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*Freedom Rider
Oprah's Best Self
by Margaret Kimberley*

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Until recently, Oprah Winfrey's biggest sin was to unleash Dr. Phil's loud mouth quackery on an already troubled nation. Dr. Phil is part of the Oprah empire, which consists of celebrity news and advice on how we ought to be "our best selves."

Oprah should be given credit for accomplishing what generations of English teachers could not. Her book club has turned thousands of nonreaders into readers. One of her recent choices was "A Million Little Pieces," a "memoir" of drug addiction written by James Frey.

As a result of the Oprah effect, Frey's book sat securely atop the bestseller lists. As often happens, success brought more scrutiny than was desired or anticipated. The Court TV web site, the Smoking Gun, investigated Frey's background and exposed him as a fraud and a liar. Frey was a suburban kid who liked to get high. He had no exciting stories to tell, but he wanted to write a book. He decided to make his life seem more dramatic than it really was.

At first he was honest and marketed his book as a novel. When no one expressed interest he did what addicts always do. He concluded that lying was the surest way out of his predicament. His novel turned into a memoir.

In his "memoir" Frey claimed to be in jail for three months when in fact he only served one day. He claimed to have caused a traffic fatality when he didn't. He claims numerous arrests for which no mug shots exist. Someone should have known that something wasn't right when he claimed to have had root canal without anesthesia.

The Black Commentator – Freedom Rider: Oprah's Best Self

When the news of Frey's lies spread, the media sat in silent anticipation of Oprah's reaction. What would the powerful Queen of All Media have to say about promoting a huckster?

James Frey took his case to the court of public opinion via Larry King Live. He even brought his mother along for support and sympathy. Frey believes the word memoir is a term of art and that it doesn't really matter if some events in his book were complete fabrications.

At the very moment that Frey was getting an extra 15 minutes of fame with Larry King, Oprah called into the show to protect her investment. She gave Frey a pass. The woman who exhorts her viewer/followers to be their best selves did a 180 degree turn and declared that mediocrity and untruthfulness aren't such a big deal after all.

"If you're an addict whose life has been moved by this story and you feel that what James went through was able to – to help you hold on a little bit longer, and you connected to that, that is real. That is real. And it's – it's irrelevant discussing, you know, what – what happened or did not happen to the police."

Telling the truth is the most relevant thing for addicts. In recovery step number 10 addicts and alcoholics pledge that they have "Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it."

When we don't admit to being wrong we take ourselves a little too seriously. Oprah failed that test during her phone call with Larry King:

"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."

Oprah sounds a little like President Bush when he gets questions he doesn't like. In pointing out that we have the right to question, they give the impression that they would be happier if we didn't. Perhaps Bush inspired Frey. An untreated addict is president, why not an Oprah certified author too.

Americans need to know more about addictions, about the societal and genetic risk factors, about the terrible toll addictions take on individuals and how they are cynically used to maintain the prison industrial complex. If Oprah wanted to help addicts "hold on" she should find authors who have truly recovered and help them sell their books. Those authors are a harder sell and need not apply.

Oprah has succeeded because she gives celebrity worshipping, middle brow, middle America just what it wants. They want positive thinking and touchy feely advice, neither of which is very useful when discussing a serious issue.

Oprah is all about the money, which doesn't make her different from any other corporate CEO. She has succeeded because she knows what people will buy. An overwrought, melodramatic addiction story that is well promoted will be a best seller. Frey helped her book club, he got a movie deal, she vouched for him, she doesn't look so bad and keeps her ratings high. All is right with corporate America.

"Be your best self" is just a product and Oprah is the sales person. She is a smart woman who knows what her customers want. What she does should be regarded as nothing more than entertainment. Entertainment is a legitimate business, but it is just that, a business. There is no other way to explain Dr. Phil.

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