theories and methodologies

Dig It: Looking for Fame in All the Wrong Places

MARJORIE GARBER

Despite having names of Greek shepherds (Polystyrene, Polyvinyl, Polyethylene), plastic . . . is in essence the stuff of alchemy.

—Roland Barthes, "Plastic"

THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FOR NONFICTION WAS GIVEN IN 2010 TO PATTI SMITH FOR HER BOOK *JUST KIDS*. SINCE PATTI SMITH IS A rock star as well as a poet and "punk icon," her heartfelt remarks at the awards ceremony did more for the book business than any other tribute could have done. Smith told the assembled guests that as a young woman working at the Scribner Book Store, shelving books emblazoned with the National Book Award logo, she had dreamed of writing such a book herself. She concluded her acceptance speech with an impassioned defense of the printed book: "Please, no matter how we advance technologically, please never abandon the book. There is nothing in our material world more beautiful than the book" ("National Book Awards—2010").

Needless to say, this was gratifying. The judging panel for the nonfiction award, of which I was the chair, had communicated by phone and e-mail for months, reading and discussing almost five hundred books, and one of the things we had agreed on was that we were not going to be influenced by the "review attention" a book had received. In his book on literary prizes, James English notes that the National Book Awards mimic the Oscars in promulgating five finalists in each award category. Our five finalists were not the five most noticed books of the year but rather the five we admired the most. When we chose Patti Smith's book as the prizewinner, we felt satisfied that we had picked the best book we had read. But we could not have anticipated how effective it was to have a celebrity of this kind become a spokesperson for the importance of books.[1]

The judges were not seated together at the awards ceremony but were parceled out among the many tables reserved for authors, agents, and editors. When I returned to my seat after giving the statuette to Smith, I thought my evening was over. But to my consid-

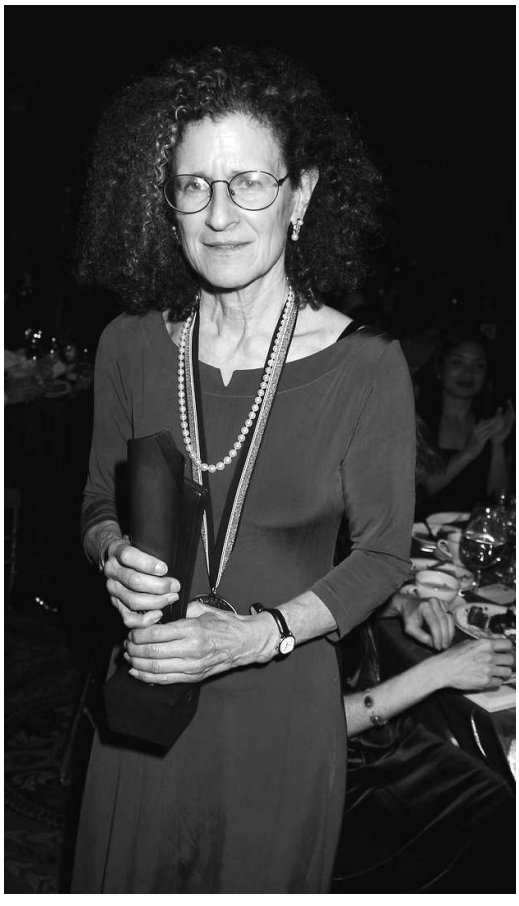
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erable delight, the fiction prize, the last and often most anticipated award, was given to the author at whose table I was sitting. And the fiction winner, Jaimy Gordon, was a surprise, chosen over a few more-famous writers. Her book, *Lord of Misrule*, was published by a tiny independent publisher based in Kingston, New York, which puts out no more than five or six books in a good year. I therefore had a front-row seat as this fine but virtually unheralded writer turned, visibly and in a matter of moments, into a luminary. In the days that followed, her new book was contracted to Random House, the prizewinning book was to come out in paper with Vintage, and she was sought after for interviews and photographs, including a big piece in the *New York Times*.

It's too simple to say that Patti Smith was a celebrity who became a writer and that Jaimy Gordon was a writer who became, at least for this moment, a literary celebrity. But something like that did take place before my eyes. The star was overwhelmed with memories of her early bookshop dreams, and she spoke through her tears. The little-known author, previously appreciated by a loyal but limited readership, claimed her prize and her place in publishing history, all at once.



Jaimy Gordon, National Book Awards 2010. Photo: Robin Platzer / Twin Images.



Patti Smith, National Book Awards 2010. Photo: Robin Platzer / Twin Images.

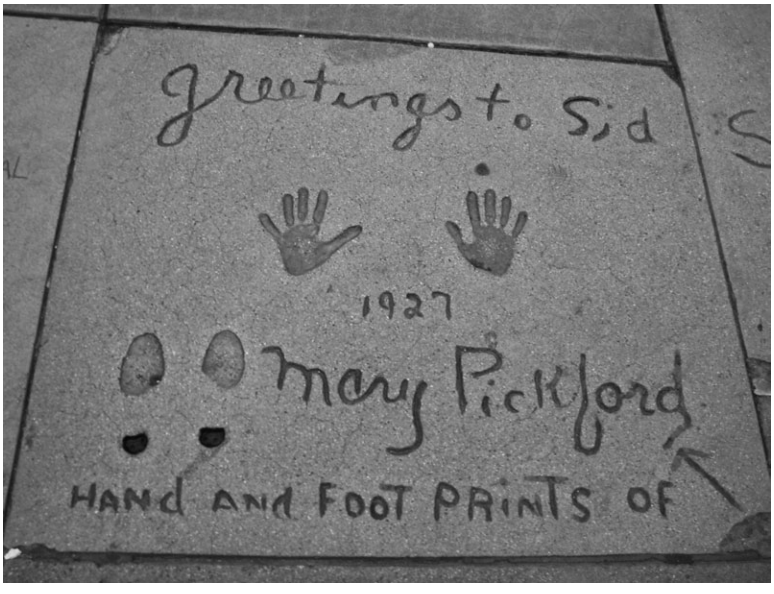
Writers can become celebrities, but usually not for the quality of their writing. John Grisham and Danielle Steele are celebrities; John Ashbery and John Updike are, more properly, renowned or maybe even celebrated. (I choose them because each is given an appendix in James English's book on prizes, with the long list of awards they have won [334–45].) But if Norman Mailer became a celebrity, as he did, it was not, strictly speaking, because of the books he wrote but because of his life and how he conducted it, which won

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him notoriety. Ditto Truman Capote, and perhaps even Susan Sontag.

In the nineteenth century, before the advent of film, radio, television, the Internet, and so on, authors could indeed be celebrities. We can all name them: figures like Byron, Alcott, Emerson, Stowe, Twain, Dickens, Wilde. But if you type "Wilde Celebrity" into your browser today you get a dozen listings for the actress Olivia Wilde (who did, in fact, choose her stage name in homage to Oscar Wilde, and who is, among other things, PETA's pick for sexiest vegetarian celebrity of 2010). "Emerson Celebrity" produces either Michael Emerson of the TV show *Lost* or Celebrity Nails and Spa, in Emerson, New Jersey—take your pick. Fame is fleeting.

When *Fame* is the title of a musical, *Notorious* the stage name of a rapper, and *Celebrity* the name of a cruise line (or a hair salon) we have moved into territory where these terms of approbation and rebuke have become brands. The words themselves, rather than anything or anyone they might designate, have become—to employ a recent coinage—*famesque* (Argetsinger).



Mary Pickford, hand- and footprints, Grauman's Chinese Theatre. Photo: Meredith Peruzzi (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/2.0/deed.en).



Roy Rogers and Trigger, hand-, foot-, and hoofprints, Grauman's Chinese Theatre. Photo: Loren Javier (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/2.0/deed.en).

How lasting is this kind of celebrity? Imagine that you are a cultural investigator of the twenty-second century and that you are doing a little fieldwork in the Los Angeles area. Your excavations turn up, in the vicinity of what your GPS map tells you is something called a "Chinese Theater," a surprising number of hand- and footprints, and indeed some hoofprints and tire tracks, each enclosed in a concrete rectangle. Looking closer, you see that each rectangle contains a name or names and a date. The earliest names you find are those of Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks,

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and Norma Talmadge. Those dated 2010 include Jerry Bruckheimer and a mysterious individual who might be a Frenchman, since he signs his name with the single word "Cher." Hoofprints appear next to the names of Tom Mix, Gene Autry, and Roy Rogers. (Can they have been centaurs?) Cigars mark the concrete squares of George Burns and Groucho Marx, nose prints the squares of Jimmy Durante and Bob Hope. Nothing about these names or prints strikes you as especially Chinese.

You move on to a stretch of disused roadway that seems to have been a kind of promenade or performance space. The area in question, on what your map tells you was once Hollywood Boulevard and Vine Street, is lined with coral-pink terrazzo five-pointed stars, rimmed with brass and set into a charcoal-colored terrazzo background. (Compared with the hand- and footprints, these clearly show an increase in artisan skill and wealth on the part of the indigenous society, and our cultural investigator of the future might well conclude that they date from a later stage of Hollywood civilization.) Your map indicates that the area was once called the Walk of Fame.

Five different brass emblems differentiate what appear to be ancient entertainment categories: a classic film camera, a television set with rabbit ears, a phonograph record, a radio microphone, and a pair of comedy and tragedy masks. Some figures represented or commemorated by inlaid stars seem to belong to categories or species unfamiliar to you: Mickey Mouse, Tinker Bell, Snow White, Winnie-the-Pooh (here your taxonomy temporarily fails you: what is a "pooh"?), Lassie (perhaps a famous Scotswoman?), Rin Tin Tin (a musician?), and Kermit the Frog. There is also a single star honoring a collective set called "the Munchkins," a term familiar to you from Dunkin Donuts, but since there seems to be no entertainment category for food types this may be a regional usage whose meaning is lost. A special group of images



The Beatles' star, Hollywood Walk of Fame. Photo: Christian Haugen (creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en).



Kermit the Frog's star, Hollywood Walk of Fame. Photo: Jean Karaschewski (creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en).

commemorates an event designated as the Apollo 11 moon landing, so that among all these images of stars you find, as well, images of four identical circular moons.

Of course, your fieldwork is not limited to Los Angeles. You also find across the United States, in a bewildering range of buildings called "halls of fame," relics as various as football jerseys, torn basketball nets, and, in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, the houndstooth hat of someone or something (a totem animal?) called Bear Bryant. (Another sport seems to have had a tiger totem and been sacred to the goddess Nike, but traces of that totem disappear, abruptly, without explanation, in the early years of the twenty-first century.) "Hall of fame," it seems, is an indigenous American usage, even though the architectural iconography of these structures tends to evoke, in a generalized way, ancient Greece or (more often) ancient Rome. The original hall,

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the Hall of Fame for Great Americans, was founded in 1901 and by the 1970s still existed within a ruined colonnade in the Bronx, New York, but the hall itself, a vestige of its former self, lacked funds needed to commission the bronze busts of its honorands.

Although in its day the Hall of Fame for Great Americans was more prestigious than the Nobel Prize, and groups like the American Bar Association and the Daughters of the American Revolution lobbied to get their candidates elected, it became a largely forgotten and neglected relic. Its place in America's heart, mind, and pocketbook was taken by dozens of other halls of fame, many commemorating sports or music heroes (baseball, football, basketball, bluegrass, rock and roll). Not to mention (but of course you will wish to do so in your research report) the Insurance Hall of Fame, the Burlesque Hall of Fame, the Cowboy Hall of Fame, and the Robot Hall of Fame. Clearly there was a market for them.

As you contemplate this treasure trove of archaeological information, you cannot help being struck by how much the civilization you are investigating appears to be focused on celestial objects, gods and goddesses, and totem signs. The discovery of a category called "American idols" provides an especially rich area for the comparative study of religion. So-called star maps, found in excavated ancient trash barrels, seem to have guided twentieth- and twenty-first-century pilgrims to the homes of movie stars. It will be part of your research to discover who or what these beings were and what was their relation to other clans, tribes, or castes of similarly named figures, all seemingly connected to the heavens or to mythological figures of the past: rock stars and superstars, luminaries and idols, glamazons and celebutantes. These last two, examples of the hybrid nature of celebrity in action, appear particularly Ovidian.

You trace the dates when some of these terms became current in twentieth-century



Hall of Fame for Great Americans, Bronx, New York. Photo: Wally Gobetz (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/deed.en).

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usage. *Superstar*, an outstanding performer in theater, music, sport, and so on, dated from as early as 1925 ("cinema super-stars") and 1936 ("super-star jockey"); *supermodel* from 1977 (Margaux Hemingway); *superhero* from 1980; *rock star*, as a general term of praise (rock star financiers, rock star physicists), from the last quarter of the century. *Celebutante* can be found as early as 1939 (Brenda Frazier), though the word came into its own with Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie.

Our description of a fantasy cultural investigation of the future has not to this point specified what kind of a researcher might pursue these clues about celebrity. If the investigator is a sociologist or a cultural anthropologist, he or she might be especially interested in the underlying causes of celebrity, from an economic or a social point of view. If the investigator is a specialist in communications, the question of technology (print, broadcast, Internet, etc.) might be foremost in his or her mind. In any case, these would be "material culture" investigations, looking at the institutional substrate, the historical and political machinations, that produced celebrity and celebrities.

But what would be a literary way of approaching this question, distinct from a sociological or economic or historical approach? I want to suggest that such an approach would begin by taking the language of celebrity, notoriety, and fame seriously on its own terms. By looking *at*—rather than *through* or *past*—the rhetoric and imagery and metaphors that have animated this phenomenon. By contemplating a cultural field that has stars, gods, idols, and icons and recognizing that we are dealing with a full-blown mythographic system.

Just as titles like Duke, King, Queen, Prince, and Princess have increasingly been applied to entertainment celebrities, becoming in the process something less like a metaphor and more like an alternative system of royalty, so the language of stars indicates an aspirational belief system, midway between religion and hero worship. But the royal and noble monickers applied to celebrities were



Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, Cleveland, Ohio. Photo: Natalie Boyne (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/2.0/deed.en).

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never hierarchically precise. Would the musician known as Prince (full name, Prince Rogers Nelson) outrank John Wayne (Marion Michael Morrison, known as Duke)? Is there an adequation between Aretha Franklin, the Queen of Soul, and Elvis Presley, the King of Rock 'n' Roll? How about the performer Lady Gaga and the country music group Lady Antebellum? Clearly these are moves in the direction of a cultural peerage, but they seem inchoate rather than legible, or accidental rather than essential, in the technical sense in which those terms are used in logic or textual criticism.

In contrast to this loose, nonsystematic penchant for borrowing titles and ranks, celebrity and notoriety have, in fact, evolved into a functional mythographic system, an assemblage of myths forming a complex unity. The myths are those of a particular society—call it modern, or postmodern, culture; in this case the two are the same. Like all myths, these variously explain, allegorize, narrate, and historicize. They are patterns of social credence and social desire.

For all that we hear and see about a revival of interest in traditional religion, some believers require—*instead* or *as well*—a set of myths based on local experience and sightings. Such belief structures need not conflict with or rival what we sometimes call "organized religion," and they may even build on it in various ways, from adaptation (the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*) to bricolage (the iconography of Madonna). Gods made flesh walk among us, and their names are symptomatic: Leonardo, Angelina. The word *celebrity* derives from a term for "thronged," not, as we might suppose, from religious "celebration," which is the result, not the cause, of the celebrious event. The presence of a throng (actual or virtual) is the only precondition: celebrity is, in a sense, a back-formation from the capacity to attract a crowd.

The hierarchy of Hollywood, old and new, depends on commonly understood rankings: superstar, star, starlet; A-list, B-list, C-list, Z-list. The Ulmer scale, founded by the film industry writer and editor James Ulmer (the author of *James Ulmer's Hot List: The Complete Guide to Star Ranking*) measures the global value of stars according to qualities like bankability, career management, professionalism, promotion, risk factors, and—last but not least—acting talent. The term *A-list*, coined to assist power brokers and financiers in the canny casting, funding, and production of motion pictures, has by now migrated across a wider field of celebrity and notoriety.

The Oxford English Dictionary dates *A-list* in this sense to one usage in the 1930s ("an A and B list of débutantes and stag lines"), but most examples come from the 1970s and later, and those who seek a definition of *A-list* are helpfully told to compare this one with entries for *B-list*, *C-list*, *D-list*, and *Z-list* (A: "the most celebrated, sought-after, or high-ranking individuals, esp. in the entertainment industry or the media; a social, professional, or celebrity elite"; B: "moderately celebrated, sought-after," etc., "a prominent but not elite social, professional, or celebrity group"; C: "relatively unimportant members of a particular group," "minor or formerly prominent celebrities or socialites"; and finally Z: "the very least important individuals, esp. in the film industry; esp. used to emphasize extreme insignificance"). The dictionary's double use of the abbreviation *esp.* (for *especially*) in its definition of Z-listers seems particularly—or *especially*—pointed. Nowhere is extreme insignificance more, well, insignificant, than in the film industry. The possibility of migrating up (or cascading downward) in this alphabetical cosmology is the constant hope (or constant fear) of participants, as well as the constant entertainment and speculation of columnists, agents, and publicists. But what is more important for our present concern is that these terms have now become general. *Rock star* is a common term for a celebrity in virtually any

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sphere of activity. "In the world of physics," declared *Wired* magazine, "Richard Feynman was a rock star."[2]

A-list, B-list, C-list. In fact, though celebrity may look to some historical or sociological observers like a business or a commodity or an ideology, in literary terms it is a mythology and a reading practice. The narratives of celebrity tell transformative stories. Like the moralized Ovid of the medieval period or the mythography of the Renaissance or the dying and reviving gods of James George Frazer's *Golden Bough*, the elaborate panoply of superstars that confronts us daily on pages of boldface names and in magazines called *Self*, *Us*, and *People* is a reminder of the quest for a new belief structure, a euhemerist vision of humans who can be transmogrified into gods.

There's perhaps no better, or more readable, short account of this process than Roland Barthes's essay "The Writer on Holiday," in his collection *Mythologies*. This brief and brilliant piece has the double advantage of being a literary analysis as well as a portrait of literary celebrity. The topic is a human interest story about a writer, shown off-duty, on vacation, wearing blue pajamas, and eating Reblochon cheese. Although the ostensible point of the article is that such a writer is human like the rest of us, "the balance of the operation," Barthes notes,

> is that the writer becomes still more charismatic, leaves this earth a little more for a celestial habitat where his pyjamas and his cheeses in no way prevent him from resuming the use of his noble demiurgic speech.
>
> To endow the writer publicly with a good fleshly body, to reveal that he likes dry white wine and underdone steak, is to make even more miraculous for me, and of a more divine essence, the products of his art. Far from the details of his daily life bringing nearer to me the nature of his inspiration and making it clearer, it is the whole mythical singularity of his condition which the writer emphasizes by such confidences. (31)

"Celestial habitat," "demiurgic speech," "divine essence," "mythical singularity"—these are the star qualities that are, paradoxically, ensured by the artful disclosure of human frailty. Or, as another celebrated late-century commentator on celebrity, George Michael, remarked, "It's not that there's something extra that makes a superstar. It's that there's something missing."[3]

The gods of Olympus were powerful and flawed: jealous, ambitious, licentious, promiscuous, quick to take offense and to take revenge. Whatever they did, they were always good copy. If this reminds us of celebrity tabloids, we should not be surprised. Gods who exhibit human vulnerabilities often make for stories as compelling as those of humans who aspire to emulate the seeming perfection of the gods. The "something missing" that makes a superstar is not a negative but a positive, an opportunity for identification and connection. What such luminaries lack, what they need, what the audience—the throng—can give them, demonstrates both their godhead and their paradoxical humanity. When Patti Smith wept at the National Book Awards, accepting the prize for a book called *Just Kids*, her memories were of a teenage girl who longed to be a writer—but her tears were the tears of a star.

Notes

1. Newspapers and other media outlets across the country highlighted Smith's remarks about the fate of the book, mentioning her experience as a salesperson at Scribner and her eloquent defense of printed books as "beautiful" and crucially important. See, e.g., Aswad; Bosman; Deluca; Halford; Italie; Kellogg; Minzesheimer; O'Grady. The *New Yorker* commented, "One of the things that's so nice about Smith winning a *national* book award is that it reminds us that we have been, at times, a nation in which books are a major part of the broader cultural conversation, and not carefully kept separate from what qualifies as 'pop' or 'mainstream'" (Halford).

2. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "rock star," def. 2.

3. I am indebted to Nancy Vickers for this reference.

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