

# How True Does a Memoir Have to Be?

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

A better, more nuanced answer would recognize the complexity of the issue. Here's my try: inaccuracy becomes a problem following the extent to which a memoir gets details as well as larger truths demonstrably wrong, depicts identifiable people in a negative light, fails to recognize the limits of memory, is poorly written, is self-serving, or otherwise wears its

agenda on its sleeve. The more of these things it does and the more egregiously it does them, the bigger the problem is.

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

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

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

