

# Sex, Soap and Sainthood: Beginning to Theorise Literary Celebrity

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For over two weeks now my newspaper (broadsheet, Fairfax-owned) has been carrying daily instalments of the latest sex scandal surrounding soccer super-star David Beckham: revelations of affairs with a former employee as well as with an Australian model; the reaction of his almost equally famous wife, Victoria (formerly “Posh” Spice); the views of a great many “close” associates of the various parties and speculations by celebrity-watchers. One day, however, the Beckham spot is given over to another story: “Rushdie Takes Bride No. 4 in Hindi Wedding” reads the title. The main point of interest in the story is the rumour that the actress bride, Padma Lakshmi, would defy Hindi tradition by wearing a white sari, rumours which turned out to be unfounded: “the girl from south India bowed to 5000 years of tradition and dressed in dazzling purple” (*The Age*). There is a photo of the couple, both dressed in cream, and a mention of their age difference (25 years). The Rushdie affair is mentioned in a humorous aside: “At one point, Rushdie knelt—a posture that even the late Ayatollah Khomeini was unable to achieve with his 1989 fatwa after the publication of *The Satanic Verses*” (*The Age*).

Apart from a rather more conservative hairstyle there is not much, it would seem, to distinguish the literary from the sport celebrity: the focus is on the glamorous wife, clothing, and on other marital or extra-marital sexual exploits. Rushdie’s literary career only gets a brief mention when he is identified as the “56-year-old Booker prize-winning groom,” but then, David Beckham’s exploits on the soccer field rarely figure in these stories either. The conclusions one might draw—and the conclusions generally drawn—from such stories are: first, that celebrity culture now has become so ubiquitous that it has invaded those parts of the public sphere normally concerned with matters of a higher cultural order (many traditional readers of *The Age* were outraged at the “tabloidisation” of the

paper, particularly after the Beckham story on one occasion made the first page); secondly, that once someone has reached celebrity status, they are famous simply for being famous and their professional achievements are eclipsed by the usual topics of celebrity gossip: personal appearance, lifestyle, sexual and family relations and, of course, anything that can be construed as a scandal.

In this essay I want to question, and complicate, such seemingly obvious conclusions through a closer examination of literary celebrity, or rather, of some of the public uses to which both living and dead authors are put. I want to argue, as several theorists have done already (see for example Frow, Turner and Rojek), that celebrity itself is a more complex and multi-faceted phenomenon than generally assumed, and that literary fame is a function of a number of different discourses, both literary and non-literary, and serves a number of different purposes which by no means can be simply reduced to satisfying our apparently insatiable appetite for gossip. In order to do so, I first want to offer a series of illustrations, gathered from personal experience as well as published sources, of the kinds of uses to which writers are put and the different meanings they are made to carry in contemporary public culture.

## 1

First, another Rushdie story. Previewing the highlights of the 1998 Adelaide Writers' Week, in an article tittilatingly entitled "Literary Catfights," Jane Sullivan in *The Age* ponders what might happen when Robyn Davidson and Marianne Wiggins meet. Literary accomplishment is eclipsed to make room for speculations about sexual rivalry:

Wouldn't you love to be a fly on the wall of the tent when two of the most important women in Salman Rushdie's life get together in Adelaide next week? Will they want to tear each other's eyes out, exchange polite nods, cry together at his terrible fate or swap bitter-sweet memories of the bastard ex?

And she goes on:

No doubt the audiences at Writers' Week will be at least as interested in the Rushdie connection and what the two women make of each other as in their books. Like it or not, writers' festivals fascinate readers because they might catch a glimpse of their heroes as real people who don't just sit quietly writing. They might fight, fall in love, hit the bottle, or do delightful, horrible and outrageous things. (Sullivan)

## 2

At Adelaide Writers' Week in 1994, at the end of a book launch session, a member of the audience stood up and asked the writer, Rosie Scott, to "tell us about yourself." There was an embarrassed silence and Scott finally asked what she wanted to know. The woman hesitated, and finally blurted out: "Tell us what we want to know." I am not quite sure what her ungrammatical request really meant: "Tell us that which we want to know" or "Tell us what it is we want to know." In either case, I am amazed by the power bestowed on the author by this seemingly innocent question. What is the nature, what are the limits, of the author's knowledge? Is she the custodian of meaning, not just that of texts, not just of her own life, but *our* meaning as well? Can she unlock the mystery of our lives?

## 3

In Adelaide for the 2004 Writers' Week, Jeanette Winterson entertained her audience with a spirited defence of poetry, at the same time mocking the tendency to fetishise writing and authors, treating them as the spiritual equivalent of fast food or quick-fix solutions to all the ills of the modern world. Poetry, she said, becomes "a spiritual wonderbra" and she herself had frequently been made to feel like "a home-help encyclopedia." "You can't put yourself on a spiritual Atkins diet!" she warned, demonstrating, however, with her witty metaphors and well-honed performance (learnt, she admitted, during her early training as a fundamentalist evangelist), that it is possible for the author to have it both ways: to court the audience's veneration and to mock it too.

## 4

"Sex and the single girl. A novel where fact meets fiction," announces the cover of *Good Weekend* on 17 April 2004. The article it advertises ("Girl's own story") is an author profile of Sophie Cunningham published to coincide with the launch of her first novel, *Geography* (Hawley). The article focuses on the author's earlier career as a high-profile publisher, her numerous sexual adventures and recent sexual reorientation, her three "fathers" and the "autobiographical urge" which, according to Cunningham, besets all first-time novelists. It concludes with Di Gribble, one of Cunningham's mentors, chuckling at the prospect of her novel, like Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip*, becoming the subject of intense autobiographical speculation of the "who's who" kind. Interestingly, Cunningham has herself recently commented on how difficult it is to market first novels in an increasingly

competitive market (Cunningham 112). In her own case the marketing has, it would seem, been carefully targeted for maximum effect.

5

The shift in focus from texts to authors which typically characterises the festival scene is captured in this advertisement for the 2000 Melbourne Writers' Festival 2000:

You've read their words.  
Now read their minds.

**FREE FESTIVAL PROGRAM IN  
THE AGE SATURDAY 22 JULY.**

For a unique insight into how your favourite authors think, don't miss The Age Melbourne Writers' Festival. And for a taste of what's to come, make sure you get the official Festival Program - yours free in The Age on Saturday 22 July. The Festival's a rare chance to rub shoulders with 180 leading authors.

**THE AGE WRITERS' FESTIVAL** Meet luminaries like Zadie Smith, Roberta Sykes, and Robert Drewe. And chat with hundreds of like-minded literary devotees.

**THE AGE** At the CUB Malthouse, August 25 to September 3. *Seize the day.*

The price of every ticket includes a copy of The Age.

## 6

Public literary culture frequently makes a point of distancing itself from academic literary criticism and theory. In a session entitled “Whose literature is it anyway” at the Hay-on-Wye festival in 1996 the notoriously cantankerous writer V. S. Naipaul received huge applause for the following statement: “Literature should be read by people privately. English should be abandoned as a silly course, and all the professors should be put out of a job.”

## 7

For the would-be celebrity, as John Frow has argued (“Is Elvis a God?” 204), death can be an excellent career move. Distinguished primarily by their tendency to be more cooperative, dead writers serve functions not fundamentally different from those of their living counterparts.

A promotional bookmark for the “Literature Comes to Life Tours,” a Melbourne-based company which organizes guided tours to literary sites in England and Ireland reads: “You’ll be amazed [. . .] at what a tour like this can do for your life.” And what it “can do” is not merely offer an educational, or even spiritual experience, but a physical, sensual one as well:

“Listen for the nightingales in John Keats’ garden”

“Run your fingers over the polished oak of Jane Austen’s writing table”

“Feel the heritage under your feet”

The literary “experience,” it would seem, can somehow be transmitted from the physical surroundings of the dead writer to the live body of the tourist. Similarly, literary “pub crawls,” which are hugely popular in cities like London and Dublin, seem to rely on the capacity of brews like bitter, Guinness or whisky to provide participants, through bodily transformation, with literary inspiration similar to that of their cultural heroes.

## 8

I witnessed a telling illustration of what it is like to “feel literary heritage under your feet” when visiting Poets’ Corner in Westminster Abbey. A fellow tourist discovered that she was, inadvertently, standing on the grave of Charles Dickens. “Oh, my God,” she exclaimed, and jumped off, only to find herself weighing down the remains of Rudyard Kipling. “Oh, my God,” she said, again, and finally came to rest on an unmarked stone, much shaken by the experience.

And I am reminded of the even more gruesome story of what happened to

Thomas Hardy's remains. Hardy had made public his dislike of Westminster Abbey and his wish to be buried in his family graveyard in Stinsford, outside Dorchester. However, on his death in 1928 his body was nevertheless buried, with much ceremony, in the Abbey. His heart, however, was removed and transported to Stinsford for a separate burial. A delicious, but possibly apocryphal tale has it that while the heart of Hardy was awaiting burial, a dog managed to open the biscuit tin in which it had been placed, and ate it. The Stinsford grave thus contains nothing but an empty biscuit tin! The tale says nothing of what happened to the dog. The discourse of literary tourism, like literary discourse in general, is of course most reluctant to let fact get in the way of a good story.

9

The more serious tourist guides to Stratford-upon-Avon stress that their sites and stories are only "traditionally" associated with its most famous son. Even so, I found that tour leaders taking their groups through "The Birthplace" tended to lower their voices as they approached the "Birth Room," encouraging their charges to worship in silence at what Henry James in his story "The Birthplace" ironically refers to as "the Mecca of the English-speaking race." In reality Stratford can best be described as a Shakespeare theme park, a cheerful mish-mash of biography, myth and heritage industry.

10

In Dorchester, there are several public tributes to Thomas Hardy (statue, plaques, museum displays), but also a plaque identifying the house where the Mayor of Casterbridge lived.

When I visited Jane Austen's home in Chawton in 1996, the television production of *Pride and Prejudice* had recently screened and "Darcy-mania" was rampant. A portrait of Colin Firth's brooding Darcy was placed next to the only known sketch of the author in her drawing-room.

11

In late 2000, I embarked on a brief tour of literary sites in New England with some trepidation, wondering what would be made of them in the land of the theme park. I was pleasantly surprised. Literary houses, graves and museums were generally well preserved and presented, staff were surprisingly well informed and

the souvenir shops discreet. Moreover, my pilgrimage to selected authors' graves revealed examples of a "use" of dead authors I had not previously encountered. Emily Dickinson's grave in Amherst was covered by the first snow of the winter, and quite difficult to find. On the grave I found a note, in a rather childish hand, reading "Great poetry," followed by four exclamation marks and signed. It was written in purple texta which was starting to run in the snow.

In beautiful Concord I sought out the graves of its many famous writers, Hawthorne, the Alcotts, Emerson and Thoreau, in the appropriately named Sleepy Hollow cemetery. Someone had left a longer note on the grave of Thoreau. "Dear Henry," it started. The young female writer wrote about herself as well as him. She admired him and unlike his blinkered contemporaries truly understood his unorthodox ideas and lifestyle. He was her hero. She signed "with love," but added that she loved her boyfriend as well. She added a few xx's and for good measure a drawing of a pumpkin (it was the week before Halloween).

In Australia, for reasons undoubtedly related to the size of the literary market and the short history of the national literature, writers on the whole enjoy a relatively modest variety of fame. With a few notable (and mostly expatriate) exceptions, Australian writers certainly experience little of the glamour and fortune associated with literary stardom. One might argue that globalisation of the literary marketplace if anything diminishes their status: overseas celebrity writers get star billing in bookshop displays and festival programs, the locals reduced to the role of warm-up or support artists. But even if theirs is fame of a pale (and fifteen-minute) variety, it is nevertheless produced according to practices modelled on popular culture and assimilated by publishers, publicists, agents, the media, festival organisers and the tourism industry (see Turner et al.), differing in intensity rather than kind from that bestowed on the most luminous stars on the international horizon. This is not to say that there are no national differences. One might, for example, point to the near explosive growth of literary festivals in Australia, and to the relative paucity, in this country, of media attention to writers and their work, at least when compared to mainstream overseas events such as Oprah Winfrey's book show. Literary tourism is also under-developed—no doubt as a result of the stubborn refusal by most Australian writers to live in stately homes or quaint cottages—though growing, as indicated by the recent decision by the NSW government to finance the restoration of Henry Lawson's grave. As I will argue, however, literary fame is of a heterogeneous rather than uniform nature; its different manifestations may bring out particular characteristics, but others remain as discursive possibilities which can be produced through shifts in attention, focus or context.

Celebrity, or rather, the processes of celebrification, are curiously circular in nature, making it hard to distinguish cause from effect. Once famous, or imbri-

cated in the discourse of celebrity, writers are subjected to (or subject themselves to—they're not all innocent bystanders) practices, meanings and manipulations acted out in public culture and illustrated in the examples above. These practices, by no means homogenous or even coherent, typically include features such as: a preference for personality over writing; a tendency to confuse art and life, and to see writers as seamless extensions of their texts; an intense investment in the body of the writer, in their sexual exploits and preferences and in the details of their daily lives; a desire to recreate the writer as national icon or as representative or spokesperson for particular cultural groups; an emphasis on performance, whether that of writers themselves or others on their behalf; a willingness to elevate the writer to the position of spiritual guru, but also to see her or him as the most intimate companion: kindred spirit, best friend, confidant. Produced as object of desire, the writer becomes the projection of a hunger that is variously sexual, social and spiritual, a repository for values that are able to be at the same time crassly commercial, loftily aesthetic and anti-materialist. It is within these contradictions that we need to locate not only the celebrity writer, but important aspects of the function of literature itself in contemporary public culture.

High culture today, as John Frow has argued, must be regarded as “a *pocket* within commodity culture” (*Cultural Studies, Cultural Value* 86), but it is a pocket within which commodity culture itself is the cause of a great deal of anxiety. The increasing commodification of books and authors is frequently evoked as signs of the “dumbing down” of serious art, its contamination by popular culture, its “selling out” of high-minded pursuits for the sake of entertainment and material gain. In *Star Authors*, an examination of literary celebrity in America, Joe Moran cites examples of anxious academic criticism according to which “the turning of contemporary authors into public curiosities serves them up as part of the meaningless ephemera of consumerism” (3). Such complaints, Moran notes, “tap into general anxieties in postmodern mediatized 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” (3). It is an anxiety based on the myth of a putative golden age in which such boundaries were absolute and could not be breached. However, as Moran goes on to argue, such a narrative can be challenged from two perspectives: first, by a more complex and sympathetic reading of the phenomenon of celebrity in popular culture, and secondly, by a recognition that literary celebrity:

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. (4)

Anxiety over the commodification of literature, while certainly intensified in recent years, is not exclusive to the postmodern age. In “Literature as Regime,” John Frow argues that it may be fundamental to the way literature is produced as a cultural category. Examining Balzac’s *Lost Illusions*, “the first major European text to explore in a detailed and systematic way the commodity production of books” (143), he observes the tension between “two contradictory structures of value,” the high-minded, apparently autonomous literary realm and “the corrupt world of journalism and the book trade to which it nevertheless belongs” (143). “The ‘literature’ that emerges from this play of forces and values,” he writes:

is neither the transcendent stuff of poetry and the ‘high’ historical novel, nor the mere corruption of journalism, but a writing which is torn between the two and whose defining character is its status, and its dissatisfaction with its status, as a thing to be bought and sold.  
(144)

Writers, like their textual products, find themselves involved in the competing economies of “crass commercialism” and “high art,” produced as celebrities according to both popular and high culture models, even when these models exist in a seemingly paradoxical relation to one another. What Bourdieu calls the “charismatic illusion” of high cultural capital can only be produced in opposition to other kinds of celebrity, by concealing the workings of the literary marketplace (see Moran 4–5). In this sense, writes Moran, “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” (9). It thus becomes possible for public literary culture to adopt a rhetoric of authenticity and artistic autonomy (to function, as Michael Meehan argues, as “deindustrialisation rituals”) at the same time as this culture itself stands accused of partaking in the postmodern fabrication of surfaces, simulacra and commodities, precisely the kind of effects high art culture professes to despise.

Caught between the competing regimes which inform the literary enterprise, writers are variously produced according to (John Frow’s formulation again) “the aesthetics of the signature” and “the aesthetics of the brand” (“Signature and Brand” 56). The aesthetics of the signature, with its attendant notions of origin, authenticity, ownership and copyright, depends for its effect on the concept of the unique creator, and so on romantic ideas of authorship; the aesthetics of the brand functions more like a trade mark or corporate signature, associated with advertising and product differentiation; both are part of consumer culture, bound

up with processes of commodification. Moreover, as Frow observes, a convergence between the two (“the mass-marketing of high-cultural rarity and the aestheticization (rarefication) of certain forms of popular or commercial culture” (70)) is currently under way, with the effect “that it is no longer possible in good faith to oppose an ‘authentic’ aesthetic of the signature to a ‘commercialized’ aesthetics of the brand” (71). Celebrity writers are “branded” in ways not incommensurate with the marketing of consumer goods at the same time as branded consumer items are “personalised” to produce a “signature effect.” Within these regimes of value, aesthetic and economic, literary celebrity functions as both the product of desire and a mechanism for generating desire, the different manifestations of celebrity observed above responding to the kinds of desire evoked by the different codes (social, aesthetic, economic, textual) which come into play in the production of “the literary” as a cultural category.

“Celebrity culture,” writes Chris Rojek, “is one of the most important mechanisms for mobilising abstract desire” (189). By “abstract” he means that the desire is subconscious (196); it is also desire as produced by the economic logic of capitalism which requires its constant renewal. Celebrities, he argues, “*humanize* desire,” a process which “allows for deeper levels of attachment and identification than with inanimate commodities” (189). He also comments on the *diffuse* nature of abstract desire, its capacity to produce emotional, sexual, spiritual and existential identification with the celebrity (197). In the case of literary celebrity, I would argue, this diffuse desire manifests as desire for both possession and identification (wanting to *have* the author as well as *be* the author), desire to humanise the rather abstract nature of the literary experience and desire to overcome a sense of cultural alienation through recourse to romantic concepts of artistic creation as antidote to the ills of the modern world.

The religious, or quasi-religious nature of celebrity culture is a topic of frequent debate, and, according to Frow, the cause of much banal and clichéd, but untheorised comparison between systems of religious worship and fan culture: “there is nothing that has not already been said a thousand times about the cultic aspects of stardom” (“Is Elvis a God?” 199). Chris Rojek argues that while the cult of celebrity echoes religious practices, the convergence is not complete: “Celebrity culture is no substitute for religion. Rather, it is the milieu in which religious recognition and belonging are now enacted” (97). Frow himself, while denouncing what he calls the “full-blown clichés about the role of apotheosis and the cult of the dead and immortal god in popular culture” (199), nevertheless goes on to propose that “the form of apotheosis associated with the modern star system is a phenomenon of a strictly religious order” (201). What makes his analysis particularly interesting, and pertinent to the understanding of literary celebrity, is his insistence that this apotheosis must be read in terms of an economy of representation, the “presence,” or “authenticity” of the idol a function of re-

cordings, copying, doubles. He quotes McKenzie Wark: “the time came when Elvis himself became a mere corporeal appendage to so great a body of recording” (204). The celebrity, in Frow’s construction, is always already dead, and always already immortal: the live star has a “ghostly” rival produced through processes of representation, but experienced as more real, more authentic, unchanging, a compelling presence of whom the incorporated celebrity is a pale copy. It thus becomes possible to read the embodied author similarly as a corporeal appendage to the particular systems of representation, both literary and non-literary, which produce the “real” author as a figure who, in Frow’s words, “transcends and transfigures whatever it is we think of as ordinary life” (206). Or, to put it differently, it becomes possible to return the celebrity author to her/his origin in the word.

The purpose of this paper is to name, rather than explore in detail, some of the systems of representation through which authors are “textualised” and produced as celebrities: the discourses of popular culture; systems of social and cultural distinction; processes of commodification and product differentiation in consumer culture; mechanism of desire; religious or post-religious modes of worship. I want to conclude by speculating on the specifically *literary* modes of representation which, in spite of considerable competition, remain crucial to the fabrication of writerly fame in public culture. The literary discourses favoured in the media and in public literary events are not those of the literary academy, in fact they are frequently anti-academic, and particularly hostile to theoretical modes of literary enquiry (see Turner, “Australian Literature and the Public Sphere”). They are conversational rather than analytical, intimate and personal rather than intellectual, and when political, tend to regard politics as the site of individual and emotional preferences rather than as a function of the public domain. They are also practical, treating literature as craft rather than text, process rather than product. Textualised according to these regimes of literary representation, the author becomes a figure of highly personalised identification and projection, and at the same time an embodiment of ideologies of individualism and master technician. Moreover, the boundary between the personal and the professional evaporates: the one becomes the extension of the other.

In a feature essay in the *Australian Book Review*, Kerry Goldsworthy speculates that the fascination with the body of the writer signals a desire to locate a final resting-place for meaning, an end to endless deferral, a way out of the hermeneutic circle: “And it may also be that, like literary biographers, those audiences have a sense of the writer’s body as something tangible, solid, stable, reliable: an anchor for all that endless, shifty language” (50). I agree with her that audiences tend to regard the author as an extension of the text, and that the discourse of authenticity which permeates constructions of literature in the public sphere invests the writer with notions of truth and reality frequently opposed to a perceived lack of authenticity in contemporary culture. I am not, however,

convinced that festival and mass media audiences have a strong sense of the shiftiness of literary language; such a construction seems to imply that they have taken in a dose of post-structuralism but are nostalgic for less complex constructions of literary meaning. I am more inclined to believe that for these audiences, the writer is not so much escape from textual uncertainty as manifestation of textual truth, produced according to a literalism of interpretation out of favour in most academic readings. The fascination with celebrity writers should perhaps be understood not as simple preference for personality over writing but rather the reinscription of the writer into different textual modes, and above all wonderment at the paradoxical relationship between the mundane reality of the living (or once living) writer and her/his ghostly (but no less real) reality as corporeal appendage to a body of writing, incarnation of a transcendent truth.

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