

STAR
AUTHORS

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JOE MORAN



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Joe Moran

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1

Introduction: The Charismatic Illusion

There is no avoiding authors in contemporary American culture. The books and arts sections of newspapers and magazines are filled with author-interviews and profiles and features about them; they crop up on talk shows and other television programmes, as well as infomercials and shopping channels; they draw audiences to readings, lectures, signings, book fairs, literary festivals, public debates and writers' conferences. Aside from these concrete appearances, they also circulate in a more nebulous sphere of gossip and rumour, as the media reproduce speculation about their private lives, peer-group rivalries and million-dollar publishing deals, run articles about where to spot the most fashionable literary celebrities around town and produce helpful charts for readers ranking writers according to their status and visibility, revealing which are 'in' and which are 'out'.¹ What is going on here, in this culture in which, as one commentator puts it, 'Nobel laureates in literature give their recipes to the New York *Times* living section'?² If celebrity authors hardly rival their counterparts in film, television and popular music for column inches, they are still a significant cultural phenomenon, one well worth examining critically.

This book is about this phenomenon of literary celebrity – how it is produced and disseminated, what kinds of meanings are attached to it, and how celebrity authors themselves have grappled with and added to these meanings in their work. Above all, I want to challenge the way the emergence of literary celebrity is most commonly explained – in terms of the vulgarization of literary life by commercial mass media in America. In this argument, contemporary literary fame becomes part of the overall pervasiveness of 'entertainment celebrity' (any fame linked to the sphere of popular culture) which is seen as 'an imperialist phenomenon, moving

into new arenas and making them over in its own image'.³ More specifically, it is linked to the ubiquity of media images in contemporary culture and a new emphasis on mere visibility or notoriety as a source of fame. This recalls Daniel Boorstin's seminal definition of the celebrity as being simply '*well-known for his well-knownness ... the human pseudo-event*', a perniciously artificial figure produced by the influence of mass media on American culture and society. According to Boorstin, 'the star system has reached far beyond the movies. Wherever it reaches it confuses traditional forms of achievement. It focuses on the personality rather than on the work. It puts a premium on well-knownness for its own sake'. He notes, for example, the way in which 'the American publishing scene has been dominated by a few stars ... who have prospered as authors partly because they could be touted as "personalities"'.⁴

Like Boorstin's distinction between the traditional figure of the 'hero' and the contemporary 'celebrity' – the former being 'a big man' and the latter simply 'a big name'⁵ – much of the existing discussion of literary celebrity is in jeremiadic vein, opposing the hype and publicity of celebrity to an earlier, purer form of deserved fame. A *Newsweek* article from the 1980s – a time of frantic buyouts of publishing firms and the introduction of sophisticated new marketing techniques into the book industry – put it in these terms:

Open just about any magazine today, turn on any talk show, and you'll find a writer holding forth ... on where he gets his ideas, what he eats for breakfast and, of course, the state of the American novel. Imagine what Herman Melville ... would have thought of Jerzy Kosinski half-naked on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* ... What would he have made of John Irving scantily clad in wrestler's briefs to advertise the new magazine *Vanity Fair*? ... Melville, who made an average of \$1,600 a year at his writing peak and was therefore one of the best-paid authors of his day, might find it hard to credit the vast sums of money that now flow toward writers whose faces flash across the country on the covers of national magazines and whose images enter America's living rooms via cathode-ray tubes.⁶

This descension narrative, contrasting 'serious' literature with the frivolous, titillating agenda of the media and the disposability of consumer culture, is reiterated in academic cultural criticism. John Cawelti, for example, makes a clear distinction between literary 'fame' and contemporary literary 'celebrity':

The test of artistic fame is that one's words or images remain in the minds of men; the test of celebrity is being followed everywhere by a photographer ... The object of celebrity is the person; the object of fame is some accomplishment, action, or creative work.⁷

Alan Spiegel similarly agrees that the turning of contemporary authors into public curiosities serves them up as part of the meaningless ephemera of consumerism:

Celebrity watching is still one of this culture's most efficient antidotes to the poison of dead time in a leisure economy; our national pastime of converting an artist into a screen star while dragging his art along as a stand-in is the customary price serious work usually pays for permission to leave the cell of the specialist and enter the marketplace.⁸

These comments seem to tap into general anxieties in postmodern, mediated culture about the replacement of the 'real' with surface image, and the subsequent blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction, public and private, high and low culture.

It is possible, though, to challenge this narrative from two perspectives. First, its view of mass culture can be seen as too uniformly hostile: critical discussions of mainstream celebrity have moved on from early accounts by critics like Boorstin, James Monaco and Christopher Lasch which characterized stars as uncomplicatedly shallow and superficial, distinguished from 'ordinary' people by notoriety rather than genuine achievement.⁹ More recent work on celebrities in the sphere of commercial entertainment by Richard Dyer, Joshua Gamson, P. David Marshall and others has challenged these straightforward oppositions between performance and work, surface and depth, promotional packaging and content. It has shown that celebrity is an unstable, multifaceted phenomenon – the product of a complex negotiation between cultural producers and audiences, the purveyor of both dominant and resistant cultural meanings and a pivotal point of contention in debates about the relationship between cultural authority and exchange value in capitalist societies. This new emphasis is part of a larger trend within cultural studies which has challenged early attempts to dismiss popular culture as formulaic and one-dimensional, and presented it instead as heterogeneous and open to multiple readings.

Second, the complicated relationship between cultural elites and the marketplace means that literary celebrity is different in significant ways from the celebrity produced by commercial mass media. The encroachment of market values on to literary production, while clearly having a

major impact on literary celebrity, has not occurred in a vacuum – it forms part of a complicated process in which various legitimating bodies compete for cultural authority and/or commercial success, and regulate the formation of a literary star system and the shifting hierarchy of stars. Literary celebrity in the US is not simply an adjunct of mainstream celebrity, but an elaborate system of representations in its own right, produced and circulated across a wide variety of media. Rather than being a straightforward effect of the commodification of culture, it raises significant questions about the relationship between literature and the marketplace, and between ‘high’, ‘low’ and ‘middlebrow’ culture in contemporary America.

‘The Cultural Value Stock Exchange’

In order to begin to make sense of some of these questions, this book will need to examine them in relation to wider theories about the relationship between cultural and economic capital. In this connection, the work of the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, is particularly useful. Bourdieu’s work on culture is specifically concerned with the struggles for power and position amongst cultural producers which result when traditional systems of authority – such as those provided by ecclesiastical and aristocratic patronage – collapse. He argues that there has been a historical development since the decline of these old forms of patronage and the first emergence of a literary marketplace, by which the social sphere of writers and other cultural producers has grown larger, more sophisticated and more ‘autonomized’, transforming itself into ‘a field of relations governed by a specific logic: competition for cultural legitimacy’.¹⁰

The term ‘field’ is a crucial concept in Bourdieu’s work – it describes a semi-autonomous, structured system with its own internal logic, rules of operation and inherently hierarchical relationships created by the struggle between agents for whichever form of capital is appropriate to that field – the principal forms being symbolic, social, economic and cultural. The field of cultural production, according to Bourdieu, is specifically concerned with the creation and dissemination of cultural capital within what he refers to as ‘the cultural value stock exchange’.¹¹ Cultural producers are relatively autonomous, gaining power within this field by the extent of their separation from other fields, by investing in cultural capital which has an ostensibly antagonistic relationship to other forms of capital – particularly economic capital. In fact, according to Bourdieu, cultural capital is only gained when directly economic interests are either absent or concealed, because they threaten the field’s claim to a monopoly of influence over which cultural goods are valued. The individualization of the author

or artist as a person with special gifts or qualities (what Bourdieu calls the 'charismatic illusion'¹²) is the focal point of this separation of cultural from economic capital – it is 'the ultimate basis of belief in the value of a work of art and ... is therefore the basis of functioning of the field of production and circulation of cultural commodities'.¹³ Leo Braudy's more general history of fame argues in similar vein that the idea of the famous author as distanced from and superior to other kinds of public notoriety – and in particular as occupying a privileged position outside the sphere of exchange and profit – has been inscribed in the concept of literary fame since the displacement of aristocratic patronage by the rise of the author as individual entrepreneur within the literary marketplace.¹⁴

Although Bourdieu argues that power within the field of cultural production is gained by those who present themselves as free of outside influences, however, there are also different sectors which vary in their level of autonomy from other fields. Indeed, Bourdieu uses the relatively loose term, 'field', precisely to point to its provisional, relational and conflictual nature, the fact that it is made up of constant struggles between dominant and peripheral figures. He sees the field of cultural production as being divided roughly into two subfields: the 'pure' subfield of restricted production and the 'extended' subfield of large-scale production. The subfield of restricted production is an 'autonomous' grouping associated with elite culture and organized around the specific, self-contained interests of the field, in which commercial success is frowned upon and the myth of the individual producer as charismatic genius is most prevalent; the subfield of large-scale production, in contrast, is a 'heteronomous' sphere in which success is primarily measured by commercial gain, the satiation of a pre-existent demand, the widest popular success and other forms of capital not specific to the field, and the status of individual producers is correspondingly at its lowest.¹⁵ (As an example of this, one could point to the ways in which popular genre and pulp fiction have traditionally been viewed as less firmly linked to an individual author than more 'literary' texts.) Bourdieu, however, emphasizes the dynamic nature of these subfields and their continual mutual interaction and conflict, so that the field of cultural production as a whole is 'a *field of forces*, but it is also a *field of struggles* tending to transform or conserve this field of forces'.¹⁶ In other words, there is a constant battle between agents occupying different points of hierarchy within each field and correspondingly different levels of autonomy from other fields, about what Bourdieu calls 'the rules of the game' – the role and purpose of authors and artists and the work they produce. As he puts it:

The struggle between occupants of the two opposite poles of the field of cultural production has at stake the monopoly on the imposition of the legitimate definition of the writer, and it is comprehensibly organized around the opposition between autonomy and heteronomy.¹⁷

It must be said that, although he continually emphasizes the applicability of his ideas to other countries, much of Bourdieu's extensive ethnographic research is specific to France – and, in particular, the class stratifications in French society which inform his general notion that literature, art and culture fulfil 'a social function of legitimating social differences'.¹⁸ However, his theory of the competition for different forms of capital within and between different fields provides a useful analytical framework for examining literary celebrity in the United States, since my argument in this book is that this phenomenon tends to be mediated in such a way that the author represents both cultural capital and marketable commodity. In general, celebrity in the United States has been conferred on authors who have the potential to be commercially successful and penetrate into mainstream media, but are also perceived as in some sense culturally 'authoritative' – in other words, they occupy a contested area of cultural production between the restricted and extended subfields.

Consider, for example, some of the bestselling authors in America (and the world) today: John Grisham, Danielle Steel, Thomas Harris, Scott Turow, Michael Crichton, Tom Clancy, Stephen King – famous people certainly, but writers more read than read about. Celebrity authors, by contrast, tend to be (for example) those who are reviewed and discussed in the media at length, who win literary prizes, whose books are studied in universities and who are employed on talk shows as what one host (Merv Griffin) once called 'heavy furniture', adding 'the minor authority of the authorial' to the proceedings as a serious counterweight to the more lightweight celebrities on view.¹⁹ They are, in short, usually 'crossover' successes who emphasize both marketability and traditional cultural hierarchies, occupying what Charles Newman describes as 'that immense and pleasurable space between belletristic coterie and mass-market hype'.²⁰ Bourdieu's theories will therefore be useful in working through some of the tensions involved in the production of literary celebrity between the legitimacy of culture and the less ambiguous sanction of the marketplace. Literary celebrity clearly complicates the moralistic approach of Boorstin and others – it is either an indication that celebrity is now worryingly omnipresent and that even high culture is 'dumbing down', or that the cultural pessimists have misunderstood the complex dynamics by which fame and reputation are acquired in contemporary culture.

Since they tend to straddle the divide between the restricted and extended subfields of cultural production, celebrity authors are ambiguous figures. As cultural signifiers they often contain elements of the idea of the charismatic, uniquely inspired creative artist associated with the autonomization of the cultural field, but they also gain legitimacy from the notion of celebrity as supported by broad popularity and success in the marketplace. In fact, the ambivalence with which literary celebrities are often represented itself feeds into the conflicted ideologies of celebrity in general, drawing simultaneously as it does on aristocratic notions of fame as the setting apart of a natural elite and democratic-capitalist notions of fame as inclusive and meritocratic.²¹ Literary celebrities are also controversial and much-discussed figures in American cultural life because they have a contentiously intermediate position in relation to literary production as a whole. They have thus been at the centre of an ongoing debate – particularly between cultural producers in the restricted and extended subfields – about the relationship between literature and the market. A number of critics have already pointed to the historical significance of this struggle over cultural legitimation in the US between traditional highbrow standard-bearers who insist on the absolute separation of art and commerce, and proponents of popular and middlebrow culture who insist on their commensurability.²²

Although, as Ken Worpole has suggested, those who argue that the literary world has been overtaken by commercialism often suppose that this has been ‘a recent and regrettable phenomenon, evidence after all of the final collapse of cultural values in the face of relentless consumerism and the bitter exigencies of mass production’,²³ this debate has actually been going on ever since the emergence of literature as a commodity within capitalism. My emphasis in this book is primarily contemporary, but I also want to show that literary celebrity has a historical context in the United States which dates back to at least the middle of the nineteenth century. The dividing line between premodern ‘fame’ and mediatized ‘celebrity’ is, as Braudy has shown, by no means clear-cut – he traces the beginnings of ‘a modern international European fame culture’ as far back as the eighteenth century, when the development of a market culture allowed ambitious individuals to press themselves into the cultural void created by the decline of the traditional sources of power and influence – the church, the monarchy and the aristocracy. Before the eighteenth century, for example, the author’s aristocratic patron was perceived as the more likely candidate for fame as the subject of the author’s work, whilst the author was compensated with the favourable judgement of posterity, but with the emergence of the modern literary marketplace the author began to achieve an independent status and became a candidate for public esteem. Questioning

Boorstin's assumption that 'heroism and its expression can ever really be fully separated', Braudy suggests that fame has always been 'enhanced by and feed[s] upon the available means of reproducing the image'.²⁴ This historical grounding – examining the emergence of literary celebrity in the US in relation to the development of early forms of mass media in the nineteenth century – will help to provide a context to the contemporary debates and controversies which surround celebrity authors.

The Individualization of Authorship

In *Mythologies*, his classic deconstruction of the cultural artefacts of 1950s France, Roland Barthes uses a typical example of how writers are discussed in mainstream culture – the magazine or newspaper profile – to point to this complicated relationship between cultural authority and celebrity visibility in the representation of famous authors. Barthes highlights a common feature of these profiles (both in France and elsewhere), which is the attempt to show the author in prosaic circumstances, ostensibly to highlight his or her 'ordinariness'. He argues that in this convention the writer

concedes that he is endowed with a human existence, with an old country house, with relatives, with shorts, with a small daughter, etc.; but unlike the other workers, who change their essence, and on the beach are no longer anything but holiday-makers, the writer keeps his writer's nature everywhere. By having holidays, he displays the sign of his being human; but the god remains, one is a writer as Louis XIV was king, even on the commode. Thus the function of the man of letters is to human labour rather as ambrosia is to bread: a miraculous, eternal substance, which condescends to take a social form so that its prestigious difference is better grasped. All this prepares one for the same idea of the writer as superman, as a kind of intrinsically different being which society puts in the window so as to use to the best advantage the artificial singularity which it has granted him.²⁵

In one sense, this representation of authors is a typical example of the way in which stars in general are presented in contemporary culture, the ubiquity of celebrity creating what Gamson calls a 'pull between hierarchy and equality', celebrating stars as simultaneously extraordinary and familiar.²⁶ But there is no doubt that this tension is particularly apparent in the case of authors, the lives and work of whom are ransacked for their human interest at the same time as they are lauded for their difference and aloofness. This

paradox shows that literary celebrities cannot simply be reduced to their exchange value – they are complex cultural signifiers who are repositories for all kinds of meanings, the most significant of which is perhaps the nostalgia for some kind of transcendent, anti-economic, creative element in a secular, debased, commercialized culture. They thus reproduce a notion, popular since the Romantic era, of authors and their work as a kind of recuperated ‘other’, a haven for those creative values which an increasingly rationalistic, utilitarian society cannot otherwise accommodate.²⁷ In other words, the human impulses that cannot be expressed within the social and economic realities of a society transformed by capitalism are channelled into our representation of authors and artists, who perform the role of spiritually legitimizing society by virtue of their separateness from it.

It is important to unpack the process by which these cultural signifiers are created precisely because the whole logic of literary celebrity is based around mystifying and concealing it, by celebrating the author as an individual of superior talent or even genius, free of external determination – what Walter Benjamin calls

the overtaxing of the productive person in the name of ... the principle of ‘creativity’. This overtaxing is all the more dangerous because as it flatters the self-esteem of the productive person, it effectively guards the interests of a social order that is hostile to him.²⁸

In this sense the figure of the literary celebrity conforms to Marx’s definition of the fetishized commodity – it works actively to suppress the intricate network of social relations that has produced it. As Bourdieu puts it, this process of individualization ‘directs attention to the *apparent producer*, the painter, writer or composer, in short, the “author,” suppressing the question of what authorizes the author, what creates the authority with which authors authorize’. He suggests that this process is particularly prevalent within the fields of art and literature: ‘There are in fact few other areas in which the glorification of “great individuals,” unique creators irreducible to any condition or conditioning, is more common or uncontroversial’.²⁹ As Barthes has argued, however, it is also true of the celebrity system as a whole, which has a vested interest in disguising its own operations: ‘Through star-making society imposes a strong tension which permits the fan to consume stars without however dignifying the processes which produce them’.³⁰ I want to interrogate this ‘taken-for-granted’ nature of literary fame – the way in which it helps to naturalize the visibility and authority given to certain kinds of authors and texts. At the same time, as

I have suggested, the peculiar nature of literary celebrity has led to it being the source of perpetual controversy, which provides a useful starting point in any attempt to demystify this naturalized element. This book therefore aims to unravel the cultural meanings of literary celebrity primarily by exploring these debates around it.

The first part of the book examines literary celebrity in relation to three main frameworks: the historical relationship between literature and publicity in America, and attempts by commercial media to market the author as public personality; the contemporary literary star system and debates surrounding it; and theoretical and institutional perspectives on authorship. The second part of the book comprises chapters on the work and careers of four literary celebrities – John Updike, Philip Roth, Don DeLillo and Kathy Acker – which follow up on these issues and discuss how these authors position themselves and have been positioned in relation to their own fame. Celebrity seems to enforce self-reflexiveness: for those authors who experience it, it often becomes a constant preoccupation – they talk and write about it constantly, in both fictional and non-fictional forms, usually describing fame as a negative influence pervading their whole life and work. These authors have been chosen as extended examples because they have each dealt at length with the experience of literary celebrity in their work and in public statements, and because the different ways in which their celebrity has been constructed, including their own attempts to manage and control it, demonstrate the complexity and diversity of the phenomenon. Their work provides them with a unique opportunity to interrogate their feelings of unease about the machinery of celebrity – what Updike calls ‘the silken mechanism whereby America reduces her writers to imbecility and cozenage’.³¹

In fact, a central argument of this study is that authors actively negotiate their own celebrity rather than having it simply imposed on them. The book therefore necessarily entails combining cultural and historical contextualization, biographical material and textual analysis. By focusing on a subject which demands a study of the intersection between the textual and contextual aspects of American writing, it will argue for some degree of situated agency for authors, without reverting to an uninflected intentionalist stance which risks replicating the assumptions of celebrity itself. Finally, the conclusion points to some wider contexts to the cultural phenomena I have been examining, by considering other kinds of stardom associated with intellectual production, and literary celebrity beyond the US. The relevance of this latter development to a British readership lies in the pervasive global influence of contemporary American culture and its position at the leading edge of developments in the book industry,

mass media and marketplace culture as a whole. The increasing prominence of the mediagenic, high-profile author in the UK is certainly one of the more apt demonstrations of the fact that, in commercially oriented cultural production at least, 'America's present will be Britain's future'.³²

Part One

Cultural Contexts

2

Mark Twain Absurdity: Literature and Publicity in America

Although star authors are most commonly seen as the products of a media-fixerated, market-driven contemporary culture, there are interesting parallels to be drawn between literary celebrity and historical versions of fame, which also point to some of the broader conditions which make the US an especially significant site of celebrity authorship. This chapter therefore seeks to place literary celebrity within the context of the underlying connections between literature and the marketplace in America, and the broader development of a celebrity 'culture industry' from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. It begins by examining the ways in which mass media helped to individualize and promote the figure of the author in the nineteenth century; it then explores how this cult of authorship was continued in the twentieth century through the profiling of authors in massmarket magazines; and finally analyses the intense debates that this produced about the commodification of literature and culture which continue today.

The Emergence of a Star System

In America, traditional means by which writers could gain support and approval – such as aristocratic patronage – were never very strong. The individualization and professionalization of authorship in America from the early nineteenth century onwards thus coincided with the rise of literature as a commodity within a broader system of market exchange, and in particular authorship became entangled with a developing industry of advertising and publicity. A key event here was the emergence, from about 1850 onwards, of advertising as 'a radically new discursive practice ... a center of knowledge production, a determining economic site, as well as a