

Scandals

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By *Laura Kipnis*



Roger Clemens

Which is worse: lying to Congress or lying to Oprah?

When the news broke that former MLB star Roger Clemens was being indicted for perjury about his alleged steroid use, the figure who sprang to mind, despite coming from an entirely different world, was James Frey, the notorious memoirist publicly indicted for lying in his 2003 bestselling memoir (and Oprah Book Club selection), ***A Million Little Pieces***. To a writer writing on scandal, Frey obviously holds a certain fascination: If I ever find myself in the midst of a horrible scandal, it's probably going to be over something I publish, too. But more to the point, what unites these seemingly disparate figures is the charge of illicitly boosting their games by employing prohibited substances (anabolic steroids and fictional experiences, respectively). In other words,

these are scandals of *ambition*. They're about people doing what it takes—or what they believe it takes—to enhance their position in the marketplace. Though ... doesn't everyone, pretty much?

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Scandals about ambition often involve faking things: degrees, **scientific research**, memoirs, **investment returns**. Finger-pointing is easy, but ambition *is* one of the more conflicted subjects of our times. With the exception of a few iconoclasts who live off the grid or the fortunate few who live off inherited fortunes, we all tailor ourselves to the requirements of the marketplace in large and small ways: trying to get an edge, find an angle, raise *our* games. Yet doing it excessively well or wearing your ambitions too nakedly raises hackles, because in the contemporary moral-monetary equation, market-driven behavior is coded as selling out, being a whore. But who isn't market-driven? Of necessity—we live in a market society. Clearly we're ambivalent about it: Note the strain of compensatory romanticism that pervades popular culture, in which turning down money is a sign of integrity. It means you have *principles*. At the same time, we revere those who've struck it super-rich—tech-bubble billionaires, self-promoting real-estate magnates with strange hair—to whom we turn for **life lessons and character tips**, even from those universally regarded as assholes. In short, our relationship to the marketplace is completely schizophrenic.

Modern market-societies require ambition because they're premised on social mobility. The founding principal of democratic society is that your position in the world doesn't derive from your origins, it's determined by your talents and achievements. But there's a stumbling block for the ambitious: It's the market that determines *which* talents count toward achievement at any given moment. Which is where the Clemens and Frey scandals converge. It's not that either of them were talentless schlubs who got where they did on sheer fakery. What they did was augment the talents they had in order to conform to the current demands of the marketplace. (Clemens still denies it, though no one believes him.) They may have broken the prevailing rules of their respective games—baseball and memoir-writing—but as to whether steroids should be legal or will be eventually (maybe), or if memoirists are generally so truthful

(probably not), things are not exactly simple. "**All memoirists lie,**" says memoirist André Aciman; on the prevalence of performance-enhancing substances in sports, please consult the work of another noted memoirist, **Jose Canseco**.

Ambition is excessive, by its very nature. It's predicated on desire, which is inherently limitless: When is enough ever enough when it comes to these bottomless wells of yearning? In the case of the vastly talented Clemens, the desire might have been to eke a few more playing years out of his talents—a few more wins, maybe a World Series, though he probably would have made it to the Hall of Fame even without a chemical boost. But apparently he didn't care to be put out to pasture quite yet, or limp toward the end of his career. As for Frey, the back-story is a little more complicated, as the intersections of art and commerce tend to be. Here was an aspiring novelist who tried to publish a novel. His agent submitted it to 17 publishers; no one would buy it. When she added that it was based on a true story, he got offers—an unknown recovery memoirist looked like a more commercial prospect than an unknown first-time novelist, even though it was basically the same story. So he rewrote it to suit the dictates of the market.

Scandal specializes in revealing open secrets, and here's one to consider. All writers write for the marketplace. If they don't, they don't get published, increasingly so these days, given the corporatization of publishing, the insistence on increased profits. Yes, Frey produced a book that would sell instead of the novel he wanted to write, and based on his sales figures, he wrote *exactly* the book the marketplace wanted, a huge commercial success. In business lingo, you would call him a product innovator: He merged the realist novel with the true-life recovery narrative, reinvigorating the form and reaping the rewards. His critics seemed to think he should have played by the rules instead of doing what it took to succeed, ignoring commercial pressures in a grand romantic gesture, as if it was up to Frey to singlehandedly contest the momentum of global capitalism. But here's a question: Do any of us?

It's not exactly news that sports, too, is first and foremost a business. Players sacrifice their bodies to the game, cultivate a 95-mph fastball at the expense of their ligaments, then are put on waivers when they're past their prime and no longer valuable enough to owners. The expectation that individuals like Clemens and Frey are supposed to uphold some pre-capitalist code of honor shifts the burden of integrity away from the

real bastions of power and profit and onto the bit players. But why are individuals supposed to play fair in the marketplace when the marketplace doesn't play fair in return? It chews people up and spits them out as necessary; it lets individuals take the fall for industry-wide transgressions toward which leagues and publishers long turned a blind eye, from crowd-drawing, juiced-up hitting machines to memoirs so dramatic they read like fiction.

Of course, then you have the case of writers whose books **can't find publishers** because they *haven't* kowtowed to the memoir craze, along with everyone else who's buffeted around by market forces, especially at the moment. You follow the rules all your life—don't pad your resume or your expense account—and what do you get in return? Downsized, pink-slipped, laid-off at age 64 with no pension.

Negotiating the contradictions and emotional fallout of life in a market society is no easy business. Yes, possessing the right talent at the right time can propel you up the social ranks in a democracy, though here's the sticking point: The right talent is as unequally distributed as noble birth once was. The fact that some people "make it" and some don't is one of the more uncomfortable aspects of modern existence. And the consequences of *not* making it can be devastating—consider the relevant vocabulary: loser, schlub, a mediocrity. Who wants to be one of those?

Which is something to keep in mind when slamming the excessively ambitious for flying too close to the sun. Watching them out-climb us in the achievement ranks raises touchy questions: If all men are created equal, how come they're up there? Obviously, we deeply love cutting a striver down to size, and luckily, ambition-driven scandals offer the chance. We can't get enough of them: It's some small compensation for playing by the rules.

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