

Spotlight on Princeton

Feeling Obsessed With Celebrities? Princeton Author Landon Jones Can Explain That

A review of the new book, 'Celebrity Nation: How America Evolved into a Culture of Fans and Followers.'



At his book signing at Labyrinth Books, Jones conversed with fellow Princeton resident Joyce Carol Oates, the accomplished author who also happens to be a celebrity in her own right.

TAPinto Staff

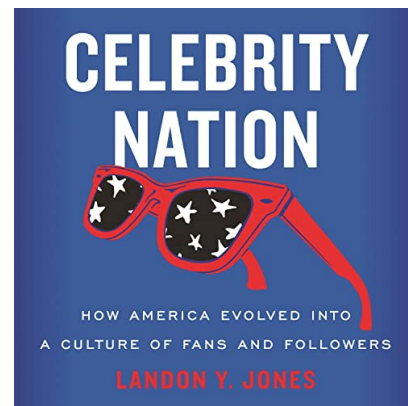
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Princeton, NJ –Who among us doesn't have at least one celebrity encounter to share? All the people who have told us they ran into Bruce Springsteen eating lunch at the Witherspoon Grill. The time we chatted with architect, sculptor, and climate activist Maya Lin about the irony of her "Princeton Line" sculpture by the Princeton Dinky station being covered with unsustainable grass. Or someone who ran into one of the stars of "Oppenheimer," while they were in town last year filming for the movie.

Based on the very credible and thoughtful analysis provided by Princeton-based author and editor Landon Y. Jones in his new book, "Celebrity Nation: How America Evolved into a Culture of Fans and Followers," the answer posed to the question may well be "No one." With celebrities – some created by their own talents or accomplishments, many created out of the thin air of social media and self-aggrandizement – swarming about us like gnats, it's easy to imagine that every single person reading this review will have one or more of their own celebrity encounters to talk about -- if they choose to.



That's the rub. Mentioning a celebrity encounter might brighten up the conversation at a dinner party or backyard barbecue. But it might also label you as a shameless name dropper. Or, you realize as you absorb Jones's thoughtful book, it might contribute to the social dysfunction that many of us sense and that Jones has defined in his book. He refers to "celebrity worship syndrome," and asserts that "it has promoted individualism at the cost of social capital that societies need. Today we are no longer sitting around our campfires. We're gazing into phones and mirrors."

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And the images we see are dominated by celebrities on whose every act and word many of us cling. That worship comes with real consequences. Jones, a longtime writer for People magazine who became managing editor in the 1990s, remembers putting Donald Trump on the magazine's cover. "We thought he was simply a buffoon – a defiant buffoon, to be sure," Jones writes, adding, "defiance was a celebrity's calling card."

But then the pioneering reality show producer Mark Burnett created "The Apprentice" as a vehicle for Trump, with the memorable tagline, "you're fired." Trump became a ratings hit. Jones quotes a producer from the show speaking about Trump: "He has just gone through I don't know how many bankruptcies. But we made him out to be the most important person in the world. It was like making the court jester the king."

Jones sees some innate drawbacks to celebrities in the nation's service. "Celebrities have stepped into the space vacated by civic engagement," Jones writes. But "celebrities aren't so much leading their millions of followers as being led by them. To be popular to so many, so successfully, for so long, you must necessarily appeal to and, in appealing, reinforce your followers' popular notions." Jones also has a discomfiting observation about those followers: "People most interested in celebrity are least engaged in politics, least likely to protest, and least likely to vote."

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People used to look up to heroes, Jones says. Now they model themselves after celebrities. A big difference, Jones contends. "A hero's fame cannot be manufactured; it is hard earned," he writes. But "we can manufacture and distribute celebrities like any other consumer products."

To make his case about the grip of celebrity on our culture, Jones must obviously drop a few celebrity names along the way. Partial disclosure here (and fuller disclosure below): I have known Lanny Jones and his family for many years and anticipated that some of his personal celebrity encounters would find their way into this book. They did, but in such a way that I felt as if I was hearing them for the first time.

When I finished the book I marveled at how few times Jones played one of his personal celebrity cards. Just a handful, I thought. Then I went back and counted: More than a dozen, dropping the names of Arthur Ashe, Malcolm X, Ronald Reagan, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Elizabeth Taylor, Princess Diana, John Riggins, Sandra Day O'Connor, Stan Musial, Dean Cain, Gillian Anderson, Mel Gibson, and Bill Gates, among others.

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In one of his celebrity anecdotes, involving Abe Vigoda, Jones is the goat of the story. In another brush with a celebrity, poet Allen Ginsberg teaches Jones as a young journalist a lesson about interviewing that would guide him through his career. And Jones's best personal celebrity anecdote of all involves a now forgotten but once headline criminal case from the 1950s. Jones's recounting of his involvement in that case comes with a surprise ending that no reader – certainly not me – would ever see coming.

All those years at People magazine paid off: Jones handles his celebrities deftly.

For readers interested in how the media contribute to the celebrity worship syndrome, "Celebrity Nation" takes us behind the scenes. Jones reveals the art of the "write-around," the process of getting a story about the celebrity who refuses to be interviewed, and the trick of not only mentioning that the celebrity has a dog, but also including the name of the dog.

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In writing about the formula for what would make a People cover story a reliable seller on the newsstand, Jones writes that could be boiled down to three types: there were three: "Di, Diet, and Dying." Those were cover stories about Princess Diana, about beauty and the stars' struggles to maintain it, and about deaths – particularly untimely – deaths of celebrities. Di fit into all three categories. Jones reports Diana had been on the People cover 58 times (as of the book's editorial deadline in 2022).

"Celebrity Nation" is the second book that Jones has written addressing a cultural and sociological phenomenon that is felt by everyone but that falls outside any single academic discipline – ripe ground for a journalist such as Jones. The first book was "Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation," published in 1980.

In "Celebrity Nation," Jones also takes special note of one generation in particular: The current generation of children, especially "tweens," those between 9 and 11 years old, who now value fame more than community or familial values. The kids are "busily soaking up the same emphasis on fame from the internet and social

media” as they are from television shows. If, as Jones writes, they “are comparing themselves to the fantasy lives they see exhibited by the influencers on social media, it is not surprising that they look into the mirror and find themselves feeling alone together.”

I quibbled with one thing in Jones’s book, and I found another thing that might cause others to quibble – but not me.

First the quibble. Jones cites the Oxford Handbook of Human Development as the source for the assertion that “as living environments become increasingly urbanized, . . . psychological development moves in the direction of increasing individualism, while traditional, family, and community values decline.” As a writer with a strong interest in urbanism, I wonder if a kid living in a dense, walkable community with access to public places and events is worse off – or better off – than a kid holed up with a smartphone in a suburban bedroom.

The second thing that might be a quibble for others – not for me – is the hope that Jones brings up in his introduction. “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.”

Some may read “Celebrity Nation” expecting to find the definitive answer to that question. Jones wisely does not provide it. He cautions readers about the challenge of separating causation from correlation. “The question we are left with is whether the rise of celebrity addiction caused the breakdown of our civic assets, or whether both are correlated with a third factor, such as the impact of the internet and social media since the turn of the century,” he writes.

In the end, Jones hedges his bet. He cites some of the many celebrities that have encouraged their followers to support worthy causes. Jones sees us at “an awkward period when we try to look past the newest technologies to see if celebrities can approach the public naturally and honestly, unmediated by intense media coverage. If celebrities themselves can gain the self-awareness needed to do so, there is hope.”

As I was reading “Celebrity Nation,” I took note of a [New York Times article](#) by Suzanne Garfinkle-Crowell, a child psychiatrist whose own daughter had become an obsessed fan of Taylor Swift. At first skeptical, Garfinkle-Crowell had come to see a therapeutic value in kids’ fascination with the singing idol.

“What is singular about this artist, in this time, is the access she has created to a cohesive community, particularly for the pandemic generation, whose social connections grew tragically elusive and for whom the internet’s offerings assumed a central role,” the child psychiatrist writes of Swift. “Whatever you are upset about, the poet laureate of this generation has got a song somewhere in her mega-oeuvre describing that precise feeling. She is not going to solve whatever problem you are having, but she is going to sit with you in it until the passage of time does its work: Look at her now.”

I drew my own conclusion. I'm now thinking of celebrity culture as another drug pervading our society. It might be like a prescription recommended by a physician to fight anxiety, or like another round of drinks to help brighten the dinner party. Like any other drug, it should be used in moderation. And it can always be dangerous, or even deadly.

Editor's note: By way of full disclosure, I have known Jones since the fall of 1965, when we briefly crossed paths as undergraduates serving on the Daily Princetonian. When Jones became editor of the Princeton Alumni Weekly in the early 1970s, I was a frequent editorial contributor. While Jones was working his way up the masthead at People, I was a freelance contributor to the magazine, writing and reporting on many celebrity subjects until 1984, when I left to found U.S. 1 Newspaper. For many years Jones and I have lived within a few blocks of each other in Princeton and have seen each other at any number of backyard barbecues or dinner parties. Sure, Lanny, let's have another round of drinks.

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