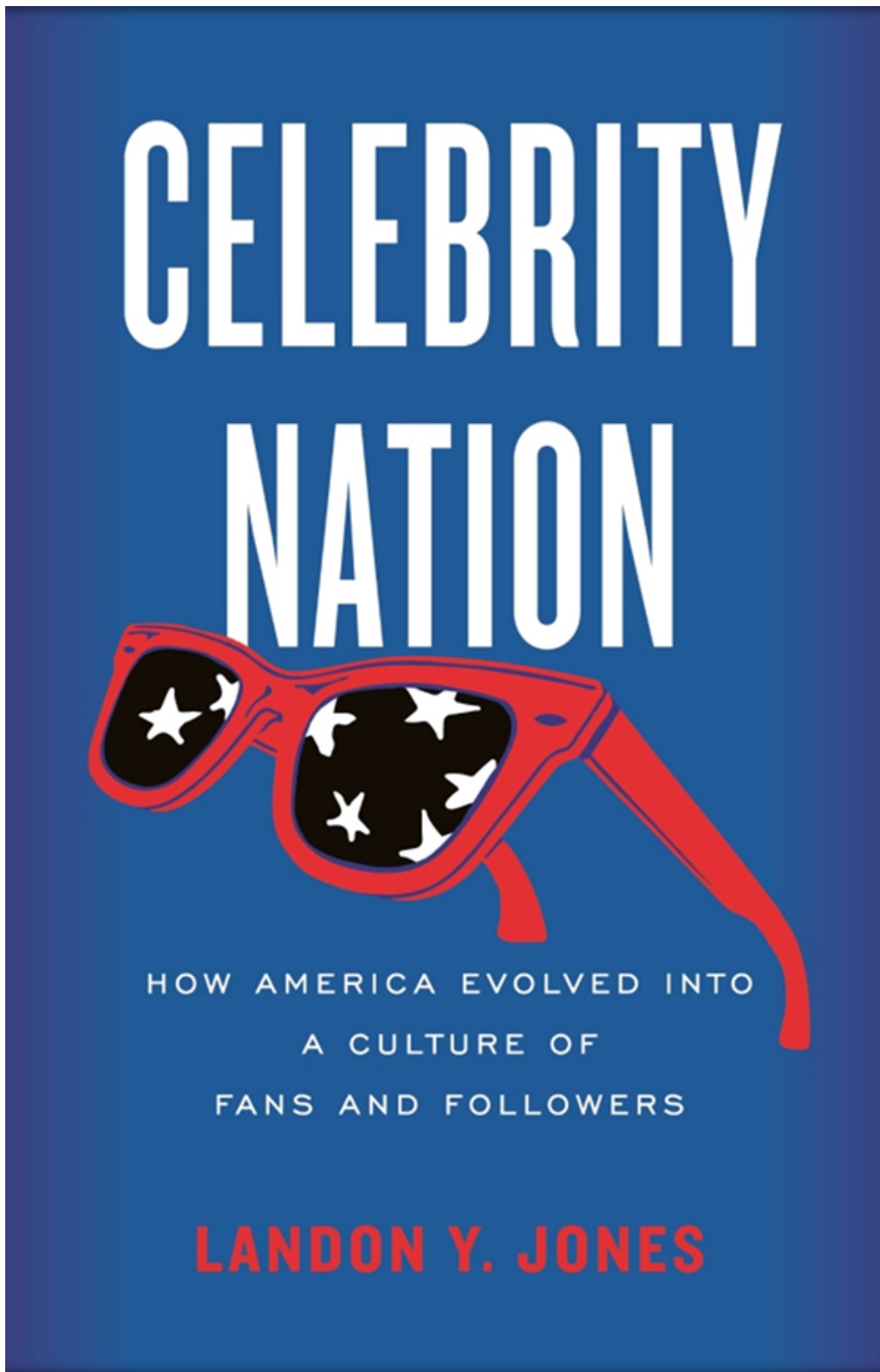


Famous for Being Famous

PageSix



Celebrity Nation: How America Evolved into a Culture of Fans and Followers

By Landon Y. Jones

Beacon Press, 216 pp.

Edward Tenner, a frequent contributor to the *Review*, is a research affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution and Rutgers University.

Published June 23, 2023

In his influential 1961 book *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, the historian and future Librarian of Congress Daniel J. Boorstin memorably defined a celebrity as “a person well-known for well-knownness.” The remark was still not so much descriptive as prophetic. The celebrities of the 1960s were men and women who had originally achieved fame in the arts, sports, business, media, politics — or at least through inherited wealth or title. Even celebrity criminals like the gangster Bugsy Siegel — by then an [assassin’s victim](#) — had a talent for something.

Landon Y. Jones, a former managing editor of *People* and *Money* magazines, has brought Boorstin’s witty definition up to date, drawing on personal experience as an interviewer and confidant of premier celebrities, along with a command of decades of academic writing on the sociology of fame. I am biased — he’s a friend — but also qualified as a recidivist fame-seeker.

Mapping the Stars

Jones’s schema has three phrases. Celebrity worship, in Jones’s telling, is as American as M&M’s, and may have been launched (at least in the sphere of the arts) by PT Barnum as the impresario behind the Swedish opera singer Jenny Lind, a star in Europe but almost unknown in the United States. Guaranteeing performance fees to her equal to millions today, Barnum recouped his investment by exploiting the nation’s already burgeoning print media. His celebrated [auction of tickets](#) for her first concert in 1850 could have taught Live Nation a thing or two.

Lind, like today’s top touring musicians, became famous through a combination of innate talent and skilled promotion. Barnum was a founder of what Jones calls a celebrity-industrial complex that both stimulated and fed Americans’ appetite for the details of their idols’ private lives. At the dawn of the age of celebrity, a heroic ideal emerged. Jenny Lind’s success depended not only on her undoubted talent but also on her highly publicized philanthropy. In the mid-19th century, the public yearned to close the gap between private and public persona.

This changed after the Civil War. New generations of celebrities created public images around pseudonyms (think Mark Twain né Samuel Clemens) and were usually able to shield the less felicitous aspects of their private lives from public gaze, at least temporarily.

For William Cody (aka Buffalo Bill), to take one example, that meant hiding both his debts and prodigious consumption of whiskey. PT Barnum, who shared Cody’s tastes and went bankrupt (though he eventually emerged successfully), recast his own image after the Civil War by appearing to regret his former Southern sympathies and notorious exploitation of an enslaved woman whom he “leased” to exhibit her as George Washington’s supposed nursemaid. Thus, cynical exploitation of the peculiar institution paved the way for the high-minded Jenny Lind tour.

Fast forward a bit. Both motion pictures and print mass media needed celebrities. Thomas Edison’s myopically thrifty resistance to the star system — he refused to allow individual actors to build personal reputations in his movies — helped cost him his early lead (indeed, monopoly) in filmmaking. While 19th-century science greats like Charles Darwin and Louis Pasteur had been idolized in intellectual circles, they had never become figures of fascination and curiosity like the 20th-century Albert Einstein.

Quoting [Walter Isaacson’s biography of Einstein](#), Jones shows how ambivalent 20th-century celebrities themselves

could be about their fame, with its attendant loss of privacy. The legal right to privacy, originally intended to protect wealthy society figures from scandal sheets, had first been proclaimed by Louis D. Brandeis and Samuel Warren in an 1890 *Harvard Law Review* paper. By 1953, though, Appellate Judge Jerome N. Frank [ruled for a baseball player against a trading card publisher](#), recognizing a new right to control publicity — a right extending beyond the grave. Today, some intellectual property lawyers specialize in representing dead celebrities, and Einstein’s image continues to earn royalties for his heir, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Jones skips most familiar stories of early 20th-century Hollywood glamor and its underside. But some were too tragic to ignore. The three manslaughter trials of the comic star Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle in the early 1920s showed how eagerly tabloids could turn on even a foremost star, whose career was ruined despite clear evidence of his innocence. This era found its final cynical expressions in noir film masterpieces: Alexander Mackendrick’s *The Sweet Smell of Success* (on the viciousness of celebrity gossip) and Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* (on the pathos of a wealthy aging superstar).

Combining memoir, literary insight and academic research, *Celebrity Nation* is a triumph of human insight into an all-too-often inhuman institution that can become a mortal threat to celebrities themselves.

New Age Celebrity

Landon Jones’s own magazine, *People*, marked a new and sunnier age in celebrity journalism. Decades of television competition for advertising had doomed *Time*’s iconic pictorial magazine *Life*, but the “People” department of *Time* was a bright spot in the magazine’s fading presence. Jones, along with Dick Stolley, *People*’s founding editor, discovered by trial and error a new model of celebrity journalism for a new generation of readers impatient with the airbrushed style of celebs of yore.

Empathy replaced the former cycle of inflation and deflation. Obscure people joined boldfaced names. Celebrities were candid about the challenges of their private lives. One of *People*’s heroines was First Lady Betty Ford who shared her struggles with breast cancer and alcoholism. Jones had a natural rapport with Elizabeth Taylor and Princess Diana, and featured their philanthropic initiatives, which had been so important for Jenny Lind’s persona.

Yet the dark side persisted, Jones acknowledges. Celebrity coverage was disproportionately white, though the overt racism of the 19th century had diminished in mainstream publications. Moreover, the celebrity aficionado remained morbidly curious: a star’s death could prompt a cover photo supercharging newsstand sales. Princess Diana ended her life as a martyr to people’s curiosity and the journalists who exploited it.

While nearly all celebrities of the 1950s had done something notable, a new type of what might be called Boorstinian celebrity emerged: someone known *only* for being well known, with Kim Kardashian as the archetype. Studies of fans have suggested that the narcissism that is such an occupational hazard of celebrity — if not a motivation to seeking fame — rubs off on would-be influencers who see social media rather than conventional careers as the key to fame.

An [extreme recent case](#) is the California private pilot who faked engine trouble to deliberately crash his plane and parachute into a national forest, hiking to the downed aircraft to retrieve cameras from the wing and tail. He had earned three million TikTok views and was on his way to a possible sponsorship before he pleaded guilty to obstructing a federal investigation. And, it’s worth remembering, in the search for eyeballs and ad revenue, liberal cable executives rescued uber-narcissist Donald Trump from business has-been to national celebrity.

Combining memoir, literary insight and academic research, *Celebrity Nation* is a triumph of human insight into an all-too-often inhuman institution that can become a mortal threat to celebrities themselves. But one of Jones’s influences,

Christopher Lasch's 1979 book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, in which Lasch laments the societal normalization of pathological narcissism, may be worth reconsidering.

It is easy to mock Donald Trump's self-characterization as "a very stable genius." But is there also not a positive side to narcissism? It surely has motivated some of the greatest works of art. And sometimes it takes narcissists to fight narcissists. As a young journalist Winston Churchill notoriously declared, "We are all worms, but I do believe that I am a glow-worm." Charles de Gaulle went further: "Nothing great can be done without great men, and they are great because they have willed greatness."

The list goes on. According to a [2013 \(pre-presidential Trump\) Pew Research study](#), Franklin D. Roosevelt was our fourth most narcissistic president. Jones rightly recognizes the heroism of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky in opposing the malign narcissism of Putin. But recall that Zelensky was an actor and comedian — professions that seem to attract narcissists — before becoming a politician. Could he have become an inspiring head of state through entertainment without a healthy dose of the trait?

Following Lasch, Jones writes that our narcissism has earned us "the contempt of the rest of the world." Maybe, but paradoxically it has also earned the fascination of American culture (think global rap artists).

The true risk, as I interpret most of Jones's cautionary tales, and America's underlying problem, is not celebrity but its immoderate pursuit. Narcissism can turn toxic, but it is the dose that makes the poison.