

A million little pieces of boxing balderdash

Written by George Kimball

Wednesday, 25 January 2006 19:00

America at Large: If it only wanted to expose James Frey's deceit, thesmokinggun.com could have saved itself a lot of fact-checking time by consulting a single volume – the boxing record book – which would have demonstrated the best-selling author to be the biggest boxing bullshit artist this side of Bert Randolph Sugar.

For a millionaire author with two hit books to his credit, Frey is a slow-moving target. The most visible effect of the nationwide *furor* which arose when his "memoir," *A Million Little Pieces*, was recently exposed as a wildly imaginative collection of distortions, half-truths and outright lies, was that the book immediately regained its place on the *New York Times* bestseller list – for "nonfiction."

While we're reluctant to do Frey any more favors, he needs to be called on the boxing stuff in this book.

Either Frey's memory is even more faulty than suspected, or else he takes us all for idiots.

As the literary world surely knows by now, Frey was unmasked last month by a muckraking website called thesmokinggun.com, which after consulting court records and interviewing law enforcement personnel, pretty conclusively established that *A Million Little Pieces* might better have been entitled

A Million Little Lies

. Far from being a career criminal "wanted in three states" facing a prison sentence upon his discharge from the drug rehabilitation facility which serves as the locale for his memoir, Frey spent a matter of a few hours in jail as the result of a relatively minor traffic offence.

Since *A Million Little Pieces* spent most of 2005 atop the best-seller list, God knows why it took so long for anyone to examine it properly.

It has, though, been downright amusing to watch those with an investment in Frey – the *Times*, which had all but canonized him, his publisher, which continued to defend him long after it had become apparent his transgressions were indefensible, and Oprah Winfrey, who by making *Pieces*

a selection for her influential Book Club almost single-handedly turned him into a millionaire – twist in the wind.

Matters concerning the Sweet Science form the backdrop of two crucial elements of Frey's story. One comes in the person of a fellow rehab patient called "Matty Jackson," who is repeatedly described as "the former undisputed featherweight champion of the world." The other comes in what Frey describes as a "World Heavyweight Championship fight," the telecast of which is shown for the inmates as a parting gift from "Leonard," Frey's Vegas mobster confidante, who is about to be discharged.

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James Frey was indisputably born in 1969, and the events of *A Million Little Pieces* take place when he is 23. We know this because he tells us "I am 23-years-old" almost as often as he tells us "I am an addict and a criminal." This would place his stay at Hazelden around 1992, and Matty's reign presumably a couple of years earlier.

"Matty" is ostensibly from Minneapolis, and while it is understandable his name and hometown might have been altered, Frey is pretty unequivocal about the rest: Matty, apparently an African-American, "is a wreck, a shell of the man he was two years ago when he was one of the best boxers in the world . . . At the height of his career he was a fighting machine. He was fast, smart, strong, and unbeatable at his weight, 126 lbs. He was handsome, had a big smile, there wasn't an ounce of fat on his body, and he had dark, smooth, flawless skin. His confidence was supreme, and he entered and commanded the ring as if he owned it."

When Frey takes his leave of Hazelden, Matty inscribes a memento "From your friend Matty Jackson, former undisputed featherweight champion of the world."

Matty, we learn from Frey's epilogue, was subsequently "shot and killed outside a crackhouse in Minneapolis."

Problem is, there was no "undisputed featherweight champion of the world" in the time frame Frey describes.

Even giving him plenty of leeway and placing the era of Matty's championship somewhere between, say, 1988 and 1994, here's what we find about the disputed ones:

The WBA featherweight title was held by a Venezuelan, Antonio Esparragoza, and by a Korean, Yon Kyun Park. The WBC title belonged to an Australian, Jeff Fenech, a Mexican, Marcos Villasana, and a Brit, Paul Hodgkinson.

The WBO championship was busier, passing between an Italian (Maurizio Stecca), a Filipino (Louie Espinoza), a Mexican (Jorge Paez), a Colombian (Ruben Palacios) and two Brits (Colin McMillan and Steve Robinson).

The IBF belt was almost exclusively the province of a pair of Mexicans – Paez and Manuel Medina. Although two Americans did, however briefly, hold the IBF title (Calvin Grove in 1988, Troy Dorsey in '91), both were still fighting in 1998 – long after Matty would have passed into that great crack house in the sky.

Although Frey never names the participants in the big "heavyweight championship fight," it seems plain from their physical descriptions – and that it is supposed to be the third of a three-bout trilogy – that he is talking about Riddick Bowe vs. Evander Holyfield.

Frey tries his turn as a sportswriter, with a blow-by-blow account that is rich in detail, if not historical accuracy, but there's a bigger problem here: Bowe-Holyfield III took place in 1995, long after Frey had been discharged from Hazelden.

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Was Frey conflating a later memory? Or did he just forget how old he was when he was in rehab? Either way, he forgot another critical detail: although he identifies one participant as the "champion" and the other as the "challenger," no title at all was at stake in the third Bowe-Holyfield fight. Neither man held a title by then.

None of this would have been difficult for the publishers to have checked. Doesn't the fact that no one bothered say a great deal about the regard in which these people hold the rest of us?

(Many thanks to The Irish Times for permission to reprint this article.)