

PowellsBooks.Blog

Authors, readers, critics, media – and booksellers.

INTERVIEWS

James Frey's Bright Shiny Morning

by Danielle, June 17, 2008 10:12 AM

It's rare that you meet, much less interview, someone as notorious as James Frey. Frey's debut, *A Million Little Pieces*, received great reviews, found a wide audience as an Oprah's Book Club pick, and sold over a million copies. But when it was discovered that Frey had embellished parts of his memoir, the backlash was quick and vitriolic — he was famously thrashed by Oprah herself. Right away, he slipped out of the public's favor and then, at last, out of the headlines.

Now Frey has come roaring back into the spotlight with *Bright Shiny Morning*. A sweeping, stylized novel with four major narratives and historical asides, it portrays "the American dream" in all its beauty and its ugliness, as painted on the canvas of Los Angeles.



Bright Shiny Morning has polarized critics. Some, like Janet Maslin of the *New York Times*, absolutely loved it. "A captivating urban kaleidoscope," Maslin raved. "[Frey] stepped up to the plate and hit one out of the park." Others hated it, really hated it. David Ulin at the *L.A. Times* called it "a terrible book. One of the worst I've ever read."

All that really matters to Frey is that he wrote it. He survived. And now, once again, he has polarized the literary world. *Bright Shiny Morning* proves, like *A Million Little Pieces* did before all the drama ensued, that James Frey is a writer to be reckoned with. Whatever the cause, the effect is stunning.

Danielle Marshall: What inspired you to write about Los Angeles at this time in your life?

James Frey: Before living there, I had all these preconceived notions of what kind of place L.A. is. After I moved there, L.A. lived up to those notions for a short period of time, but then I discovered a city that wasn't what I expected it to be. It was a really cool, interesting, incredibly diverse place that didn't have a whole lot to do with movies or TV, which is all anybody ever thinks about. So I wanted to write a book about it.

I also didn't think anybody had ever really taken it on. There are books where cities are central characters — Paris or Rome or New York or Chicago — but no one ever made L.A. the central focus of a book, in all its glory and its horror. So I did it, or I tried. I wanted to go after it because I think it's an interesting place. It becomes more relevant in America the more we

move along in our history. L.A. is growing at an incredibly fast rate. It's the most diverse city in America; it's got the largest immigration population — both in-country and foreign — in the country. I thought it was an interesting place to write about.

Danielle: I did feel like L.A. was the central character in the book. In many ways, Los Angeles is a microcosm of America condensed into one, albeit very large, place. It reminded me in some ways of Mike Davis's book, *City of Quartz*. Davis calls L.A. a city of utopia and dystopia, and I was wondering: which is it for you?

Frey: It's both. That's the beauty of it. *City of Quartz* is the best book about L.A., but certainly a different kind of book than what I wrote.

The best of America is there and the worst of America is there. The best of humanity, the worst of humanity, and everything in between. It's a city of extremes. You go to Hollywood and you look at these people who are unbelievably wealthy, famous, privileged; there are only a few of them in the world and there's no one like them. And you can go to Skid Row, which is the single most dangerous and depressed neighborhood in America, and it's existed for decades unchanged. You can go to Malibu and see sort of an idyllic beach community. You can go to Compton or Watts and walk into a war zone. And, again, there's everything in between.

Danielle: So true. Los Angeles is a city that's electrified by all the dreams that gather there. The four major story threads in your book exemplify the dreamers that flock there to heal something broken in their lives.

Frey: Yes, the book is completely about dreams; those dreams can be big or little. I say that L.A. is the city that embodies America, because America has been the symbol of a better life for a couple hundred years now. "Go to America, start over, make your dreams come true." L.A. is the most relevant embodiment of that idea. People from all over the world go there to try to be famous or rich, but people from all over the world also go there just to get a job and a house. Sometimes the dreams are big, but sometimes the dream is literally a green card.

Danielle: The dreams in your book can be as big and gross and exaggerated as America can be, or they can be as simple and heartwarming and engaging as America can be.

Frey: The simple reality is that most dreams don't come true.

Danielle: I thought about that element after finishing the book. Was *Bright Shiny Morning* a dissection of the American dream?

Frey: Yes. Maybe your dream will come true in some way, or some part of it will, but it almost never comes true in our grandest notion of what it originally was. Maybe somebody gets a job, but what is the real price paid for that job? Maybe somebody becomes famous, but what does it cost them? But, more likely, neither happens.

Danielle: In an essay for Powell's a few years ago, you wrote, "As I write, I work with a simple formula: where was I, who was I with, what happened, how did it make me feel." Was your

process in writing this book similar?

Frey: My process was very similar to how I wrote my first two books. I wake up in the morning, walk my dog, hang out with my wife and kid, and around nine I go to work. I work all day, and then I come home. I do it day after day after day after day. I think a lot of the essay I wrote for you was about music...

Danielle: Exactly. What did you listen to while writing *Bright Shiny Morning*?

Frey: I listened to a lot of tunes about L.A. Or tunes I listened to while I lived there.

Danielle: An esteemed theater teacher once said that every single play that's ever been written can be boiled down to a one-word theme. When I was rereading *Bright Shiny Morning* I contemplated that theme. For me it was hope — that dreams can come true on some level.

Frey: I write about universal things in all my books. Hope and dreams and love and friends and family and pain and loss, redemption... or not. I write about things that everybody feels, whether it's me or somebody else. There's a lot of hope in the book. At the time in my life when I wrote it, hope was a pretty relevant emotion or idea.

When you live in L.A., you see it everywhere. You might not recognize it, but you drive down the street and see guys on the corner holding up signs asking for work. You drive down another street and you see these massive houses. You drive down another street and you see these immigrant communities. One of the interesting things about L.A. is that it has the greatest disparity of wealth of any city in our country. The middle class is shrinking; it isn't as prevalent as it is in most other American cities.

Danielle: Regarding the different narrative voices in the book, in some of the passages, I thought the narrative was staccato, like music with no sustained notes. I kept thinking of the sound of an automatic weapon when I was reading those passages. Some passages had more narrative flow. For example, Old Man Joe had a long monologue at the end.

Frey: There are a number of different voices in the book. They're crafted very deliberately. One thing I wanted the book to do throughout was sort of bury itself. A reader's going to get bored, but if you're constantly shifting story, perspective, the mode of delivering information, voice or style, it's going to be, in my opinion, a better reading experience.

Danielle: Those choices really helped to illuminate each of the four major story lines. I read Janet Maslin's *New York Times* piece and she said that you looked into the hearts of your characters but you didn't get "sloppy or maudlin." You wrote as if you "cared about them desperately." I felt that as well, especially Old Man Joe. Would you agree with her?

Frey: I loved writing the book. I couldn't believe that review. I couldn't believe it. She certainly understood what I was trying to do and how I was trying to do it, and what it meant to me, for sure.

Danielle: It was a pretty stunning review, and I think she definitely got it. When I received the galley I had no preconceived notions about it except that it was just, you know, a book...

Frey: By *that* guy. *[Laughter]*

Danielle: Well, I definitely had the "that guy" voice in the back of my head, for sure. I did wonder if readers were going to look past your history and respond to such an amazing work. I was a huge fan of *Bright* right away. And then, as reviews and comments started rolling out into the media, some were talking about it before they read it, or at times not digging it in the same way that I did. I was so glad that somebody, especially a major reviewer, responded to it that way.

Frey: Obviously I love the Maslin review, the *Time* magazine review, the *People* review, the *Washington Post* review. But the Maslin review was the most stunning because she definitely did not like my first two books, and she's from the most prestigious venue, a very tough critic. I couldn't believe it the first time I read it. Then, the second time I read it I cried. It felt good.

Danielle: If I were a writer, I'd want people to react to my work exactly that same way: either really love it or viscerally hate it.

Frey: Totally. Most of the online reviews are either five stars or one star.

Danielle: *[Laughter]* No middle ground there.

Frey: I'm cool with that. That's what you hope for.

Danielle: How did you come to include music and Terry Richardson photographs at your events?

Frey: I just wanted to do something different. I think sometimes readings get boring. They get boring for me, for consumers, and for book lovers, and I wanted to try to do something different and cool and fun. The photographs were shot for a limited edition version of the book. The music was, you know, let's just put on a show. If readers want to come see me and support me, then I'm going to try to do something cool for them to show them I appreciate it.

Danielle: I was reading about the protester (singular) at the Slim's event in San Francisco. I just found that hilarious and great. *[Laughter]*

Frey: Totally.

Danielle: Just this one guy creates an organization and says...

Frey: "Down with Frey!" I'm all for "Down with Frey."

Danielle: What has this current book tour has been like for you — all the unending questions about *A Million Little Pieces* and Oprah?

Frey: It's been great. People have been cool. We literally haven't had a heckler anywhere. When a couple of protesters showed up, I just went up and chatted with them. It's been fun. Book tours are tiring, but it's been more fun than I've ever had on one, probably. It sounds corny, but now I'm just happy to do it. A couple of years ago things weren't looking real good.

Danielle: Happy to have another chance to get your words out there and talk about it?

Frey: Yes, and happy to say thank you to people for their support. Happy to go into cool bookstores all over the place and say thanks to booksellers. You appreciate something more when you lose it, or when it looks like you might lose it.

Danielle: Why have you chosen to stay out of the memoir debate, the whole "What is a memoir" question? Why didn't you defend yourself as a writer and vehemently say, "You know what, what about Junky? Look at *On the Road*, or *Fear and Loathing...*"

Frey: I can't really get into that because there are a lot of legal issues involved with answering that specific question. But it basically comes down to the fact that I just don't care. I don't care how they classify my books. I don't care how they're marketed. When I write a book, I try to move somebody — affect them in some way. What a reader thinks of it means much, much more to me than what a marketing department classifies it as. I'm not going to go out and defend those books. They defend themselves. If they're good enough, people are still going to read them, regardless of what they're called — and if they're not, they won't. And that's it. They're books. At some point I may talk in greater detail about what my feelings are, but I can't right now.

Danielle: It's fodder for another really good memoir. *[Laughter]*

Frey: Maybe. If I do write one it'll be published as fiction, that's for sure.

Danielle: What is the one question that no one has asked you on the book tour that you wish they had?

Frey: Nobody's asked if Oprah asked me back. I was surprised nobody asked that.

Danielle: You are positively notorious. How does that feel?

Frey: It's awesome. When I saw the *Time* magazine review and the headline was, "America's Most Notorious Author Returns," I was like, "Awesome! Dreams do come true." I ended up right where I wanted to be.

Danielle: In the most unimaginable way.

Frey: Yeah, the whole experience has been unimaginable, the highs of it and the lows of it. It's been very surreal. I mean, Josh [Josh Kilmer-Purcell, *James's touring partner, was in the room with us*] is one of me and my wife's closest friends, he's our daughter's godfather, and I think he'd agree it's been a very odd couple of years.

Josh Kilmer-Purcell: It was nuts. I'm in advertising, so I understand the media and how to persuade people, and I had to ask, "Why is this still going on?"

Frey: I'm really happy where I am. I'm writing books that I'm proud of and that I love. I'm publishing them with people that I'm proud to work with. I'm touring with a great friend. I'm going to the best bookstores in the country and getting to meet cool people. And I'm notorious. What more could I ask for? I've said before, if I'm the one who ends up bringing down the big, dumb American memoir, cool.

Danielle: What are you working on now?

Frey: Just touring. I've started another book, but I'll probably start working on it for real in the fall. It's a book that's being written like the Bible, in chapter and verse and red-lettered. It's about a 32-year-old secular Jew in NYC who believes he's the Messiah. And other people believe him. And he might be.

Danielle: Another big topic.

Frey: Why not?

Josh Kilmer-Purcell: It's a memoir. *[Laughter]*

Danielle: I really commend you. You're a better man than I to come out on the other side of such a scandal and to continue doing what you love.

Frey: Thanks.

I spoke with James Frey before his event in Portland on May 21, 2008.

Google +

Most Read

1. **Best Books of 2022: Fiction** by Powell's Staff
2. **The Big List of Backlist: Books That Got Us Through 2022** by Powell's Staff
3. **25 Books to Read Before You Die: 21st Century** by Powell's Staff
4. **Powell's 2023 Book Preview: The First Quarter** by Powell's Staff
5. **7 Essential Authors Recommend Their 7 Essential Sci-Fi and Fantasy Books** by Powell's Staff

Blog Categories

INTERVIEWS ORIGINAL ESSAYS LISTS Q&AS PLAYLISTS
PORTRAIT OF A BOOKSELLER CITY OF READERS REQUIRED READING
POWELL'S PICKS SPOTLIGHT

Post a comment:

*Required Fields

Name*

Email* (won't be published)



I'm not a robot

reCAPTCHA
[Privacy](#) - [Terms](#)

SUBMIT COMMENT

Please note:

All comments require moderation by Powells.com staff.
Comments submitted on weekends might take until Monday to appear.