
ALYSON MILLER

ABSTRACT

Examining hoax memoirs by James Frey (2003), Dave Pelzer (1995), and Kathy O'Beirne (2006), this paper illustrates how anxieties about the inability of representation to provide a direct access to truth are mitigated via an emotional connection with the text. While the degree of faking varies, each scandal reveals concerns about authenticity and the need to find—or feel—something that can be accepted as unquestionably 'true'. The mimicking performed by a fake unsettles the boundaries between fact and fiction to reveal a public investment in an undisturbed effect of the real, a willingness to accept a blurring of 'truth' in the interests of the sensational experience of literature.

THE PORNOGRAPHY OF TRAUMA:
FAKING IDENTITY IN
'MISERY MEMOIRS'

In the contemporary literary market, the immense popularity of a genre termed the 'misery memoir' explicitly demonstrates a public infatuation with confessions of trauma. Described by Frank Furedi as the "pornography of emotional hurt" ("An Emotional Striptease"), these memoirs focus on the outpourings of authors who have endured childhoods of horrific abuse, describing in agonising detail histories of domestic violence, incest, poverty, institutional cruelty, drug addiction, and sexual abuse. The market success of the genre points to the lucrative opportunities for authors and publishers to satisfy the voyeuristic fascination of readers with narratives of human degradation. As Brendan O'Neill notes, "these memoirs sell in numbers that many mainstream novelists can only dream about." According to O'Neill, of the top 100 best-selling UK paperbacks in 2006, eleven were memoirs about surviving abuse, and with combined sales of 1.9 million copies, 'misery memoirs' generated £24 million for the British publishing industry. Capitalising on a cultural ethos that celebrates the public confession of victimhood, 'misery memoirs' are marketed as both part of the recovery of the abused survivor, and inspiration for the enamoured reader. But as Furedi argues, the notable success of these narratives is perhaps less connected to their cathartic or motivational function than to their ability to allow readers the vicarious and voyeuristic experience of the most appalling suffering ("Fake Holocaust Memoirs"). Furedi argues that 'misery memoirs' characteristically "confess to so much that they take on the character of a literary striptease," providing pornographic accounts of traumatic pain which "actually turn readers into voyeurs" ("An Emotional Striptease"). And, Furedi notes, "as in real porn, there is a lot of faking going on."

Examining James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called 'It'* and Kathy O'Beirne's *Don't Ever Tell*, this article illustrates how anxieties about the connection between representation and truth are mitigated via an emotional connection with the text. While the degree of faking varies, each scandal reveals a cultural anxiety about authenticity and the need to find—or more specifically, feel—something that can be accepted as unquestionably 'true'. Indeed, the mimicking performed by a fake profoundly unsettles the boundaries between fact and fiction to reveal a public investment in an undisturbed *effect* of the real, a willingness to accept a blurring of 'truth' in the interests of the sensational experience of literature.

DELUSIONS OF DOMESTIC TRAGEDY: VICTIMS OF ABUSE

A considerable number of recent literary scandals have involved the debunking of spurious 'misery memoirs' which astutely exploit a predilection for public confession. The revelation that James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* was an artifice, for example, enraged audiences invested in the heartrending narrative of a "raging, drug-abusing" teenager (qtd. in *The Smoking Gun*). Promoted on an episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* entitled "The Man Who Kept Oprah Awake At Night", *A Million Little Pieces* was touted by Winfrey as a "gut-wrenching memoir that is so raw and...so real," a tale of survival "like nothing you've ever read before" (qtd. in *The Smoking Gun*). In a tearful interview with Frey that resulted in the sale of more than two million copies of the text, Winfrey acted as the vehicle through which *A Million Little Pieces* became a publishing phenomenon. She authorised its truth claims by proclaiming an intimate emotional connection with the narrative: "I know that, like many of us who have read this book, I keep turning to the back of the book to remind myself, 'He's alive. He's okay'" (qtd. in *The Smoking Gun*). Indeed, Winfrey helped shape a celebrity author who played upon an identity that transformed a few incidences of petty crime into a sordid history of drug addiction, alcoholism, and violence.

The revelation of fraud emerged after the publication of an exposé on the investigative website *The Smoking Gun (TSG)*, in which a comprehensive report concluded that Frey had grossly embellished key details of "his purported criminal career, jail terms, and status as an outlaw wanted in three states." According to *TSG*, Frey "appears to have fictionalised his past to propel and sweeten the book's already melodramatic narrative," whilst convincing readers of his 'malevolence' as a social deviant. As Frey asserted in the interview with Winfrey:

I was a bad guy. If I was gonna write a book that was true, and I was gonna write a book that was honest, then I was gonna have to write about myself in very, very negative ways. I am an Alcoholic and I am a drug Addict and I am a Criminal. (qtd. in *TSG*).

Repeating this incantation numerous times throughout the memoir, Frey went to great lengths to emphasise the authenticity of his self-abuse and criminal history, dismissing assertions that elements of the memoir were radical fabrications. Despite evidence detailing the life of the 'real' Frey, the author refused to acknowledge the fraud, yet nonetheless sought

to legally expunge court records relating to his criminal history. Frey stated that he “wanted to put up walls as much as [he] possibly could...to keep people away from [his] private business” (qtd. in *TSG*). As *TSG* notes, there is an obvious irony about proclamations of privacy in the context of publishing a graphically detailed bestselling memoir:

Why would a man who spends 430 pages chronicling every grimy and repulsive detail of his formerly debased life...need to wall off the details of a decade-old arrest? When you spend paragraphs describing the viscosity of your own vomit, your sexual failings and the nightmare of shitting blood daily, who knew bashfulness was still possible?

Frey refuted accusations of fakery, affirming the truth-value of his narrative by indignantly declaring to readers: “let the haters hate, let the doubters doubt, I stand by my book and my life and I won’t dignify this bullshit with any sort of further response” (qtd. in *TSG*). Initially, Winfrey continued to authorise the memoir, stressing that the “underlying message of redemption in James Frey’s memoir still resonates with me, and I know it still resonates with millions of other people” (qtd. in O’Rourke). Shortly following this declaration, however, Winfrey was forced to recant when audiences argued that her support of Frey represented an indifference to truth (Eakin 19). Winfrey then staged a talkshow episode in which she excoriated Frey in simple terms: “You lied” (Winfrey, qtd. in Eakin).

The role of Oprah Winfrey, a daytime television magnate, in the unravelling of the Frey controversy is significant. Indeed, the relationship between fake memoirs and the marketplace is one of particular interest in contemporary literary scandals, given the propensity of recent frauds to achieve extraordinary popularity and market success. Certainly, literary authority is conferred not only by ‘elite’ institutions, but also by the marketplace, which commodifies and packages ‘the literary’ as a desirable item for purchase. In the American context, profits have been largely due to Winfrey. While the role of Winfrey in publicly endorsing an embarrassing series of frauds¹ has seen the media mogul dismissed as easily ‘suckered’, the ‘Oprah Effect’ is a well-documented phenomenon that describes the catapulting sales of literature promoted by the talkshow queen (Flaherty 7). As Edward Wyatt notes in the *New York Times*, Winfrey has “championed a diverse group of modern authors...whose members saw sales of their books grow exponentially, as hundreds of thousands of loyal viewers rushed out in search of the latest selection.” The involvement of star figures in sanctioning select literature points to a culture that commodifies both the text as a desirable product, and the identity of the author as a literary celebrity. Feeding into a “larger obsession with celebrity and identity that is apparent in public culture,” Maria Takolander and David McCooey argue that a book marketed in terms of its author “offers the seductive possibility” of allowing the ordinary person privileged access to the celebrity (“Fakes, Literary Identity and Public Culture” 59). The book, Takolander and McCooey contend, “more than any other commodity, seems to offer the possibility of penetrating through to the authentic identity of the author. It seems to offer the possibility of an exchange of interiorities” (59). In terms of memoir, this potential for

¹ Including, alongside James Frey, Herman Rosenblat’s *Angel at the Fence* (unpublished) and Margaret B. Jones’ *Love and Consequences* (2008).

exchange is made even more intimate. However, with the revelation of fakery, audiences are left not only with the sense of having engaged with a façade, but also of having made a poor emotional investment.

The cult of the literary celebrity also signals the various cultural investments bought by—and sold to—reading audiences. Much of the literature promoted by Winfrey has a tendency to represent authors who explore or have experienced trauma, such as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Gabriel García Márquez, and Elie Wiesel. In line with Winfrey's penchant for texts representing triumph through adversity, the book club not only feeds a public demand for narratives of trauma, but also highlights how minority voices are marketed for majority culture—an interplay further complicated by Winfrey's position as a member of both the mainstream (in her celebrity) and the marginal (as a black woman). Moreover, as Winfrey celebrates the prize-winning literature of writers who have suffered under colonialism, racism, and religious persecution, she reveals a public culture keen to be associated with the "high aesthetic value and moral seriousness" accorded to 'literary' texts (Carter *n.p.*). As David Carter notes in the context of Australian literary culture, "good books and good reading are lifestyle and identity 'accessories'" that have the power to endow readers with aesthetic and ethical integrity. As celebrities help to package moral and aesthetic seriousness as desirable commodities, particular authors and texts—those associated with the suffering minorities—are connected with a particular kind of prestige, as are the readers who support and consume them. It is a circuitry of cultural value that fakes have astutely exploited, recognising the commodification of marginality for mainstream audiences, and the pretensions, perhaps, of literary culture *per se*.

Ironically, one of the most notable features of Frey's memoir is its insistence on absolute authenticity and its aggressive derision of romanticised narratives of victimhood. As Meghan O'Rourke contends, the Frey affair is made farcical by the canny criticisms in the memoir of "the 'bullshit' stories that shape our interactions with people, politicians, and the media, especially the stories that are billed as the most raw and honest." According to O'Rourke, "Frey's claim to be a truth-teller in an age of emotional mountebanks who savvily manipulate public sympathy" is partly what distinguishes *A Million Little Pieces* from "other recovery memoirs." By cynically rejecting the "pieties of being an addict and victim," Frey constructed a narrative that appeared "newly *real*—or authentic—in an age of packaged sound bites." In addition, through declarations of self-abuse, *A Million Little Pieces* explicitly critiques the commodification of trauma stories and a therapeutic culture in which damaged individuals are made heroic. Foremost, Frey repeatedly returns to notions of individual responsibility, rejecting ideas about the role of socio-cultural dynamics in shaping the suffering of the addict and victim. As Frey argues: "Somehow I always knew that I would kill myself with drugs and alcohol. I knew each time I took a drink, I knew each time I snorted a line...It is nobody's fault but my own. I knew each and every time. I could not stop" (85).

Further, the memoir engages with the terms through which victimhood is transformed in order to function as a validating narrative for reading audiences. Frey, for instance, in

imagining the writing of his obituary, notes that

the truth of my existence will be removed and replaced with imagined good. The reality of how I lived will be avoided and changed and phrases will be dropped in like Beloved Son, Loving Brother, Reliable Friend...People will change their view of me, from reckless Fuck-Up to helpless Martyr, from dangerous Fool to sad Victim, from addicted Asshole to unfortunate Child. (85)

In order to combat the formula of victim memoirs, Frey thus purports to be offering readers nothing but the truth, an unflinching exposé that presents a 'hard' vision of the 'real'. As Frey contends: "No happy lies, no invented memories, no fake sentimentality, no tears" (86). By self-consciously exposing the generic conventions of 'misery memoirs' and aggressively rejecting cultural prescriptions for victimhood, Frey appears to be resisting the status quo. The irony, of course, is that Frey is capitalising precisely on those trends that he seeks to excoriate and diminish.

By explicitly rejecting the 'fake', Frey positions *A Million Little Pieces* as the most authentic account of suffering available to readers, a narrative marked by its refutation of artifice and pretence. Interestingly, Frey draws upon two key representational strategies in order to emphasise the truth-value of the memoir, and to set the text apart. Firstly, the memoir regularly adopts the tone of a police file, documenting details of his addiction as perfunctory and indisputable 'facts':

James Frey. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, September 12, 1969. Started stealing sips from drinks at seven. Got hammered for the first time at ten...Smoked dope at twelve. By thirteen was smoking and drinking regularly. (85)

Assuming the stylistics of a legal report provides Frey with representational credibility. Mimicking a form axiomatically linked to the 'truth' is a kind of confidence trick. Secondly, Frey explicitly condemns the inability of the media to portray an accurate vision of reality. For example, the memoir provides a detailed explanation of a television drama in which a heroin addict is admitted to hospital after an overdose. Frey observes the constructed nature of the narrative—"She wears dirty clothes that are ragged in a glamorous way" (216)—and after its happy conclusion, rails against the writers of the show:

If I could, I would hunt down the Creators of this utter bullshit fantasy fairy-tale piece of crap and I would lock them in a room and feed them drugs until they were profoundly and chronically Addicted to them...I'd ask them if their experience has in any way whatsoever resembled the experience they presented to the Public...After I received their answers, no no no please what I do now no fuck me I'm fucked no please help me no no no, I'd ask them how they were going to present addiction to the Public in the future. I'd ask them if they were going to romanticise it, glorify it, make light of it, or portray it in a way that is wholly inaccurate. No no no please what

I do now no fuck me I'm fucked no please help me no no no. That's what I thought, you Motherfuckers. No. (216-17)

The aggression expressed by Frey in relation to inauthenticity seems to be a calculated façade that aims to distract readers from the fictitious nature of the memoir. His self-righteous arrogance makes doubting the text appear entirely unreasonable. Frey's performance is not only aided by the forceful language and the belligerent assertions of credibility, but also by the emotional engagement of reading audiences and the positioning of author-victims as messiahs able to lead readers to the 'truth'. Indeed, the popularity of the 'misery memoir' has often been attributed to its inspirational qualities, evidenced by the marketing of the genre as a source of motivation for readers interested in changing their lives. In this way, these memoirs construct self-help gurus from the survivors of traumatic experience. By doing so, narratives such as *A Million Little Pieces* seek to gain authority by offering the sense of something 'real'. They offer a literary experience, for example, that is *felt* to be genuinely capable of changing the life of the reader. Indeed, recent fakes have explicitly eschewed the status of victim, electing, rather, a position of martyr-like responsibility. As Frey writes in *A Million Little Pieces*:

I'm a victim of nothing but myself, just as I believe that most people with this so-called disease aren't victims of anything other than themselves...I call it being responsible. I call it the acceptance of my own problems and my own weaknesses with honor and dignity. (276)

Transforming trauma into a motivational ethos, these authors thus capitalise on a self-help trend that uses suffering as a means of personal development through access to the 'true'.

In a second example of a fraudulent 'misery memoir', the phenomenon of Dave Pelzer reinforces how the marketing of trauma is a lucrative vehicle through which victims can benefit from the injustices of childhood abuse. The author of a trilogy of memoirs—*A Child Called 'It'* (1995), *The Lost Boy* (1997) and *A Man Named Dave* (1999)—Pelzer has enjoyed considerable success, selling 3.5 million copies of the books in the UK alone while appearing on the Times bestseller list for a combined 448 weeks (Jordan). According to the memoirs, Pelzer suffered a childhood of physical and mental abuse as the result of an alcoholic mother intent on torturing her bewildered son. *A Child Called 'It'*, for example, recounts incidences where Pelzer is forcefully burned on a gas stove; starved then made to eat faeces, a bar of soap, ammonia, and a 'bowl of regurgitated hot dogs' (34); stabbed; whipped with a dog chain; and made to sleep on the garage floor. Following the extraordinary popularity of the trilogy, Pelzer sought to help others learn how to "feel good about themselves" (qtd. in Jordan) and transformed personal suffering into an industry of self-help advice. With an appearance fee of US\$7000 and over 270 confirmed public presentations a year, Pelzer is a high-earning celebrity victim, a status in which he readily invests. As Pelzer claims, the allure is "not about the books. My fans are buying the DNA of Dave" (qtd. in Jordan). Asserting that "there's a lot of Dave mania when I speak" (qtd. in Jordan), Pelzer is a tireless advocate of his

own talent, allegedly purchasing tens of thousands of copies of his work to re-sell at speaking engagements while declaring that the memoirs are “taught at Harvard” and are Pulitzer Prize nominees (qtd. in Jordan). Indeed, according to Pat Jordan in *The New York Times*, to watch Pelzer work “is to be put in mind of those itinerant preachers of the early part of last century... He is the Elmer Gantry of the 21st century, selling his books, his abuse, his platitudes, the DNA of Dave, an afternoon of laughter, some praise.” And, Jordan argues, like Gantry, the Pelzer industry has roused a band of devotees committed to little more than a myth:

I spoke with one of Pelzer’s younger brothers, Stephen...[who] denies his mother abused David or burned him or forced him to eat dog faeces. ‘Please!’ he says. ‘That never happened.’ As a witness to the stabbing incident, Stephen says: ‘I saw mom cutting food when David grabbed her arm and got a small cut from the knife. There wasn’t even any blood, yet he screamed, ‘Mommy stabbed me!’...Pelzer’s grandmother, Ruth Cole...remembers him as a ‘disruptive kid...with big ideas of grandeur...His books should be in the fiction section.’

Yet according to the responses of readers, verifiable ‘facts’ are not necessarily crucial in determining the authenticity of a text. While the constructed nature of all autobiographical writing has attracted critical scholarship for some time, as ‘misery memoirs’ encourage readers to empathically connect with the traumas of the author, the genre highlights how an emotional link offers an authentic literary experience that transcends the simplistic binary of true and false. Certainly, the controversies involving Frey and Pelzer reveal how anxieties about the inability of literature to provide something ‘real’ are mitigated via an emotional connection with the text. In Winfrey’s initial defence of Frey, for example, she asserted that the memoir retained its resonance regardless of issues concerning its factuality, while readers of Pelzer have rapturously described how his works have profoundly altered their sense of self (Jordan). The empirical truth-value of a text is certainly no measure of its capacity to captivate and transform reading audiences, as fiction most obviously suggests. Indeed, while other memoir fakes—such as the false testimonies produced by Bruno Dössekker, Norma Khouri, and Monique de Wael—have been comprehensively rejected by a reading public in light of their implications for historical fact, the memoirs produced by Frey and Pelzer have yet to be fully renounced by readers who remain enthralled by the narratives of abuse. A reader review of *A Million Little Pieces* on www.james-frey.com, for instance, states

I am probably not the only one very touched by this book. I’ve read it (sic) when I was in rehab for the second time...[and] after that in every fucking rehab I’ve been since. And every time, that book made me feel better, it made me laugh and cry and—most important—it made me feel content with the fact that I’ve got to fight. I don’t give a shit whether the facts in that book were true or not. As long as it touches me, as long as it makes me laugh and cry and fight, it’s bloody well enough.

What is interesting about the arguments surrounding these fakes, then, is the willingness of audiences to relax, if only temporarily, the demand for absolute authenticity—in terms of ‘fact’—in the interests of the sensational effects provided by the text and the intimacy of the reading experience. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note in *Reading Autobiography*, the

genre of memoir inherently allows for ambiguity on questions of what determines 'truth', arguing that

autobiographical narration is so written that it cannot be read solely as either factual truth or simple facts. As an intersubjective mode, it lies outside a logical or judicial model of truth and falsehood. (17)

Indeed, Frey and Pelzer seem to offer readers a connection that is deemed authentically 'real' despite critical evidence to the contrary. The gap between representation and reality is sufficiently blurred to allow an effect to possess truth-value, what Smith and Watson might term a "communicative exchange and understanding" (17) between the reader and the text. Arguably, this effect is made all the more powerful by the recognition of the limitations of language when representing trauma. As Leigh Gilmore suggests in *The Limits of Autobiography*, the complex relationship between trauma and representation subjects memoirs to anxieties about veracity but more importantly, raises questions about the limits of language. Gilmore argues that

something of a consensus has already been developed that takes trauma as the unrepresentable to assert that trauma is beyond language in some crucial way, that language fails in the face of trauma, and that trauma mocks language and confronts it with its insufficiency. (6)

In relation to 'misery memoirs', the work of the text—recognising the unreliability of language—is thus not to create a narrative that is legally verifiable, for example, but an emotional experience that offers a different kind of 'real'. In this scenario, what is the difference, readers question, in the 'laughter and tears' produced by a fake and those by a genuine article? Reality, then, is reduced to little more than a sensation of the 'real' produced by a simulation. It is a notion in line with the arguments of Jean Baudrillard, who claims that human experience is of a simulation of reality, a "network of artificial signs" (20), rather than the real itself.

It is important to remember that as the simulations produced by Frey and Pelzer "threaten the difference between the 'true' and the 'false', the 'real' and the 'imaginary'" (Baudrillard 3), on a personal level broader social narratives begin to be re-scripted and formulated as something 'other'. Unlike fraudulent Holocaust memoirs, for example, which draw upon a well-documented historical trauma to validate experiences of suffering, fake confessions of domestic abuse have contributed to the construction of an entirely new version of family reality. As Furedi argues, false 'misery memoirs' "do more than merely stretch the boundaries of truth. They set out to demonstrate that, whatever the facts might be, there is a higher truth out there—namely that the horrendous degradation of children is a normal...occurrence" ("An Emotional Striptease"). While there are authors of the genre who represent experiences of trauma without a context of childhood victimhood—such as Frey—an increasing majority relate to the sadistic abuse or mistreatment of children. Furedi asserts that the family, "once

idealised as a haven from a heartless world, is now widely depicted as a vile and abusive institution,” as ‘misery memoirs’ suggest that tragedy, violence and degradation are a hidden social ‘norm’, the “‘reality’ of childhood and family life.” In a culture which encourages individuals to seek meaning through degrading experiences, reading audiences no longer invest in “stories of happy and purposeful childhoods,” Furedi contends, “since such stories must surely have been written by people ‘in denial’ who cannot face the bitter truth about just how badly their parents hurt them.” As Kate Douglas argues in *Contesting Childhood*, this trend in autobiography is “emblematic of wider social concerns about childhood” (6) and suggests the commodification of childhood in a series of narratives designed for the voyeuristic pleasures of adult readers:

Childhoods are produced and sold (by writers, publishers, and booksellers) and bought and consumed (by readers). Autobiographies of childhood pledge to offer experiences and stories of childhood for adult consumption, allowing adults to fantasise about their collective pasts and presents. Childhood lives are presented as available, desirable and consumable. (44)

Further, child victims represent a voice that is as sacrosanct as that of the Holocaust survivor. The profound consequences of falsely doubting a child witness have ensured that reading audiences largely refrain from explicitly accusing even the most incredible ‘misery memoirs’ of fraudulence, revealing tensions about the relationship between children, truth, and trauma. Indeed, due to the focus of ‘misery memoirs’ on children and childhood, critics are often unwilling to condemn these works as false. For example, the literary editor of *The Independent*, Boyd Tonkin, resolutely rejects evidence of the spuriousness of Pelzer’s memoir, arguing that there is “no strong reason to consider Pelzer as anything other than a survivor of prolonged abuse whose elaborate scapegoating may have disguised much suffering from other family members.” In his defence of Pelzer, Tonkin highlights anxieties about the subjective nature of truth and the capacity of one vision of the ‘real’ to be considered more valid than another. Given that the trilogy recounts incidences from childhood and claims a unique position of victimhood—Pelzer was the single recipient of the abuse—its assertions can be neither proved nor disproved. In this scenario, the genuine and the fake are indistinguishable, leaving the reading public to decide where the boundaries of the real and the unreal occur.

In a third example of a fake ‘misery memoir’, the scandal surrounding the publication of Kathy O’Beirne’s *Don’t Ever Tell*² explicitly demonstrates anxieties about the inability to differentiate between authentic and fabricated versions of reality, as the text has struggled to secure a consensus regarding its claims to truth. In line with the remarkable market success of other frauds, *Don’t Ever Tell* sold 350,000 copies in the UK alone on its release, again attracting the attention of Oprah Winfrey and sparking rumours about a sequel and potential film deal. Gene Kerrigan observes in *The Independent* that the text is a suitably graphic example of the ‘misery memoir’ genre, indefatigably describing the psychological and physical horrors

² Initially published as *Kathy’s Story* (2005).

of “parental viciousness and institutional brutality.” O’Beirne relates a vividly traumatic childhood in which she was regularly beaten by her father and brothers, incarcerated in a series of institutions for delinquent children, and raped by a priest in the grounds of a convent. She was transferred to numerous psychiatric hospitals before being finally relegated to a Magdalene laundry, a workhouse for ‘at risk’ women where she suffered frequent assaults. O’Beirne states that she wrote the memoir in order to begin a cathartic process of justice and to make public the harm inflicted by specific individuals and institutions: “I feel my story had to be told. It was like a volcano inside me, always ready to explode. So much evil was done there, and there was a voice inside me shouting ‘Justice!’” (qtd. in Clarke).

In the midst of the early successes of the memoir, questions were raised about the reliability of O’Beirne’s narrative. Natalie Clarke notes in the *Daily Mail* that several members of O’Beirne’s family publicly denied the authenticity of the text, refuting most vociferously the representation of their father as a cruel and violent man. O’Beirne’s sister, Mary, for example, asserts “my father never once lifted his hand to us...It was a normal, happy childhood...He was a very proud, good man and it breaks my heart to see the terrible lies Kathy has written about him” (qtd. in Clarke). Kerrigan observes that while “one of Kathy’s brothers supports part of her story and claims to be writing his own book,” the remaining seven siblings “are furious about her claims.” Moreover, while O’Beirne alleged to have been abused in a Magdalene laundry managed by the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity, the Order released a declaration to “categorically state that Kathy O’Beirne never spent any time in our laundries or related institutions” (qtd. in Kerrigan). As further evidence emerged, the journalist Hermann Kelly began to collate the discrepancies appearing in O’Beirne’s claims of victimhood, listing the ‘lies’ of the memoir in a book titled *Kathy’s Real Story* (2007). The report issued by Kelly provides clear and concise evidence that explicitly disproves the assertions made in the memoir. Interestingly, however, accusations of the fraud remain contested, by both critics and O’Beirne alike, leaving public audiences, as in the case of Pelzer, to decide about the authenticity of the truth-claims made in the text.

Certainly, the author continues to proclaim the credibility of the text, declaring “I’m not a liar. I’m a truthful person” (qtd. in Addley). O’Beirne defends the authenticity of the confession, and asserts she is capable of producing police documents that support occurrences of rape and physical assault. The journalist Esther Addley notes that in reference to the refusal of the Sisters of Our Lady to recognise her institutionalisation in the Magdalene laundry, O’Beirne highlights “well-publicised” cases in which religious orders have been exposed as having destroyed or failed to keep proper records.” Indeed, accusations against members of the clergy render the text particularly volatile in an era that is only just coming to terms with church suppression of incidences of sexual abuse. It is perhaps this key element that ensures the memoir is caught in a tension of doubt, with readers unwilling to absolutely condemn O’Beirne in a milieu where victims have been so often ignored. As Kerrigan states, if “Kathy’s story is false, a whole lot of people...have been done an injustice. If her story is true, the pain she suffered has been compounded by the persistent denials of her story.” Thus despite the testimonies—and attempted court injunctions—of the O’Beirne family and mounting

evidence demonstrating the spuriousness of *Don't Ever Tell*, O'Beirne, like Pelzer, has played upon social narratives of trauma successfully enough to be considered an authentic victim of domestic and institutional abuse. As Susanna Egan notes of frauds more generally, "the impostor, like the magician, seems to be very good at knowing what people will believe and, like the comedian, very good at knowing what people care about" (*n.p.*).

Curiously, even when memoirs are rendered suspect—or debunked by family members—there remains a public readiness to suspend disbelief. Despite being denounced as impostors, Frey, Pelzer, and O'Beirne remain popular with reading audiences and continue to produce sequel memoirs which are received with as much zest as the scandalous original. There is, further, unlike the outrage provoked by fake Holocaust testimonies, no consensus of hostility with the revelation that a 'misery memoir' is an artifice. While some readers and critics condemn these fakes absolutely, others attempt to explore the potential for redemption, highlighting, for example, the inspirational function of the narrative, or the ability of the memoir to draw attention to the plight of real victims. As Douglas notes, while at best these texts bring "child abuse to public attention" and become tools for advocacy, at worst they are "exploitative, unethical, and even voyeuristic in their representation of the child subject" (3). The result is an ambiguous vacillation between sardonically critiquing the text for its exploitation of trauma, and acknowledging a story that is vividly heartrending. *Slate* magazine editor David Plotz, for instance, in a review typical of the Pelzer trilogy, disparages the memoirs as "snuff literature" which is "suspicious" and lacks "prose ambition," while labelling Pelzer a "child-abuse entrepreneur." Concluding, quite simply, that "the point is suffering," Plotz nonetheless goes on to praise Pelzer for his imaginative efforts, claiming "he really does inspire abuse victims" and that "he deserves credit for publicising physical abuse" and encouraging "other troubled kids to be resilient and stop wallowing."

The interpretative ambivalence associated with critiques of these memoirs engages with a series of anxieties about representation and its connection to ideas about truth and reality. For Baudrillard, the difference between the real and the unreal is already false, given that contemporary visions of reality are constituted by an infinite configuration of signs that no longer bear reference to an authentic original (2). But the capacity for images of the 'real' to be re-configured as something 'other' nonetheless entails profound consequences not only for the terms of the self, but also for the terms of the 'other'. That is, while the re-visioning of history and identity has the potential to be liberating, it is a process that does not occur in a vacuum. The memoirs of both Pelzer and O'Beirne implicate a series of specific individuals in their confessions of abuse, from immediate family members to representatives from institutions such as the church, and in doing so begin to re-construct the narratives, and even identities, of others.

Perhaps, then, efforts to accept the dubious claims made by 'misery memoirs' are linked to a need to ameliorate anxieties about the connection between representation and truth. By insisting that some element of these texts is authentically true, readers find a way of securing representation, of grounding textuality in something that is determinate and

fixed. Baudrillard argues that “it is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them” (5). The public investment in the authenticity of representation is thus perhaps an effort to resist the potential for ‘nothing’, to bestow meaning in order to combat the anxiety that the image does not “conceal anything at all” (Baudrillard 5).

In order to secure the truth-value of fake ‘misery memoirs’, audiences insist on the powerfully sensational effects of the reading experience. As with the scandals surrounding Frey and Pelzer, the readers of O’Beirne continue to assert the emotional authenticity of the memoir regardless of contestations concerning its factual veracity. Indeed, as an Amazon.com reviewer reveals in response to the traumas endured by O’Beirne, textual legitimacy is conferred via the emotional engagement of a reading public:

I find it very difficult to believe that someone would make up such horrific lies about their past. I got drawn into this book after reading the first page and found it very difficult to put down. I don’t believe that Kathy made some parts up or exaggerated to gain the sympathy of others, because what she goes through from a young child I don’t believe anyone would make up.

According to the journalist Tim Adams, in the context of ‘misery memoirs’, the ‘real’ is a notion that exists only in relation to the emotional investment of readers with the presented text. The authors of these texts, Adams argues, consciously manipulate the feelings provoked in readers during the intimacy of reading, and seek to encourage an empathic connection that is difficult to break. In line with critics such as Frank Lentricchia, J Hillis Miller, Mark Roche, and Maria Takolander, who have figured the aesthetic experience of literature in the tropes of haunting, readers frame their relationship to these “misery memoirs” in the context of possession, of being indescribably moved—if not transformed—by something beyond ‘hard’ fact. As one reviewer claims of a Pelzer memoir, it is “a book that will touch your soul forever” (qtd. in Adams). Takolander argues that the

literary fake is ultimately disturbing for readers because it highlights the reality of the literary experience—one’s possession by a spectre rather than a real person—and what that reveals about the self as a porous and spectral entity. (“The Unhallowed Art”)

Indeed, perhaps the anxieties surrounding the faking of childhood trauma—as suggested by the insistence of readers on the sensational effects of the texts—relates to conceding that audiences have been profoundly moved, and even altered, by something ghostly, not real. The reluctance to confess to the fraudulence of these memoirs, then, signifies a hesitancy to acknowledge that readers are not only deeply engaged by the unreal but also, under the power of the literary experience, unable to distinguish between the genuine and the fake.

The scandals surrounding fake 'misery memoirs' thus begin to blur ideas about what constitutes an authentic telling. The veracity of victimhood is, in these instances, less in the ability of authors to validate their reliability than in the capacity of reading audiences to forge a genuine connection with the text. O'Rourke therefore argues that the new "reigning ethos" determines that "if a book moves you, it's true." In this scenario, the 'real' is little other than a persuasive effect. Indeed, the genre of the 'misery memoir' reveals how anxieties about the inability of literature to provide access to truth are mitigated via a sensational connection with text—an emotional 'real'—and the suggestion that behind the image there is something more than a ghostly void.

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LOUIE CREW



IN A MANNER OF SPEAKING

My heavy Oxbridge accent
 —linch your molars and route
 the sounds through the wisdom teeth—
 gave away my mood.

At 29, I left Britain for the US, in 1966,
 to teach at a sleepy Southern university
 famous for its football team
 more than for its scholarship.

Just before the end of my first class,
 as I wrote the assignment on the board,
 I switched to a heavy Suthun dialect:
 "If y'all have any questions,
 you can meet me in my office
 any morning between 9 and 11."