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REVIEWS

Star-Stricken

Lorraine York, *Literary Celebrity in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007. 200 pp.

When it comes to celebrity in Canada, it is ever prudent to cite Mordecai Richler's celebrated line immediately, because it is impossible to ignore or improve on the incomparable Atuk's announcement that he's "world famous all over Canada." Richler's formulation endures not because it encapsulates some purported self-loathing Canadianness (there is no such reflex, in Richler or Canadians) but because it perfectly pricks the pretension and pomposity of the smaller in yearning to be bigger, as deftly and as humorously as does Leacock's designation of Mariposa's "Missinaba County Agricultural Exposition and World's Fair." Many theorists have recognized that "incongruity" is the essence of humour (William Hazlitt first), and it is the inventively incongruous that makes Richler's formulation so memorably apt. In the first place, very few writers are celebrities (even such as Roth and the Amises paddle in a puddle). Yet fewer Canadian writers are celebrities, even all over Canada (maybe Margaret Atwood qualifies). Terms such as "celebrity," "star," and the noxious "superstar," which are the currency of the book under review, are the fabrications of Hollywood and television and the popular-music industry. By comparison, "literary celebrity" can't help but appear incongruous, if not an outright oxymoron of the sort that George Carlin catalogues (jumbo shrimp, military intelligence, etc.). Thus, the title of Lorraine York's book could be, and maybe should be, taken as a punchline: What's the shortest book in the world?

Literary Celebrity in Canada wants to be something like Nick Mount's *When Canadian Literature Moved to New York* (2005; which York cites a number of times), but it does not measure up to that study's more thorough scholarly method. Nor does York's work approach the originality of the thesis that Mount advances on the exhaustive evidence of his research (only James Doyle and a few others had done similar work). Contrarily, what York mostly provides is her own broad cultural musings shakily supported by Pierre Bourdieu's theorizing in *The Field of Cultural Production*, while she disputes the critiques of a few other cultural critics, whom she accuses of simplification (though I find more compelling these others' critiques of

modern celebrity culture, those of Daniel Boorstin, C. Wright Mills, Neil Postman, and Neal Gabler). York's style is academic-journalistic (perhaps intentionally in keeping with the subject), and even reads, especially in the chapter on Atwood, like a bio-pic's voice-over, and a fan's at that: "Indeed, it becomes clear that Atwood has, at numerous points in her career, been punished by the media, by literary reviewers and by readers, for not adhering to this image of the modestly accomplished domestic woman—for inhabiting her celebrity, for the most part, unapologetically" (167). There is just too much wrong in that statement. Atwood *punished*? And by readers too (punishing her all the way to the bank, it must seem)? Atwood being made to assume the celebrity victim position? Suffice it to say that there's a video clip of Atwood at a conference in New York some decades ago, wiping the floor with that shrinking violet of the media circus, the late great Norman Mailer.

It is not impossible that a worthwhile, even middle-sized, book could be written on the subject of literary celebrity in Canada, but such would require extensive research into the following: (1) the extent of the writer's celebrity (simply assumed by York, which misleads her to include Carol Shields in a seven-writer constellation of Canadians: Pauline Johnson, Stephen Leacock, Mazo de la Roche, Lucy Maud Montgomery, with the four grouped together in one chapter; and then a chapter each for Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, and Shields); (2) reliable description of the day-to-day reality of Canadian literary celebrity; (3) the ways in which a writer's modicum of fame can be shown to influence the writing (for example: what is the effect of comparative wealth on the usually impoverished professional writer's writing?); (4) the Canadian celebrity writer's relations with agents, editors, publishers, readers and reviewers (more on reception)—and (5), and again, what all that means to the actual writing. York does provide some of this (for example, she is interesting on the business of de la Roche's and Montgomery's sequels to their most popular novels), but not enough to make her book an enlightening study of a new subject. Instead, she offers repetitive musings on what celebrity means as the space of various contending personal and public interests. Readers who have given this subject any thought will already have considered celebrity as such an arena of contestation.

York begins with a competent introduction of her key term as it has come to occupy academics in the spreading field of cultural studies. The arena of celebrity is where the private and public vie for definition and self-definition, where individual and collective warily meet, where Modernist demarcations of high (literary) and low (popular) culture stake their claims, etc.

etc. She then turns to four 'early' Canadian writers, which for York means early twentieth-century. Not only is the nineteenth-century virtually non-existent in this study, but York does not seem to know that Canada's first international literary celebrity was Thomas Chandler Haliburton, the creator of Sam Slick (whose first book, *The Clockmaker*, had some 100 editions and a long string of sequels). Haliburton's career would have provided York the opportunity to study a 'Canadian' (technically before there was a Canada) who achieved instant literary fame on a scale to rival Byron's waking one morning to find himself famous, and celebrity in relation to national identity and citizenship is one of York's central interests (Haliburton was co-opted as the 'father of American humour'). The example of Haliburton's Canadian literary celebrity would also have given this study continuity from the colonial to the contemporary periods, and thereby have helped support York's half-truthful claim that there never was a golden age of pure devotion to letters but that, in matters of literary celebrity, it has ever been thus.

Instead, we 'learn' what we already know or suspect: Pauline Johnson was conflicted about her racial identity and also wielded her star power advantageously. Leacock was similarly conflicted. And de la Roche and Montgomery? Conflicted and conflicted, while also not above using their celebrity status (Bourdieu's "cultural capital") to advantage. But a lot of what York contends is speculative, suppositional, untenable, unconvincing, imagined, or just plain wrong. She seems incapable of understanding that authors such as Leacock and the other three early writers were formed by the wholly literary worlds of the late-Victorian era; they did not like the newly wired modernity that seemed bent on trussing them up for its all-consuming, insatiable appetite for novelty, sensation, and meaning for the populace's increasingly denuded private lives.

For example, I know something about Leacock's life and writings, and York's statements about him are indeed simply wrongheaded. "…Stephen Leacock, whose fame was caught up in his obsessive drive for conspicuously displayed commodities (money, houses) that would provide him with reassuring evidence of his intrinsic worth" (33). Setting aside York's remarkable access to Leacock's view of himself, I observe only that he studied at the University of Chicago under Thorstein Veblen, originator of such phrases as "conspicuous consumption" and "conspicuous leisure." Then comes this radically uninformed statement: "There is no major critical revival or reinvestigation of [Leacock's] work…" (46). There is, and it is ongoing: three books of my own in the past twenty years; the University of Ottawa's conference on Leacock in 1985 and the subsequent proceedings edited by David Staines, as well as Staines' recent substantial selection of

Leacock's letters; James Doyle's biography, and Theresa and Albert Moritz's revision of their earlier biography (and with a new biography in the works by Margaret MacMillan); new critical editions of *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* by Tecumseh in Canada and Norton in the U.S. (the latter edited by D.M.R. Bentley), a critical edition of *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich*, and a new edition of the *Sketches* in England with an introduction by Richler; and then of course there is the monumental bibliographic work of Carl Spadoni, as well as his own recent edition of the *Sketches*. Etc. Then comes this: "To a considerable extent, then, American tourism has driven the Canadian memorialization of Stephen Leacock. …the building of touristic shrines to [Leacock] has, ironically, been driven by the power of American cultural claims upon Leacock" (48-49). That is not only insupportable but an egregious insult to Orillia, its residents, and the committees centred at the Leacock Memorial Home. According to York, Leacock "made a conscious decision to pursue fame within Canada" (50). I suppose it is possible that Leacock *un*consciously chased fame (which, like his view of his own "intrinsic worth," York is privileged to know), but consciously he decided to stay home: in Canada, Montreal and Orillia. So too did Northrop Frye, who believed that he could not have done his work anywhere but in Canada—because of the very cult of academic celebrity that pertained in such places as Harvard, Yale, and Oxford.

With regard to the trappings and challenges of literary celebrity, it may indeed have always been thus, but only to a much lesser degree, the degree whose trajectory went off the chart starting about 1920 and has long since shot out of sight. Now, in these latter literary days, such things as Oprah's Book Club, bigger and bigger prizes (because the bigger the better), "Canada Reads," and so on, become the ends instead of the helping means of literary pursuits, distorting rather than acting as reliable guides in the literary landscape. G.K. Chesterton performed a rhetorical turn whereby to test the truth of a truism he would posit its inverse. Here, where most say that the sorts of pseudo-literary events listed above draw attention to reading and books, we might posit that the likes of Oprah and her ilk draw attention away from the initially and necessarily private activity of reading and books (the plural). To my thinking, this is where a literary-critical analysis of "literary celebrity" should lead, to considerations of what craven "celebrity" culture does to the "literary" life of writers and readers, not to musings on the significance of Ondaatje's turn at the Oscars or Atwood's signature hair.

The following may constitute unfair quotation from *Literary Celebrity in Canada*, to the extent that the passage is so far over the top as to have disengaged with its own star-struck bottom:

> And so Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera publicly twisted tongues with Madonna at the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards, a move designed to prolong two young pop-music careers and resuscitate another one of earlier vintage. Movie starlets are often associated, right before the release of a new film, with older, A-list leading men, as the recent excessively public romance of Katie Holmes and Tom Cruise demonstrates. But in the world of literary production, though public tongue-wrestlings are not the usual publicity gambit, there is a process of consecration at work in the way the older, established writers may promote the work of an aspiring new writer.
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> In the case of Carol Shields, consecration takes another form....(146)

Deo gratias. We are spared the sight, if not the conjured scene, of Shields playing tonsil hockey with, say, Lynn Crosbie at, say, a Giller gala. But consider: even York's torturous 'reading' of this superstar text (her subject) is questionable, as I believe all three divas were at the time at the height of their fame. That insight aside, I nominate the subsequent paragraph opener for the *Canadian Poetry* Non-Sequitur/Wonky-Bridge of the Year Award.

As for the eminently sensible Shields, she is quoted as saying of her celebrity role, "'Just listening to yourself blather on induces a certain amount of self-loathing'." York proceeds to complicate Shields' truth by showing how such modesty furthers a reputation for modesty (in the world of celebrity, forget private truth: one cannot be anything but one's public image). But I prefer Shields' concession/confession just as it is. There is something loathsome, something slavering, about celebrity culture, and it engages the loathsomely needy in ourselves. The extent to which a writer participates in celebrity culture is equal to the degree she becomes self-loathing. Shields knew this; so too do Salinger, Pynchon, and Roth, to name but the best known. If their acting on that knowledge by becoming reclusive writers contributes something exotic to their celebrity images, that is beside the point, or is relevant only to point up that someone who views yet greater celebrity as the tactical purpose of privacy has already conceded everything to celebrity culture, including her own soul.

Oddly enough, stillborn in *Literary Celebrity in Canada* is a potentially promising literary biography of Carol Shields. Only with the least of its celebrities does Lorraine York's book begin to find its way into something worthwhile and original. Such a book could have used all the other stuff as a contextualizing introduction.

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