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# Tracing the Evolution of Celebrity Memoirs, from Charles Lindbergh to Will Smith

“Creating a personal myth allows celebrities to create just that—a myth.”

By Landon Y. Jones

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Today, celebrities tell their stories in memoirs as a duty forced on them by their agents and their fans. They can publish them to supplement a thriving career or to give a declining career a boost with the allure of finally-let-it-all-hang-out details. Sometimes a memoir launches a career all on its own, as in the case of Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes*. Regardless of its purpose, however, every celebrity memoir is an attempt at creating, packaging, and selling a personal myth.

One of the first was the actress Sarah Bernhardt with her memoir, *My Double Life*, which proclaimed her nonconformist lifestyle and personal defiance. According to Sharon Marcus, Bernhardt became “the godmother of modern celebrity” because she “invented many of the features of celebrity culture that remain in place to this day. She

was one of the first figures to use modern media to achieve truly global celebrity by courting controversy, imitation, and evaluation, as well as one of the first to affect crowds so strongly that many journalists found her supporters alarming.”

In keeping with his flamboyant business model, the impresario P. T. Barnum likewise “wrote a controversial autobiography” filled with hokum to which “the backlash ... was severe, and readers felt betrayed and swindled.”

While it was clear that the memoir could be another way celebrities could capitalize on their fame, the confessional narrative of overcoming challenges most celebrities use today had not yet been refined. Charles Lindbergh, for example, wrote a “dutiful” early memoir that made no effort to dress up his matter-of-fact writing. It was well-received but nowhere near as successful as the phenomenally popular *Of Flight and Life*, written 20 years later in 1948. This book was not a memoir as such, but as Brian Horrigan writes, it finds Lindbergh in high autobiographical mode and has a “stunning” spirituality uncommon to most celebrity books.

Lindbergh was one of only a few celebrities to write more than one memoir. The formation of today’s structured celebrity memoir began with the numerous attempts and styles found in Lindbergh’s comparatively vast oeuvre. In 1953, he published *The Spirit of St. Louis*, what Brian Horrigan calls a “classic American epic” made of both “narrative” and “passages of evocative memoir.” *The Spirit of St. Louis* won a Pulitzer Prize, establishing it as not only the leader of a new frontier in celebrity memoir but also as a work of literary merit.

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There was also the posthumous *Autobiography of Values*, a collection of Lindbergh’s memories and reflections written toward the end of his life. In none of these books, of course, did Lindbergh mention the secret of his multiple wives and families hidden across Europe. In that sense, he fulfilled the foreboding of celebrity-as-hypocrite made by Winston Churchill in *The Celebrity*.

Other early celebrities failed to capitalize on the opportunity of the memoir—or managed to do so only after their deaths. Thomas Edison, the celebrity inventor who once endeavored to record Sarah Bernhardt, would often “pretend that nothing had changed, that he was indifferent as ever” to his newfound celebrity. Perhaps this is one reason he never published a memoir of his own, despite his “hunger for credit” in most things. The myth created by his own companies may have been enough to sustain his legacy.

Other early celebrities, like Marilyn Monroe, wrote memoirs that were published posthumously. *My Story*, written at the height of her fame but not published until more than a decade after her death, deals in the narrative of overcoming challenges we have come to know in celebrity memoirs. The memoir describes the ups and downs of Monroe’s early life and career—and its posthumous publication lends it an air of reclamation, putting her personal myth in her own words even after her death.

In *Blonde*, her richly allusive novel about Monroe, Joyce Carol Oates delves deeper into the themes that shadowed Monroe's life as a celebrity—the rapes, molestations, miscarriages, abortions, predatory males, and voracious fans. Here we have the blind power of mythmaking in Hollywood, seen through the lens of one life.

In that sense, it is the opposite of *The Celebrity*—the fault is not in the stars but in the people who create and enable them. “As Oates watched all of Monroe's movies,” writes Elaine Showalter, “[and] learned more about her intelligence and humor, her determination to be seen as a serious actress, and the intersection of her career with multiple strands of mid-20th-century American culture—sports, religion, crime, theatre, politics—she realized that she needed a larger fictional form to explore a woman who was much more than a victim.”

Many modern celebrity memoir writers shape their myths by the traumas they've overcome. Sometimes they are self-inflicted, sometimes not. In her 2022 memoir, *Out of the Corner*, the actress Jennifer Grey details her struggles with cocaine, sex, and plastic surgery. Likewise, Selma Blair in *Mean Baby* discusses her alcoholism, sexual assaults, two suicide attempts, and eventual recovery.

In his memoir *Brat*, actor and director Andrew McCarthy writes candidly about his alcoholism: “One of the predominant aspects of alcohol abuse is the baffling power it exerts over its victims. While someone else might have heeded this early warning sign of potential trouble on the horizon, I ignored the implications and instead focused on the more immediate problem of damage control.”

Here, McCarthy places the blame on himself for dismissing the signs of alcohol abuse. He is the one who eventually redeems himself, checking himself into the hospital after “[sobbing] at the disorder and chaos that my life had become.” Although he acknowledges his helplessness in the situation (note that in the passage above he is a “victim” of alcoholism, not its enabler), he also takes responsibility for the resolution of his largest personal issue.

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Where McCarthy frames himself as both the cause and remedy of his trauma, other celebrities frame their lives around external incidents from which they restore their lives. In his account of his experiences on ABC's *The Bachelor*, contestant Matt James tells how he felt exploited by the series in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter movement. “In my conversion from person to prop, key pieces of me were left behind,” James said later, explaining why the series turned him into “a sideshow.”

In *Going There*, journalist Katie Couric writes of one personal and one professional incident from which she had to fight her way back. The first, more personal incident was the death of her husband, Jay, from colorectal cancer. The chapters that follow her description of this tragedy primarily focus on her grief and recovery. Although Jay comes up in the memoir several times after his death, the second part of the book closes with a friend driving Couric and her family “back to our lives,” implying a sense of moving forward.

The professional obstacles faced by Couric were many, but one seemed particularly difficult to overcome—the failure of her run as an anchor on *CBS Evening News* and host on *60 Minutes*. Couric cites not only the frequent criticism her anchoring drew but also her own regret at certain interviewing choices: “If I could have just one do-over, this would be it,” she writes in regard to an interview with Elizabeth Edwards. Chapter names like “She’s Toast” and “The Fall of Rome” further emphasize how detrimental Couric’s time at CBS was for her career—in short, she “was drowning.”

There were other professional setbacks, such as the sexual harassment allegations against her professional partner Matt Lauer, but none seemed so personally disheartening as Couric’s poor reception on CBS. The book ends, however, with Couric taking out “a new lease on my professional life.”

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Interestingly, on the first page of his memoir published the year before the notorious slap at the Oscars, Will Smith had all but predicted the incident as resulting from his lifelong fear of “being seen as weak.” As a nine-year-old, he had failed to stand up for his mother when his father struck her. “Will Smith is largely a construction,” he wrote, “a carefully crafted and honed character designed to protect himself. To hide myself from the world. To hide the coward.”

He continues, “It’s amazing how skewed your vision can become when you see the present through the lens of your past,” referring to his constant awareness and expectation of violence as a result of his upbringing. While this particular trauma was external, Smith also writes of the internal challenges he faced. At one point, he writes, “I was *worse* than broke—I was in the *hole*. The walls were tumbling down. I had enjoyed Sodom and Gomorrah way more than I was enjoying Jericho.”

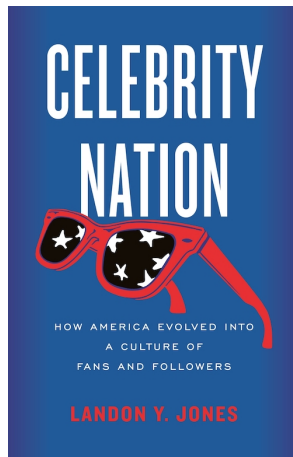
He demonstrates a recognition of his situation and takes responsibility, saying, “I didn’t pay my taxes,” rather than blaming his situation on anyone else. Like Couric, his book goes challenge by challenge until it leads to a hopeful embrace of love and bravery, which Smith describes as “learning to continue forward even when you’re terrified.”

What all three memoirs have in common, besides their challenge/reward structure, is the construction of a personal myth. Smith puts this most explicitly:

We tend to think of our personalities as fixed and solid. We think of our likes and dislikes, our beliefs, our nationalities, our political affiliations and religious convictions, our mannerisms, our sexual predilections, et cetera, as *set*, as *us*. But the reality is, most of the things that we think of as *us* are *learned* habits and patterns, and entirely malleable, and the danger when actors venture out to the far ends of our consciousness is that sometimes we lose the bread crumbs marking out way home. We realize that the characters we play in a film are no different than the characters we play in life. Will Smith is no more “real” than Paul [the dissembling character he plays in the 1993 movie *Six Degrees of Separation*]— they’re both characters that were invented, practiced, and performed, reinforced, and refined by friends, loved ones, and the external world. What you think of as your “self” is a fragile construct.

This is Smith’s own definition of what McAdams might call the personal myth, or history of the self. If what Smith writes is true—that the self is a construct—it reinforces the idea that each celebrity is manufacturing their own personal myth, or projection of the self, in their memoir. This allows them to utilize a narrative structure that feels more like a story than an actual life. Each challenge is overcome in an episodic fashion, and the memoir often ends with a triumphant, hopeful witticism about how the author will continue to overcome the rest of life’s challenges. Creating a personal myth allows celebrities to create just that—a myth, woven specifically to highlight their defeats, their resilience, their comebacks, and their path forward.

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