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The Post-Truth Era Strikes Again

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The question of truth has always haunted authors of controversial stories — including both fiction and non-fiction. Nevertheless, non-fiction was understood to represent a claim to be a true, even if highly interpreted, account of reality. Or, at least that has been the understanding until recent times.

Now, in the age of Stephen Colbert's concept of "truthiness" and what others have called a "post-truth era," the lines between fiction and non-fiction are becoming more and more blurred. This is true even in the case of some well-known, popular, and influential works. Does the truth matter anymore? Do we care if fiction is presented as non-fiction?

In 1992 Guatemalan author Rigoberta Menchu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, largely on the basis of her book, *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, in which she claimed that she and her family had been subjected to horrible persecution by right-wing Guatemalan forces and the government. While it is likely that this was true, at least in general terms, serious questions have been raised about specifics in her story. Is this not a problem?

In 1976 Asa Earl Carter released another book destined to be a best-seller. Writing under the pseudonym of Forrest Carter the book appeared as *The Education of Little Tree*. The book was presented as an account of the life of a young Native American boy. It later turned out that the story was not an autobiography at all, but a work of fiction. Nevertheless, the book is still cited as a non-fiction account in many contexts.

President Ronald Reagan had asked historian Edmund Morris to write what many considered the authorized biography covering his life and presidential administrations. Readers were shocked when Morris's book, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*, appeared. The book was not a traditional biography at all. Instead, Morris wove together fictional and historical materials so that the reader is never sure which is which. After controversy ensued, the book's publisher had the audacity to claim that Morris's methodology actually represented an improvement or advance in the biographical form.

Two years ago, James Frey was forced to admit that his purported memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, was not a truthful account of his struggle with drug addiction. Then, just last week, the literary world was shaken by the news that *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years* by Misha Defonseca is yet another fake.

All this is background to today's revelation in *The New York Times* that the book world has been rocked by yet another literary admission. Truth has been victimized again.

From the story:

In "Love and Consequences," a critically acclaimed memoir published last week, Margaret B. Jones wrote about her life as a half-white, half-Native American girl growing up in South-Central Los Angeles as a foster child among gang-bangers, running drugs for the Bloods.

The problem is that none of it is true.

Margaret B. Jones is a pseudonym for Margaret Seltzer, who is all white and grew up in the well-to-do Sherman Oaks section of Los Angeles, in the San Fernando Valley, with her biological family. She graduated from the Campbell Hall

School, a private Episcopal day school in the North Hollywood neighborhood. She has never lived with a foster family, nor did she run drugs for any gang members. Nor did she graduate from the University of Oregon, as she had claimed.

Riverhead Books, the unit of Penguin Group USA that published “Love and Consequences,” is recalling all copies of the book and has canceled Ms. Seltzer’s book tour, which was scheduled to start on Monday in Eugene, Ore., where she currently lives.

Here is the most interesting section from the paper’s report:

“I’m not saying like I did it right,” Ms. Seltzer said. “I did not do it right. I thought I had an opportunity to make people understand the conditions that people live in and the reasons people make the choices from the choices they don’t have.” Ms. McGrath [editor for Riverbend] said that she had numerous conversations with Ms. Seltzer about being truthful. “She seems to be very, very naïve,” Ms. McGrath said. “There was a way to do this book honestly and have it be just as compelling.”

That is the saddest aspect of this entire controversy. This statement just about says it all: “There was a way to do this book honestly and have it be just as compelling.” The truth would have served just as well — and would have led to none of these embarrassments and humiliations.

We may live in what some would style a “post-truth era,” but the fact remains that the distinction between fiction and non-fiction matters — and far beyond the literary world. The truth always matters, and only the most deluded may believe that we can live without it.

Still, there is hope in all this. Every one of these revelations has brought a sense of outrage. This just might be a sign that an instinct for the necessity of truth survives even yet.



