The Author as Star

Hugh Look

The rise of the "star" author and the cult of celebrity overwhelms publishing in the same way that it has movies and professional sports. Television creates the star system, agents nurture it. Publishers must find ways of surviving it. The Internet provides a means for star authors to reach their public without the intermediation of their publisher, but it is not yet a medium in which stars are born.

Dramatis Personae

Writers

"Authors are actors, books are theatres." (Wallace Stevens).

"Too much importance is given to the writer and not enough to his work. What difference does it make who he is and what he feels, since he's merely a machine for the transmission of ideas. In reality he doesn't exist—he's a cipher, a blank." (Paul Bowles).

"The shelf life of a modern hardback writer is somewhere between the milk and the yoghurt." (John Mortimer).

"I'm astounded by people who take eighteen years to write something. That's how long it took that guy to write Madame Bovary, and was it ever on the bestseller list?" (Sylvester Stallone).

"All writers are vain, selfish and lazy." (George Orwell).

Publishers

"As repressed sadists are supposed to become policemen or butchers, so those with an irrational fear of life become publishers." (Cyril Connolly).

"Publishers can get their minds half-way round anything." (John Le Carré).

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Agents

“If people would deal with each other honestly, they would not need agents.” (Raymond Chandler).

“Agents do nothing for the good of football. I’d like to see them lined up against a wall and machine-gunned . . . some accountants and solicitors with them.” (Graham Taylor).

Introduction

Authors have held the attention of a mass public for the past two centuries: in the English-speaking world, Dickens was perhaps the first who could be thought a genuine “star” in a sense close to today’s use of the word. His readings were media events.

Today, many authors have become “stars” (even if minor ones), and even more noticeably many stars have become authors. A media event like the O.J. Simpson trial can produce half-a-dozen forgettable books written by people whose short path to fame has been illuminated by the television lights. Many of these authors will never write another book (indeed, some of them may not write even the one), but the advance has been enough to allow them to give up their day jobs and find interview slots on radio shows around the world.

For the publisher, stars as authors present fewer problems than authors as stars: as one-hit wonders, the publisher is not likely to need to develop a long-lasting working relationship with them once the first draft has been delivered (and probably rewritten) unless by some strange quirk the author turns out to have some genuine talent.

These authors are perhaps better described as “celebrities” rather than stars, as stardom implies at least some surviving quality rather than just happening to be standing in the way of a publicity juggernaut. Celebrity publishing is a risky game, and several 1997 celebrity titles only sold in small numbers. Timing is everything, and here technology can do something to assist in terms of the production process, but the critical task of getting the author to write something readable on schedule can only be undertaken by another human being.

What Makes a Star?

Stardom is notoriously hard to define but easy to recognize in actors and pop stars. Obviously, the star must have “star quality,” but in itself that is not sufficient (although it is essential). Full stardom only happens when that quality is widely recognized by the public and rewarded by attention and by purchase of their output. In turn, this leads to perhaps the most important star quality: power.

For an author, it is not enough to be famous: there must be some quality to the writing and also the ability to continue to write. Genius is not essential; few of the genuine star authors fall into that category.