe more importantly, from whom. James Frey wasn't ready. He wasn't ready to reveal himself, to be vulnerable, so he had to lie. After taking a beating on Oprah's couch, he was reduced to . . . a self-fulfilling prophecy. Sedaris describes how important it is to feel ready to write about certain subjects. In an interview he states, "There's this woman named Helen who lived across the hall from us in New York, and I wrote about her for *Esquire* seven years ago. I worked on it really hard, but it just wasn't right. It's not time to write about Helen yet" (Knight 78). Sedaris wasn't ready to place his version of Helen in

dispute. In my own writing, I avoid writing about certain family members especially those I am unwilling to challenge. Not because I fill my prose with lies, but because I am uncomfortable initiating the dispute about our shared references. I noticed a significant shift in my own writing after the death of my father. Until he died, anything I wrote that included him was *our* story, and I felt he still had a claim to those events. Now, just like the four dollars and thirty-seven cents we found in his motel room, the stories from my own childhood are part of my inheritance.

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