



books

A MILLION LITTLE PIECES

by James Frey

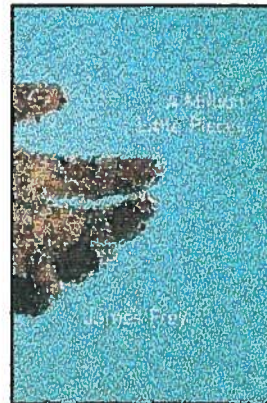
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by Claire Zulkey
PopMatters Books Critic

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Not Another Twenty-Something Memoir

Sick of self-pitying, self-important, sob story memoirs of people in their 20s? So is James Frey. These days, it's more a question of who *isn't* being billed as "the next Dave Eggers" than who is, and while the comparisons are already being made between Frey and the author of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Frey is determined to rid himself of any associations he might have with any other similar authors. With his debut *A Million Little Pieces*, you'll find memoir, you'll find a young man in his early 20s and you may sob, but you'll find no self-pity, no self importance. It's crushing and refreshing at the same time.



The book opens on a 23-year-old Frey, who appears to have lived eight lifetimes before hitting the quarter mile, and is about to throw in the towel. He is not a pretty sight: "My front four teeth are gone, I have a hole in my cheek, my nose is broken and my eyes are swollen nearly shut." His clothes are covered with spit, snot, urine, vomit and blood, liquids that come up quite often throughout the extent of the book. Delivered to his parents, he is barely conscious, yet requests that his father buy him two bottles of wine, which, amazingly, he does, and which Frey, amazingly, downs as if it were water.

This is, in case you didn't know, the story of an addict. More than an addict. Frey repeatedly and matter-of-factly identifies himself as an alcoholic and a drug addict and a criminal.

Some of the story smacks of the tale told in the drug movie *Traffic*. Despite Frey's time spent high, drugged, in alleys and in fights, he was raised by an affluent, loving family. His family has no idea of his actions, which begin around the age Drew Barrymore started partying. The drinking and drugs contrast with a warm, suburban life. For instance, failing to get a date the prom, he lies to his parents, goes to the extent of renting a tuxedo, buying a corsage, and leaves the house and sits outside the gymnasium, watching high schoolers have fun. Then he goes to the ghetto and scores some drugs. Lied to mother about going to prom, watching from outside. Even when Frey is in rehab at the Hazelden clinic in Minnesota, where the book takes place, he notes his parents' perfect attire, as they chastise him for smoking cigarettes.

At the same time, the story is reminiscent of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," where it's difficult, sometimes, to tell the crazy from the sane and how any break from the routine can seem like an absolute blessing, such as a steak and lobster dinner brought in by one of the patients as a special treat during a boxing match. "In here," says Frey, "Anything resembling normalcy is coveted."

However, *A Million Little Pieces* is not an average recovery tale. It's almost as if Frey's efforts at avoiding making a point about addiction, rehab or human strength drives the

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story straight home to the gut and the heart.

Frey's tale often has two opposing sides to it. There is the disgusting, angry side of him and rehab, dotted with vomit and the screams of Hazelden's occupants as well as Frey's outbursts of fury, weakness and sadness. At one point, Frey details from start to finish the wrongs and bad turns his life has taken, from torturing fellow children as a kid to forcing a girl in college to snort cocaine off his penis and later almost beating a priest to death. From descriptions of these events to an episode in a bus stop crack house, it's evident that Frey's tale isn't one of typical childhood rebellion. Frey's understated descriptions of physical pain are wrenching, from the extensive oral surgery he must endure without any anesthetic to his self-destructive ripping off of a toenail. "Cold white light shoots through my eyes and through my spine and into my feet and back again," he details as a doctor must break his nose for him, again, with no painkillers. However, Frey doesn't rely on his troubles to gain his audience. In fact, he is just as aware as the reader that he is a difficult narrator to love, as he often shuns friendship, laughs at the attempts at the clinic and says "I don't care" a few too many times.

However, contrasting almost shockingly with the violence, sadness and hopelessness of Frey and *A Million Little Pieces* is an open need for love and a sometimes childlike openness. "More than anything, all I have ever wanted is to feel like I wasn't alone," Frey says, and in between outbursts with his therapists or fights with fellow patients, we see his true gratefulness when his roommate lends Frey a clean shirt after our protagonist covers his own with bodily fluids, the comfort Frey finds from a children's *Babar* book and the meaning of the holding of a hand or a hug.

Unless you are an addict, some of the concepts in the book are difficult to grasp yet fascinating and crushing at the same time. How nobody ever actually gets over an addiction: they simply replace it with another. How monotonous the life at a rehabilitation clinic may be (the patterns of the days are so similar that it's difficult to tell just how long the story spans.) How addicts 'rank' each other, as Frey sneers at a rock star's confessions of drug addiction yet feels for a suburban dad who passed out drunkenly in his children's wagon. It's not the race or economic status or the amount that matters; in fact, it's hard to even tell what matters, but to addicts, there is a fine line between plying each other and mocking each other. Many times it is blurred.

"I don't give a fuck what they think of me. I'm going to try to write the best book of my generation and I'm going to try to be the best writer," Frey says in a recent interview with the *New York Observer*, shunning any comparisons between him and writers like Eggers. Whether Frey is the best writer and whether he will come upon the acclaim and attention that Eggers received is yet to be determined but in terms of a debut book, Frey's is worth reading on its own. Any parallels between Frey and his contemporaries is up to the reader, but only after the journey of *A Million Little Pieces* is completed.

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