

"THERE IS NO TRUTH," HE SAID.

THINGS START TO GET WEIRD

when Frey locks the door to his office and pulls down the blinds. That's James Frey, author of the famously fraudulent memoir *A Million Little Pieces*, a big lug with a shaved head who could pass for a member of the Russian mob—small forehead, big jaw, small pursed mouth constantly chewing gum. I figured he was going to punch me out.

Rule number one in journalism: Don't call the person you are interviewing a fucking asshole. What happened is, I was interviewing Frey at his offices in SoHo. The subject was his unusual new publishing business, Full Fathom Five, which was about to release the world's first e-book with a soundtrack. The soundtrack actually syncs up with how fast you're reading—music, gunshots, the ardent moans of young lovers. Amazing. Frey made me a cup of cappuccino, asked about my family. But then I had to ask about the three-part Oprah controversy and he started talking about postmodernism and Andy Warhol with the strong suggestion that *A Million Little Pieces* wasn't really a giant fraud but some kind of sophisticated performance art. "Anyway, there is no truth," he said. "It's all fiction. In my experience, 80 percent of reporters just tell flat-out lies."

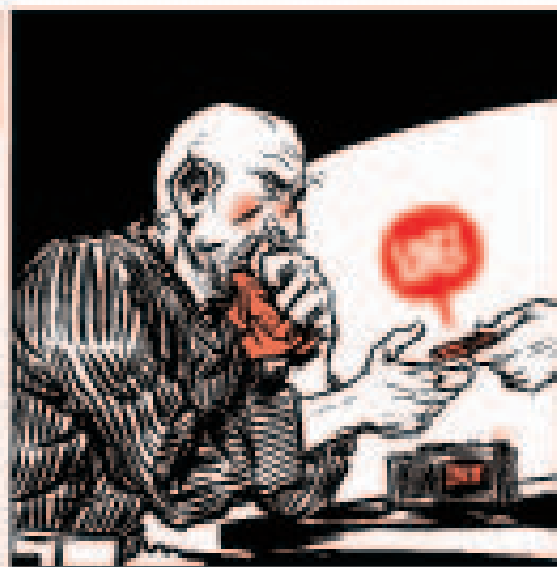
BY JOHN H. RICHARDSON
ILLUSTRATIONS
BY NATHAN FOX

So I said, "A guy who has an affair and his wife asks him if it's really true and he says, 'No, but what is reality anyway' isn't a sophisticated postmodernist, he's a motherfucking asshole." Frey asked me to step outside. I stood in the hall talking to his staff and my smartphone started going nuts. *He's about to pull the plug! What the hell is going on? Are you really swearing at him? Step outside and call me! Calm down!*

Which, of course, just pisses me off even more. Micromanaging panties-in-a-bunch editors, bane of my existence. Some time passes. I find that I like Frey's bright young crew, doubtless brutally exploited. Then Frey opens the door looking even more nauseous than he did when Oprah was carving him a new outlet for his writing. He barks at the staff to clear out and motions me in, locks the door, and pulls down the blinds.

THE FUTURE OF THE
WRITTEN WORD, AND
THE LIBERATION OF
JAMES FREY.
WITH SPACE ALIENS.





HOW BEST TO CAPTURE THE TRUTH? Some people, such as Frey, say that objective facts bear little relationship to the truth, that there are as many

I say, "Look, maybe we got off on the wrong foot. Or in your case, the wrong cloven hoof."

I'm kidding.

He ignores me. "You want the truth? I'll *show* you the fucking truth. See that laptop?"

An ordinary MacBook Pro on the desk, a futuristic matte silver shell.

"Open it."

I hesitate.

"Trust me."

Ha! But I open the laptop.

THE BOOK OF COMPASSION*

I feel a sudden wash of sympathy. Maybe I misjudged him! I start reading. It opens like so many of Frey's stories, with a lonely man coming home with vomit on his shirt, desperate for some wisp of hope or glory to give his life meaning. Frey's prose style pounds away like a gang beatdown, thuggishly effective. He describes the lonely guy's headache so vividly it gives *me* a headache. And suddenly Lonely Guy feels sick and runs to the bathroom.

At the same exact moment, I turn and throw up on Frey's carpet.

The hair stands on my neck, telltale sign of the uncanny.

"Try chapter 3," he says.

In the Table of Contents, chapter 3 is REMORSE. The title alone pierces me with sadness.

I skim down. There's a chapter on HUNGER, a chapter on PAIN.

The last chapter is DEATH.

"What the fuck?" I say.

Frey tells me the book was created by an alien warlord who had a crazy idea he wanted to test on humans—if people could *really* feel the suffering of fictional characters, a single book could change the universe. Frey thinks he was chosen to write it because his prose style is so brilliant and innovative.

Brilliant? Innovative?

Turns out Frey thinks he's one of the greatest writers of our time, that *The Book of Compassion* will be more popular than the Bible. Norman Mailer in his prime was less of an egomaniac.

***EDITOR'S NOTE:** In the interest of a good old-fashioned metaphor, and inspired by the adventurous transgressions of James Frey, the author has taken liberties with certain elements of this story. Obviously. *The Book of Compassion* and the memory stick: fiction. The aliens: also (believe it or not) fiction. Otherwise, all action, situations, and most dialogue are quite real.

Sitting at the laptop, he closes the document and drags it to the trash. Hands me a memory stick.

"What's this?"

"Take it," he says.

I start to get nervous.

"Hide it," he says. "The fate of the universe depends on it."

At that moment, a body crashes through the door and everything goes black.

When I wake up, Frey is gone and my head is throbbing. I remember a hand clamping a rag over my face and nothing after that. My first thought is that this is another annoying postmodern game, another publicity stunt. I pissed him off, he called in a thug with chloroform or something, and has invited me to enter one of his adventure novels. I feel like trashing his goddamn office.

But it's already trashed.

And the memory stick is still in my hand.

HOW DID THINGS GO SO HORRIBLY WRONG?

At first, Frey seemed totally cool. I had arrived just in time for Full Fathom Five's weekly story meeting, which was particularly rich because Frey had just returned from Hollywood with serious interest from the CW Network in a new romantic procedural, a modern version of *The Love Boat* or *Fantasy Island*. "I thought we should do one set in a castle," Frey said.

"This is probably too obvious, but what about matchmakers?"

"They said they'd tried matchmakers. Matchmakers don't work. And I was like, 'Probably because you're trying to play it straight.' It could be a matchmaker who's a wizard."

"What about a matchmaker who travels back in time and tries to set people up with the right person?"

Frey told his staff to write up their ideas, just a couple of paragraphs each. The rest of the meeting was devoted to Full Fathom Five's story list. "*Rise of Nine*," Frey begins. "Anybody read it?"

"He's going to be done in three weeks."

"*Kiss and Tell*, I pitched it to half the networks."

"Awesome."

"Some people want to age it down. Some people want to age it up."

"Well, those things are easy to do."

What about that witch story they were talking about, Frey asks. "That one we should get as fast as we can 'cause in L. A. now witches are becoming a thing. Half the people I spoke to were like, 'Witches.'"



truths as there are people. And just as you decide that Frey is full of it, some alien from an alternate reality chloroforms you (above) and tries to steal

“What kind of witch stuff do they want? Is it like evil witches or just girls who do magic?”

“They’re just saying, ‘We want witches. What do you got with witches?’ And I was like, ‘We actually have something—’”

“We got some witches!”

If this does not sound like Grandpa Scribner’s idea of a publishing company, fasten your gyrobelts. Full Fathom Five hires writers on the Hollywood model, taking the copyright and 70 percent of the profits in exchange for \$500 and the opportunity to be heavily edited by Frey and his staff. Frey also embraces product placement and all forms of multiplatform exploitation. In one book the heroine keeps finding the perfect escape route through a fictional smartphone app called Teeny Globe, which Frey is having built as a real-world app. A postapocalypse tale called *New Day in America* is being planned to overlap with a series of board games. *Dark World* was pitched by a video-game company as a game about “earth with no lights.” Frey and his group came up with a story about a military experiment gone horribly awry and built the book and the video game simultaneously, plus a digital novella version of the book that will come out on the same day as the video game this November. And there are links built into the digital novella to take you to the iTunes store so you can download the video game! And links built into the video game to go to Amazon and download the book! And three months later a full hardback version!

“*Fart Squad*?”

“I’m going to do the treatment this week,” says a staffer named Bennett Madison. “Adam is superexcited about it.”

“I think *Fart Squad* was your idea, right?”

“A stroke of genius,” says another staffer.

One day Madison knocked on Frey’s door and said he had an idea for eight- to ten-year-old boys, then said the title. “Do it!” Frey said. Now they’re dreaming of *Fart Squad* cartoons and *Fart Squad* trading cards and maybe even an animated *Fart Squad* movie.

If it works, Madison has a piece of it.

This is the future, Frey says.

TAKEN CAPTIVE BY POSSIBLE ALIENS

While all that flashes through my mind I’m still standing like a dope in Frey’s trashed office. Someone comes crashing down the hall, and the door opens. A couple of ordinary-looking white guys, nerdy media types. Except for the gills on their necks.

“This has gone far enough,” I say.

Casualty, as if it takes no effort at all, one of the men backhands me across the face. Two of my teeth go flying.

He’s Frank, president of a TV production company called Fractured Hip. His partner is named Adam. I know these guys exist in the real world because they’re on the schedule Frey gave me for the day’s activities. But these must be alien versions of them, from an alternate universe where nerdy media types have gills. They’re also armed to said gills with big weird guns that look like they shoot lasers. They tell me I better come with them or they’ll vaporize my ass. “We work in television,” Frank says. “Don’t bother trying to reason with us.”

So I follow. In the street where it feels a little more public I stop in my tracks and ask where they are taking me.

“To meet Pittacus Lore.”

That clinches it. Pittacus Lore is a ten-thousand-year-old alien warlord who is the “author” of Frey’s teen alien series. Reporters who want to interview him have to settle for Frey talking through a distortion box. So this is in fact a stupid po-mo PR gambit and Frey was actually insane enough to send his henchmen through the door—that’s actually an office joke, that he’s the Overlord and the staff are his Henchmen—to dragoon me.

I probably have grounds for a massive lawsuit.

A hiss and crackle in Frank’s earpiece, then he speaks into the air. “We’re bringing him,” he says, jerking me hard by the arm.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Squeezed into the backseat of a futuristic black limo, I go back to tracing the steps that got me into this jam. After the staff meeting, Frey kicked back in his modest office and sketched out his teenage saga: Black Flag and the Circle Jerks, Ozzy and Guns N’ Roses, booze and pot and Kerouac and Bukowski and Hermann Hesse and Stephen King and Tom Clancy, and wow, Bob Dylan. And Rimbaud and Baudelaire and booze and pot and Salinger and Fitzgerald and *Less Than Zero* and finally, in his senior year of college, he picked up a copy of *Tropic of Cancer*. At forty-one he can still recite the opening page from memory: *I’m living in Villa Borghese, I have no money no hopes no job, I’m the happiest man alive, no longer do I think I’m an artist, I am one....*

What a book! It took *iron balls* to write a book like that in the 1930s! Frey’s goal from that moment on was do unto others as Miller had done to him—“to write some book that some punk-ass fucked-up kid reads like, Fuck I can’t believe he *did* that.” After graduation, supported by a



Frey's groundbreaking technology that compels the reader to feel rather than think. Or... sorry, that last part may be fiction. Oh, and these panels

part-time job and his parents, he moved to Paris to sit in cafés and get drunk and scribble shit in his notebook, then moved to London to sit in pubs and get drunk and scribble shit in his notebook. After a year and a half of that, he headed to the famous rehab clinic in Minnesota, stopping off in New York City for a transformative encounter with abstract expressionism. “At the Museum of Modern Art, there used to be a Pollock Room. I just went into that room, and I was just like, ‘Fuck...fuck.’”

After rehab, he went to prison to serve out a three-month term for punching out some cops only to arrive in Chicago on the very day that his doomed nymphomaniac junkie lover hung herself—no, sorry, those were the bald-faced lies he told in his phony memoir and recanted on *Oprah*. What he really did is actually more interesting: He spent a year at the Art Institute of Chicago trying to understand what Pollock made him feel. “I was interested in *why*. How is that theoretically valid, to make a painting that looks like that? Or Warhol—what’s the theoretical validity of him painting soup cans, sticking it on a wall, and calling it art? A lot of people, they just think this is some *asshole* who doesn’t know *shit* painting a dumb picture and sitting it on a wall. But if you know art, you know that there’s what led us to that point. I was interested in that. How did we arrive to Andy Warhol? How did we arrive to Pablo Picasso? How did we arrive to Jackson Pollock? Why does Jasper Johns matter?”

One night, bursting with a sudden inspiration, he sat down and wrote a foreword to an unwritten book. It was going to be about rehab and he was going to do it like his heroes, writing balls out. “I wasn’t gonna write fiction and I wasn’t gonna write nonfiction. I was just gonna write whatever I wanted. And it might get me in trouble.”

Yes! The bold young writer roaring in the mouth of his cave!

But he decided he needed to make some money and headed out to Hollywood and wrote an ambitious script that sucked and then came to the kind of turning point that defines a man’s life. Was he going to be the kind of schmuck who aims so high he never hits anything, or was he gonna be a winner?

He lowered his aim, writing a romantic comedy about a guy who asks his best friend to try to seduce his fiancée in order to test her virtue. Not only did it sell, it starred David Schwimmer. “None of the characters behaves at any moment like any human being we have ever met,” said Roger Ebert. But it got Frey a career.

So passed the nineties.

But what *book* was he going to write? What’s a *great* story that’ll *fuck people up*? He would keep trying things and nothing worked.

Then in the last year of his twenties, *The Liars’ Club* kicked off a wave of addiction memoirs and he went back to his rehab idea and mixed Miller and Pollock and Schwimmer and cable TV and the Internet and cell phones—all this *shit* making the world faster so you should *write* faster too. And one day he sat down and started writing really fast without quotation marks or paragraph indentation or punctuation, just telling the story out loud and typing like he was taking dictation from himself and something clicked, *that’s* what he should be *doing*, he should be focusing on how it *sounds* instead of how it’s supposed to be written. Eight hours later he had the first twenty pages of *A Million Little Pieces*. And he was like, “Yeah.”

He was like, “Yeah.”

UNWILLING SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF

Like most reporters these days, I’ve spent some time covering Hollywood. I stood at Jim Cameron’s elbow for seven days while he shot *Titanic* and exceeded all OSHA limits for loitering on Joel Silver sets. Therefore it is on some authority that I can say there is *nothing* fake-looking about the gills on Frank’s neck. I can see the moisture, the delicate flutter, I can hear the sighing through the feathered slits.

It reminds me of Frey’s last book, a ferociously reimagined update of the Bible. *The Bible!* The balls on this dude! He made Jesus a drunk and turned the crucifixion into an industrial accident and printed it in a soft leatherette cover with rounded corners and red ink whenever “Ben Zion” goes off on a sermon about **sacred fucking**. I’m only a hundred pages in but it’s pretty damn impressive, maybe even brilliant.

Then he starts taking back the apology he gave to Oprah. “I mean, even the shit that ended up getting me in trouble, like the fact and the fiction and all that garbage, I was thinking about Cindy Sherman’s endless self-portrait project, where she’s just taking portraits of herself in radically different ways but it’s always Cindy Sherman. And thinking about, *what* is a self-portrait? It’s whatever the fuck I want it to be. What’s truth and what’s *not* doesn’t even fucking matter.”

Richardson: Are you saying that when you did *A Million Little Pieces*, it was a conscious *art* decision?

Frey: Yeah, there was a deliberate blurring.

Richardson: But you lied to people to *their faces*. For a year and a half you looked in their eyes and said, “I wrote this, this *happened*.” That’s the difference, right? I mean, if your wife asks you, “Did you cheat on me?” and you say, “No, I didn’t” and you did, that’s not blurring



running through this story show what happens to Frey and the author as they cross the fact divide to get at the truth of Frey's radical vision for the future of

the line between fact and fiction, that's just being a fucking asshole.

[Uncomfortable pause!]

Frey: Right. And I've admitted I did that and that I was wrong to do it. I don't know what else you want me to do. Why do you make that face?

Richardson: You've also said you should never have apologized.

Frey: Sometimes I don't think I should have, because 90 percent of the memoirs that are published are as full of shit as my book and not one has ever been held to the same standard that—

[EXCUSE ME ONE MINUTE HERE: If his book told lies about bird-watching, nobody would have cared. But Frey became the poster child for "truthiness" because he created a tough-guy drunk who scorned introspection and Alcoholics Anonymous, got sober on willpower alone and tested himself by putting his nose in a full glass of whiskey, a snowballing series of self-flattering heroics that put the lives of his fans at risk.]

Richardson: You don't think truth is part of art?

Frey: I think the truth is the most important thing of all. But when Picasso paints a cubist self-portrait, is that an actual self-portrait or a truthful self-portrait?

Richardson: Let me give you three scenarios:

1. I write a lot of lies about you.
2. I write a lot of lies about you that add up to a truthful portrait.
3. I write something that tries to be accurate, factual, and fair.

Which door do you choose?

"I choose the third option," Frey says.

Goddamn hypocrite didn't even hesitate.

PICASSO OR MICKEY MOUSE?

So I'm thinking all this as these guys with moist fluttering gills hustle me into a black car that takes off speeding up Ninth Avenue. And then I realize: Ninth Avenue is a one-way street going downtown. I think of Borges:

We (the indivisible divinity that works within us) have dreamed the world. We have dreamed it resistant, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space and firm in time, but we have allowed tenuous and eternal interstices of unreason that show us it is false.

Since these counterfactual theatrics seem to have their origin in Frey's book company, I should explain what he's trying to do with Full Fathom Five. Four books into his career, he says, he was visiting the factory in England where Damien Hirst makes art out of dead fish and watched all the assistants scurrying around. It hit him. *Why not start*

a factory? Like Warhol! So he came up with a simple exploitable idea about nine alien kids sent to Earth because their planet's been overrun by enemy aliens who are now trying to track them down. He found an M.F.A. writing student who was willing to write the first book for \$500 and 30 percent of the profits. He gave notes, the publisher gave notes, DreamWorks bought the movie rights and gave more notes. The crowd-sourced result was a *New York Times* best seller called *I Am Number Four*.

Richardson: Would you have done that for your books? Would you have taken notes from the studio and the publisher and every other person in the world on your personal artistic creations?

Frey: No. I don't take notes at all.

But after *Number Four* came out, he hired an assistant and started churning out new ideas and finding new writers and pitching a revolutionary new idea—*Are You a Movie Executive? A Video Game Developer? Call Full Fathom Five for All Your Story Needs*. Nobody had ever done that before!

Frey: There, you gave me one of those looks.

Richardson: You say, "We're doing things we've never done before" and I'm looking at this book, and it's an alien who comes to Earth. It's *Starman*. It's not something that's never been done before.

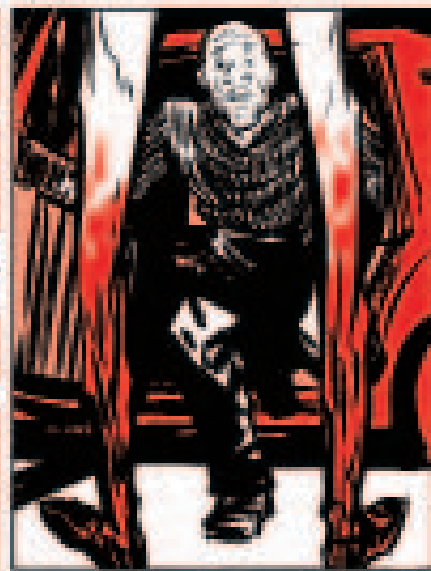
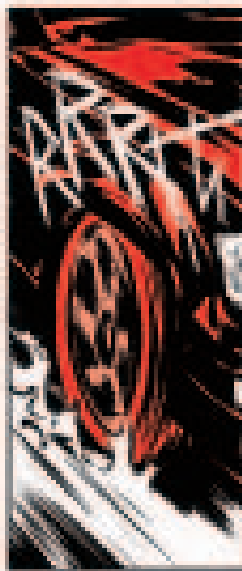
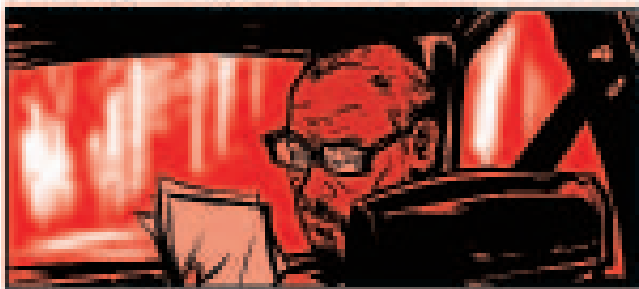
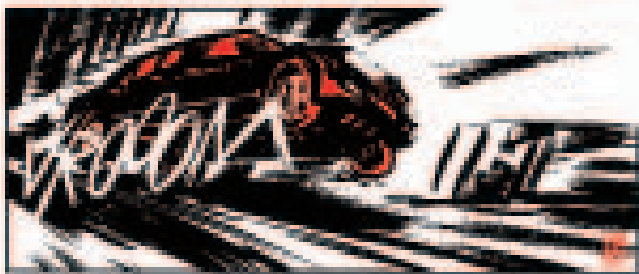
Frey: No, but in the way it was *produced*. Taking notes from movie companies, publishing companies, screenwriters, and merchandising departments...

Richardson: That's your big breakthrough? Taking notes from merchandising departments?

Frey: It's *fun*. You got to be like, "Let's make these weapons cooler. What kind of cool-ass, crazy outfits can fucking aliens wear?" It was *fun*. It was *cool*. Again, in sort of the highbrow academic world of fine literature, they're sure not gonna think it is, but I don't give a fuck. I wake up every day and I have fun. Is this a movie studio? Nope. Is this a publishing company? Nope. Is this a video-game company? Nope. It just is what it is. That's the beauty of the future. Every writer I know is scared of the future. Nobody knows what's gonna happen with digital publishing. And I say, "Yeah! I'm *making* that future! I'm *rushing* to that future! I'm *totally embracing* that future! I'm gonna be part of who determines what that future is!" Same as Henry Miller! Am I placing myself alongside of him in terms of historical importance? Absolutely fucking *not*. But am I playing that same *game* as he played, which is *trying to set a course for the future of storytelling*? Yeah!

[Insert: Tony Montana collapsing facedown in a pile of cocaine.]

Richardson: But ultimately it's the stories, right? The *stories* that



human culture, a future in which culture is a factory and objective reality itself falls away, in which everyone is an artist creating his own reality.

you're telling are genre fiction. You got your vampire story, you got your witch story. But the *real* stuff is gonna come from an individual who's sitting there working it out on his own with great ambition. It's not gonna be somebody who says, "I think I can do a pretty good *rom-com*."

Frey: But my point is there *aren't* really any Henry Millers left. Tell me one person in the world you think is doing that.

Richardson: Roberto Bolaño.

Frey: But Roberto Bolaño is *dead*.

Richardson: Recently.

Frey: But again, you're saying that one thing is somehow more valid or more important than the other.

Richardson: Yes, Roberto Bolaño is better than *Teenage Action Ranger Force*. Yes. I am saying that.

Frey: Who do you think has done more to keep the culture of books alive, Roberto Bolaño or J. K. Rowling?

Richardson: It's really kind of apples and oranges.

Frey: It's not apples and oranges at all. It's a pretty cut-and-dry answer.

Richardson: Really? Who do you think is more important: Picasso or Mickey Mouse?

Frey: Probably Mickey Mouse.

Richardson: So if you had a choice to buy something and put it on your wall, you'd choose Mickey Mouse instead of Picasso?

Frey: No, but—

Richardson: Then you're lying!

Frey: No I'm not!

Richardson: *You're making a choice. You're making a distinction between what's good and bad.*

Frey: *No I'm not.* I didn't say Picasso's more important than Mickey Mouse. I don't even necessarily think he is. He's just different.

Richardson: But when it comes time to put your money on it, you're choosing Picasso—and so collapses *your entire flimsy edifice of self-justification*.

Frey [*visibly gritting his teeth*]: You may think I'm a dick or arrogant or delusional or whatever, and frankly it doesn't matter to me. I've written four books. Published in *thirty-nine* languages. I sold millions and millions and millions of copies. Do I want to be more famous? I could give a shit. Do I want to publish in more languages? There are a few left. What matters to me is a hundred years from now when people look back at our time, what writers are they gonna say, "Holy fuck!" I think *I am* and will be one of those people.

Richardson: So you think your body of work is at world-

historical levels?

Frey: I think I've got as good a shot as anybody right now. I think I have a shot at being part of the canon for sure.

Richardson: Which you abandoned to devote yourself to best sellers about teenage aliens?

Frey: I think you're getting hung up on the idea of fine art—I don't think there's any difference between writing fine art and producing genre fiction. I think of it all as part of a larger body of work.

Richardson: That's so funny because when I was a kid in college, we were all militantly trying to collapse the boundaries between high and low—"There's no difference between rock 'n' roll and Milton, so why can't I write my thesis on Elvis Costello?" And, of course, we were right. But somehow that seems to have led to *Jersey Shore*.

FRACTURED HIP

Okay, I was overreacting. Frey was being very polite and his basic point was pretty much unassailable. Nabokov said it best: "Reality" is the one word that must always be in quotes. Especially now, with a disgusting green mucus starting to flow from Frank's gills. "Do you mind if I open the window for a second?" he says. Not at all, I say, and he powers down the window.

All the oxygen instantly gets sucked out of the car. We are flying through infinite emptiness. Frank takes a couple of deep breaths and the mucus clears up.

But I'm gasping, except nothing comes back in. I think I have about ten more seconds to live.

And there on the sidewalk is Frey, reaching for the door handle, standing between two alien guards. As he jumps into the front seat he gives the two aliens a superfriendly smile and Frank—finally—powers the window up.

Frey: You guys have fun the last couple of weeks?

Frank: Yeah. We've been hustling.

As I catch my breath, I gather from the conversation that they've been hitting up the cable networks with an idea for a reality show called *Miss Trailer Park USA*. Frank hands me their promotional one-sheet, a chorus line of hot trailer tramps lined up in front of a red '70s Camaro. It's amazingly effective. Just looking at it makes me want to drink white lightning and listen to Lynyrd Skynyrd.

Frey: This would be an extension of Richard Prince. He has a series of photographs called "Girlfriends" that are these crazy-ass weird photographs of biker chicks. And he takes old muscle cars and redoes



Preferably with aliens and a multiplatform release. But underneath all of this, there is a reality that cannot be denied, a truth measured in love and pain.

them and puts them in his front yard and sells them as sculptures. There's this tradition of art when you take sort of low America and you elevate it by making cool, funny, awesome, somewhat ironic—but not really—work out of it. So we'll take those references and transfer them to the production of an awesome beauty pageant of people who come from trailer parks and shoot guns and drive pickup trucks.

Now they're headed to truTV, which is positioning itself—this is not a joke—as the network of “fat people screaming at each other.”

Frank: Apparently their demographic does not like to watch women.

Frey: Who's their demographic?

Frank: Dudes.

Adam: Believe it or not, dudes like to watch other dudes.

AND HERE IS WHERE THE KNIVES GET CLOSE TO VITAL ORGANS

What are these freakin' aliens talking about? And why are we going to a pitch meeting for a reality show? For that matter, *why is a famous book writer like James Frey going to a pitch meeting for a reality show?*

Ask and ye shall receive. At that moment the doors of the car fly open and the two mucus-gilled aliens leap out and the doors slam shut again, not like car doors but *zzzooooop* with that *Star Wars* sound. It happens so suddenly Frey and I are left behind, fabulist and reporter trapped like the tiger and Pi.

“Do you still have it?” he says.

“Still have what?”

He looks in my eyes and sees the answer. “It's not your responsibility,” he says. “I was just pissed off and figured, fine, let this righteous prick deal with it.”

He holds out his hand.

“What are you going to do?”

He hesitates a second that is one second too long.

“You know it has to be destroyed,” I say.

He sighs, shrugging inward in that bulldog way.

“What do the goddamn aliens want it for, anyway?”

As his eye falls to the one-sheet of *Miss Trailer Park USA*, I briefly contemplate the existence of a universe where a man who believes his books are contenders for world-historical status also produces a reality show called *Miss Trailer Park USA*. That really does mark something new in the world. Would Tolstoy take an executive-producer credit on *Miss Desperate Peasant USSR*? Would Kafka authorize a *Metamorphosis* action figure? Then I understand. It is the one-sheet! By watching James Frey, the aliens had figured out how to force the

world to read *THE BOOK OF COMPASSION*. Reality television! They were going to put it in ad copy, slip it into the credit crawl, weave it into the story lines, into love letters and suicide notes. Soon everyone would feel everything so intensely they would never have to think again, and the mucus-gilled aliens would have us at their mercy.

The doors go *zzooooop* again and there on the sidewalk is a ten-foot elongated Modigliani-ass alien I recognize as Pittacus Lore. He's smoking a cigar. He looks at Frey and shakes his head. “You had a deadline,” he says.

Just like every other writer in the history of the universe, Frey pulls the “creative temperament” gag on him. “Do you want it good, or do you want it on time?”

But the alien's no fool. He holds out his hand—his paw, whatever, scaly goddamn thing. “Give me back the memory stick,” he says.

“I don't have it.”

The alien whips out a sleek little Tec-9 and slips it under Frey's chin.

“I thought you were going to use that thing to write books that would rip the hearts out of people,” he says. “The first one, you were young, it happens. Then you wrote a sequel and that thing about California and they had some effective moments. But Shakespeare could relax. But that last one! The Jesus one! I was telling the other warlords, Frey's getting control of his shit now. And then what do you do? You throw it all away to make *Sweet Valley High*!”

Now it all makes sense. Frey's characters are staples out of Hollywood melodramas, the very notion of a sensitive recovery memoir written in tough-guy thriller prose seems idiotic, yet Oprah gave it an hour-long tongue bath and five million people bought the damn thing, and that odd, annoying style really does have power and poetry in it. *The secret was alien technology.*

“Give back the memory stick,” the alien demands as the air around him turns to writhing snakes of fire that lick at Frey's face. “Give it back or I'll make you unknown. I'll make you friendless. I'll make you a fact checker at an understaffed dead-tree magazine.”

I cannot lie, a small part of me is enjoying this. But the memory stick is still hidden on my person and I can feel it tugging at me like Bilbo's ring, reminding me that secrets and lies are also a path to freedom. Since his world blew up in a million little pieces, Frey seems driven to games with authorship and identity. That's how he came to unleash these aliens on an innocent world, subverting the notion of the “author” by turning the byline of his hit series over to Pittacus Lore, a gauntlet thrown down before the straight world that almost destroyed him. He's growing around it now, [continued on page 171]

James Frey

[continued from page 141] slowly building up some pearl or fresh disaster. Maybe a future Sartre will write *Saint James Frey*, and we will learn that his Great Mistake delivered him to glory.

THEN THE ALIEN DISAPPEARS AND FREY

faces me mano a mano. We've been left to fight it out like medieval champions, each hearing the echo of a fate foretold. *This* is the great struggle of our time!

Frey: I guess I *am* that guy you think is a fool, who is saying the distinctions are being obliterated and I'm gonna be one of the people that obliterates them. But there is no difference between fiction and nonfiction. I don't think it's relevant to this world, and it stopped being relevant a long time ago.

Richardson: So again, you're comfortable with me telling lies about you in my story?

Frey: We do different things. When you put your name on a byline and publish it in *Esquire*, you're making a different statement than I'm making.

Richardson: But you made a blanket statement. You didn't say, "I think the distinction is disappearing, except in *Esquire*." You said, "The distinction between fact and fiction doesn't mean anything."

Frey: It doesn't mean anything to *me*. Whatever version of the story you write, that's your version of the story. We've had those stories written about us before.

Richardson: And you accepted it? You didn't go home and say, "That writer lied about me. That article was *bullshit*."

Frey: Yeah, I probably did.

Richardson: So you're just full of sh—you're just not telling me the truth.

Frey: *No I'm not!* I didn't go out the next day and scream to the sky. I didn't write a letter to the editor. I accepted that that's what they published. How is that being full of shit?

Richardson: Because you're saying, "I accept it, it's just another version." But when you go home, you say to your wife, "That fucker, he *lied* about me." I would be *furios* if that happened.

Frey: I'm *not*, because I understand the world we live in. If you say that we had strippers outside and there's cocaine on all our desks, there's nothing I can fucking do about it.

Richardson: So it's just strippers and coke that would bother you the most, or is there something else?

Frey: I think it'll be curious to read what your version of this conversation would be.

Richardson: Well, I'm taping it, so my version will be accurate.

Frey: The only truly accurate version of this conversation will be *absolute* unedited, untouched. Anything else is—

Richardson: Fiction.

[And finally this patient man loses it.]

Frey: You keep saying "fiction" and "non-fiction"! *Those words don't mean anything to me*. You think in today's world there is some greater thing called truth? You know what's truth? I'll give you some fucking truth. Truth

is when I watched my fucking kid *die* in my wife's arms. That's fucking *truth*. That's *truth*. What happens *here*, what happens on the TV screen, that's all fucking fiction!

THE NEXT DAY, SHIT IS AWKWARD,

awkward, awkward. Frey hides behind his screen, sitting in his Eames with his feet up against the wall—which he does so often there's a dark smudged spot where his feet touch about chest high. I'm trying to talk him off the ledge. "Don't worry about the memory stick. I can keep it safe."

But Frey is glum, glum, glum. He's developing this tic where he rubs his shaved head over and over and over again like an animal pacing a cage.

Frey: I've been through so much shit, I'm just tired of fucking fighting. It's just not fucking worth it.

I go out in the hall for a while, hoping he'll cool down. A staffer named Matt Hudson is working on a TV show that takes elements of *Zorro* and puts them into a 24 model, where a single season will track a mission of a paramilitary black-ops team trying to deal with some threat.

Hudson: It's an idea that James and I sort of collectively came up with after he was out in L.A. One of the producers said, "We're looking for high-concept takes on *Zorro*."

A staffer named Jessica Almon is working on a story about teenage girls who become gossip bloggers. In the year she's been working for Frey, he's given her a chance to write a novel and put her on the phone with major television show runners. "I never thought I'd be able to speak to these people in my life," she says, "but he brings me on the phone and says, 'This is Jessica. She developed this whole idea. She runs the show.'"

His staff really loves him. But when I go back to his office, Frey's still glum.

Frey: I just don't want to be stabbed anymore. Because I have been fucking stabbed over and over and over again. All I want to do is make shit I think is cool. And the ways I make shit that I think is cool have never been ways that many people have been comfortable with. It's caused me problems my whole life. A *Million Little Pieces* caused problems initially because it wasn't something that fit into categories and then it caused problems because I listened to the publisher and I fucking lied. And that sucked. It was a shitty decision.

Richardson: Now you're talking from the heart.

Frey: I believe in myself almost more than anybody I've ever met, which is how I'm able to do things. It's not 'cause I'm smart. It's not 'cause I'm *gifted*. It's not because I have some fancy education, went to great schools. It's because I get up every day and I go to work and I absolutely believe I can do whatever I want. And when I walk through the door of this office, I don't believe that rules apply. I don't believe that somebody should be able to tell me, "This is fiction" or "This is nonfiction" or "This is art" or "This isn't." And the one time I did it, the one time I let

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