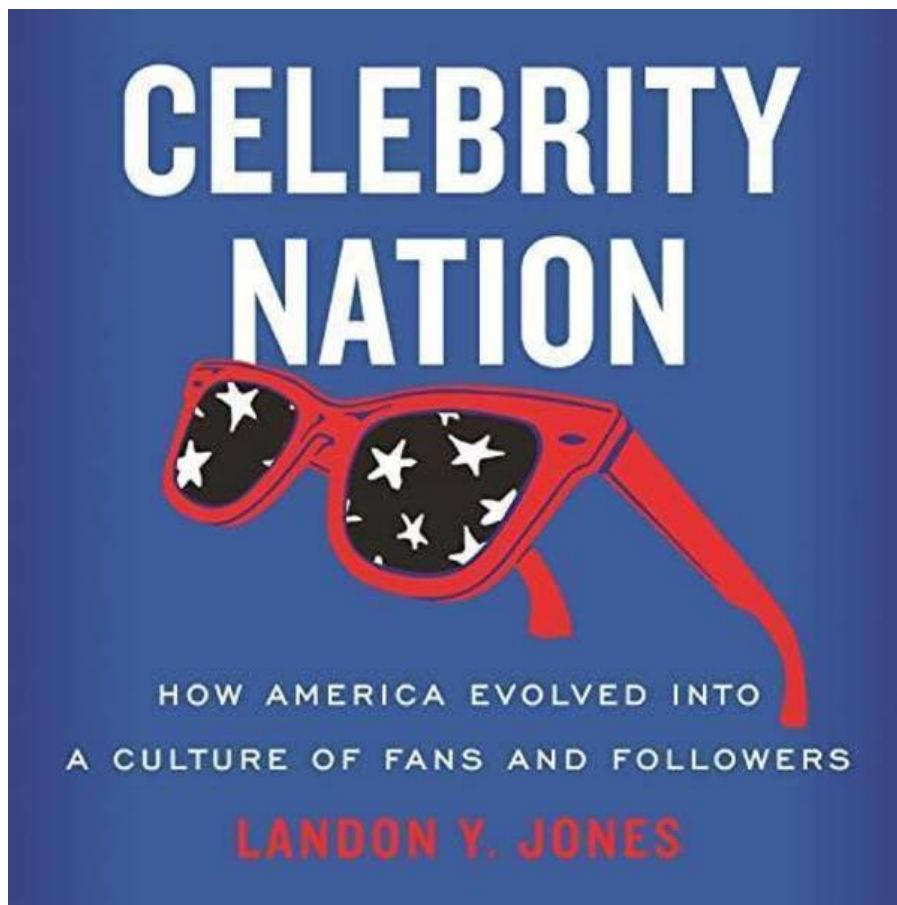


Loose Ends

Princeton Author Lanny Jones's Study of Celebrity Culture: Profound and Profoundly Entertaining

Joyce Carol Oates interviews the former People magazine editor on May 9 at Labyrinth Books.



Beacon Press

By Pam Hersh

Published May 6, 2023 at 9:54 PM
Last Updated May 6, 2023 at 9:54 PM

Princeton, NJ -- The spectacularly famous royal celebrities in London on May 6 received a three-hour bell-ringing tribute on the occasion of the coronation of King Charles III. Even though Nassau Hall and churches in Princeton are not scheduled for a three-hour bell ringing tribute, *Celebrity Nation -- How American Evolved into a Culture*

book that achieves the perfect balance of academic and pop culture enlightenment. It is profound yet profoundly entertaining in its exploration of celebrity culture and how the intensity of celebrity influence corresponds to the decline of the status of heroes in our culture.

I have to admit that I was very uneasy about doing a “review.” My objectivity is compromised. Landon, aka Lanny, is a friend; our kids even went to nursery school together. I am too much of an admirer of his intellect, curiosity, style of writing, grit, and too aware of the personal challenges he endured while writing the book. ([Click here to read about Lanny’s medical adventure.](#))

<https://www.tapinto.net/towns/princeton/sections/loose-ends/articles/princeton-s-lanny-jones-turns-a-medical-adventure-into-a-publishing-triumph?>

I resolved to read the book. If I came away with a negative opinion, I would have to go to Plan B and write this week’s column about Princeton’s most popular celebrity – an open downtown parking space on Princeton University Reunions weekend.

Sorry, parking space – no 15 minutes of fame this week. I truthfully can find nothing negative to say about Lanny Jones and his new book.

One suggestion for improvement. The book needs to be updated annually with anecdotes related to the book’s first sentence: “American culture is consumed by celebrity.” Since his book was “put to bed” with a drop-dead publication deadline, Americans have experienced a treasure trove of celebrity news that is missing from the book. For example, we need Lanny’s perspective on the rise of George Santos and demise of Tucker Carlson, both examples of how media can create and break celebrity. But the real challenge is whether we can think of any heroes who have emerged during the Santos/Carlson timeframe.

“I felt empowered to write a book exploring celebrity culture when Donald Trump got elected,” says Lanny.

As he writes in the book, “By drawing on the history of celebrity culture and analyzing the costs we pay for it, I hope to help explain whether its current omnipresence is a temporary bubble or whether it is the beginning of a permanent sea change in the public face of fame.”

But it is Lanny’s analysis of the cultural contest between celebrity and heroics that gives the book its intellectual fiber.

“We can manufacture and distribute celebrities like any other consumer products . . . But it is not possible to create a hero. Circumstances beyond our control create heroes. Celebrities require an audience – heroes require an action,” he writes.

Lanny’s expertise comes from his more than 60-year career (if you count his journalism accomplishments while a student at Princeton University – Lanny is Class of 1966) as a journalist, author, and passionate observer and chronicler of human behavior.

America. He is a student of how first television and then the internet and social media have diminished civic engagement and nourished the explosive growth of celebrity.

As often as the book provides healthy food for thought, it also provides the equivalent of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups consisting of yummy celebrity-related trivia – all truths, no fake news. Collected below are some intriguing factoids – great conversational treats for the upcoming Princeton University Reunions that celebrates a lot of celebrities and possibly a few heroes.

Celebrity Nation --- Some Intriguing Factoids

- Alexander the Great was the world's first famous person. But Alexander achieved lasting fame only posthumously as the first mortal face to be placed on a coin (perhaps the first instance of a new technology being used to promote celebrity).
- Only two Black faces appeared as the dominant image on the *People* magazine cover during its first 95 issues.
- Photos surreptitiously taken of Charles Lindbergh's kidnapped baby in the Trenton morgue sold for \$5 apiece.
- A 13-year-old boy named Ryan McKenna, who was sitting in the crowd at the 2018 Super Bowl, became instantly famous by snapping a selfie with Justin Timberlake when the singer waded into the crowd. Today McKenna's Instagram account (@selfiekid) has over 189,000 followers and celebrities seek out Ryan for the exposure he offers them.
- Andy Warhol has admitted he never actually said his famous aphorism that "in the future everyone will be famous for 15 minutes."
- A 2011 study of the historical change in the different values communicated by TV programs aimed at nine-to-eleven-year-old children found that the "desire for fame" was their number-one value in 2007, rising from number fifteen (out of sixteen) in 1997.
- According to a survey done by the *Washington Post* and Harvard University in 2005, 31 percent of American teenagers thought they would become famous one day.
- A study of 653 middle school students near Rochester, New York, found that a remarkable 43.4 percent chose their career goal to become "the personal assistant to a very famous singer or movie star."
- Kim Kardashian's shapewear brand, SKIMS, launched in 2019, by early 2022 was valued at \$1.6 billion. Her sister Kylie sold a majority stake in their cosmetics line for \$1.2 billion.
- Celebrities who have literally insured their body parts include David Beckham (legs), Mariah Carey (voice and legs), Daniel Craig (entire body), Jamie Lee Curtis (legs), America Ferrera (smile), Heidi Klum (legs), Keith Richards (hands), Rihanna (legs), Julia Roberts (smile), and Bruce Springsteen (voice).
- YouTube's founder Jawed Karim credited the "wardrobe malfunction" of Janet Jackson in the 2004 Super Bowl for providing the impetus to start his video-sharing website. Jackson was blamed for staging the "Nipplegate" and her career went into a prolonged decline. Timberlake, who may well have staged it, emerged unscathed.
- Jib Fowles, a professor of media studies at the University of Houston, has

while for the stars it was 58.7 — a full 15.2 years younger, he reported. Female celebrities fared much worse, dying on average at age 54.3, an astonishing 21.5 years earlier than the average American woman, who died at 75.8. Fowles concluded that the stresses built into the job of performing as a celebrity are far more hazardous for women than for men.

- The English scholars Nick Couldry and Tim Markham concluded in their 2007 paper, “Celebrity Culture and Public Connection: Bridge or Chasm?” that people who closely followed celebrity culture were the *least* engaged in politics and the *least* likely to use their social networks to involve themselves in public issues.
- During one week in 2022, when Anthony Fauci was recommending new vaccines and Volodymyr Zelenskyy was pleading for help against invaders, our national conversations were instead dominated by the “slap heard around the world” administered by Will Smith to Chris Rock at the Oscars and the courtroom antics of Johnny Depp and Amber Heard.

Is Lanny Jones just a celebrity or has he earned the designation of hero? In my book, it's a no brainer. He is a hero to me as a columnist and interviewer. In addition to all of his remarkable qualities about which I have written, Lanny has provided the one truly revealing question I now will ask all my interviewees: “which of your body parts would you insure?”

Start your celebrity journey on Tuesday, May 9, at 6 p.m. at Labyrinth Books on Nassau Street. Lanny will be interviewed by celebrated author and Princeton University professor Joyce Carol Oates.

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