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Ohlsson, Anders; Forslid, Torbjörn; Steiner, Ann

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PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00

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## Literary celebrity reconsidered

Anders Ohlsson, Torbjörn Forslid & Ann Steiner  
Centre for Languages and Literature  
Lund University  
Sweden

### Abstract

The ongoing celebritisation of society not only comprises ‘celebrity sectors’ such as entertainment and sports, but also literature. As in other cultural fields, the commodities to be sold—books—are marketed using the ‘personalities’ directly connected to them by authors appearing on television shows or being selected for feature articles. The aim of the article is to point out limitations to the theoretical framework used in the study of literary celebrity. We argue for a differentiation in the use of the concept of celebrity in literary studies in three respects. Firstly, there should be a differentiation regarding author’s cultural capital. In contrast to the general tendency in celebrity studies to focus on popular culture, in literary studies the application of the theory has been limited to the most prestigious areas of the literary field. Consequently, a broadening of the perspective is necessary: authors of trade fiction may be conceived of as literary celebrities too. Secondly, there is a need for geographical differentiation, since the scope of influence of literary celebrities may vary significantly. Thirdly, we will argue for a diachronic differentiation that takes into account the changing functions and uses of a celebrity author over time. The main example, the Swedish novelist Selma

Lagerlöf, shows the necessity of a stronger focus on the functions of literary celebrities, for instance in the construction of cultural and national identities. Furthermore, celebrity is important for a more comprehensive literary history and for the complex concept of literary value.

**Keywords:** literary celebrity, Selma Lagerlöf, diachronic differentiation, literary value

## Literary celebrity reconsidered

The ongoing celebritisation of society—‘the ongoing historical process by which social institutions, social interaction, and the individual sense of self are increasingly organized [...] around an evermore differentiated network of more highly visible and recognized individuals’ (van Krieken 2012, p. 5)—not only comprises ‘celebrity sectors’ (van Krieken 2012, p. 50) such as entertainment, sport, and politics, but also literature. As commodities, celebrities embody a certain abstract capital—‘attention’. i.e. ‘high public *visibilty* and *recognition*’ (van Krieken 2012, p. 5)—that in today’s media-saturated society is felt to be in short supply.

Given the increase in book publishing during the last two decades—in the US a rapid rise from less than 50,000 to almost 350,000 new titles (between 1990 and 2011), and in the UK the annual output in 2011 was 150,000 titles (Miller and Nord 2009; Bowker 2012; Smith 2012)—it is obvious that conspicuousness is in high demand even in the literary field. Joe Moran’s starting point in *Star Authors. Literary celebrity in America* (2000) is the omnipresence of authors in different American media. According to Moran, this is an outcome of the conglomeration of the book publishing business (2000, pp. 35–6). As in other cultural fields, the commodities to be sold—books—are marketed using the ‘personalities’ directly connected to them, in other words by authors appearing on television shows or being selected for feature articles. Book promotion in different types of media channels has become increasingly important, as the structure of the media has changed attention spans and the effectiveness of different kinds of marketing strategy. In what has been termed ‘the attention economy’ (Davenport and Beck 2001), visibility is the most desirable asset in a media driven market.

Given the fact that a ‘celebrity function’ — ‘a capacity to attract attention, generating some sort of “surplus value” or benefit’ (van Krieken 2012, p. 10)—can be attributed to contemporary authors as well as to authors from earlier periods in history (McDayter 2009), a substantial body of research on authors as celebrities is to be found in the field of literary studies.

This article argues for a differentiation in the use of the concept of celebrity in literary studies in three respects. Firstly, there should be a differentiation regarding authors’ cultural capital. In contrast to the general tendency in celebrity studies to focus on popular culture, in literary studies the application of the concept has in many cases been limited to the most prestigious areas of the literary field. Consequently, we ask for a broadening of the perspective: authors of trade fiction may be conceived of as literary celebrities too. Secondly, there is a need for geographical differentiation, since the scope of influence of literary celebrities may vary significantly. Thirdly, we will argue for a diachronic differentiation, that takes into account the changing functions and uses of an author celebrity over time.

Furthermore, assuming the same sceptical attitude as Turner (2010) towards merely describing instances of literary celebrity, we will argue for a stronger focus on its *function* in the construction of cultural and national identities, for the necessity of a more comprehensive literary history, and for the importance of the complex and intriguing concept of literary value. One of our main examples will be Swedish novelist and Nobel Prize Laureate Selma Lagerlöf (1858–1940). An internationally recognised literary celebrity in her own lifetime, whose novels were made into various Hollywood films starring the likes of Greta Garbo, Lagerlöf the celebrity has been constructed and used in distinctly different ways since her death.

As a result of intense media exposure, some authors have become brands. This in turn leaves readers wanting to get behind the public persona and get a glimpse of the ‘real’ person. Different kinds of publicity—author interviews and feature articles—may seem to offer an ‘authentic’ version of the person in question. Furthermore, this longing for authenticity has paved the way for authors to perform live at literary festivals and other cultural events. There is an increased pressure on individual authors to be accessible to journalists and to appear in different media contexts. The media-shy author standing aloof from the commercialism of the market might be a part of an old tradition, but it is a difficult position to maintain in the twenty-first century.

Furthermore, marketing through live appearances has also proven to be cost-effective. A decade or so ago, Moran could state that ‘a ten-city author tour costs about the same as, and reaches considerably more prospective consumers than, a full-page advertisement in *New York Times Book Review*’ (2000, p. 37). However, while it might be an effective method for the publisher, for the individual author it can be strenuous. In order to establish a position, become famous even, a new or not yet established author will be required to make these kinds of trips. The celebrity author, meanwhile, will reach a much wider audience by simply appearing on the right television shows in the right countries. There has been a shift in the publishing trade where the responsibility for marketing has gradually moved from the publisher to the author and agent. The pressure is on authors not only to make personal promotional tours but also—depending upon genre and expected audience—to be present in social media. Personal websites, blogs, Twitter, Facebook—all have been increasingly used ever since it dawned on marketers that Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series was ‘the first social networking best seller’ (Green 2008).

In order to understand the importance of celebrity for literary studies, we will begin by presenting an outline of the ‘death and return of author’ within the discipline.

### **The author in literary studies**

The advent of celebrity studies in the 1990s paralleled the ‘return of the author’ (Burke 1992) in literary studies at much the same time. Early in the twentieth century, the author had been bracketed by a number of literary theories. The decision of formalism and ‘The New Criticism’ to neglect the author was grounded in a methodological choice. Given the purpose of literary criticism as conceived of in this critical tradition—evaluating and understanding works of literature—literary scholars were expected to limit themselves to the words on the page. The text in question could not be evaluated against the ‘intention’ of the author, because how could one ever find out what that was? Even if one could, a poem is, to cite a famous passage from Wimsatt and Beardsley’s key text ‘The Intentional Fallacy’, ‘detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it’ (Wimsatt 1954, p. 5). Furthermore, finding out whether writer A consciously alluded to writer B is unnecessary, since (great) literature has a ‘suggestive power’ (1954, p. 15) guaranteeing its effects. A poem is able to speak for itself—at least in the hands of a well-educated literary scholar. Consequently, the study of literature should limit itself to ‘intrinsic’ aspects, in other words its structure, to borrow a phrase from Wellek and Warren’s well-known *Theory of Literature* (1948).

The anti-biographical stance taken by post-structuralist critics such as Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes a couple of decades later was grounded in an ontological statement concerning language. As soon as writing begins, the author’s voice—its cadences weaving into the discourses that not only long preceded its existence, but that also make it possible—is bound to lose its origin. According to Barthes, the position of

the author in classical criticism, as the source of meaning and the unity behind or beneath the text, is grounded in a misconception of the nature of writing: ‘writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing’ (Barthes 1995, p. 125). Writing ‘I’ might not be equated with someone expressing pre-textual beliefs through language. Rather it is to enter into a language that predates the writing I, thus speaking through the subject: ‘it is language which speaks, not the author’ (Barthes 1995: 125–6). Such a conception of language and writing makes biographical criticism futile.

Moran, interestingly, also suggests a connection between the development of anti-biographical discourses by Barthes and Foucault and the celebritisation of society leading to authors gaining prominent positions in different media. Writing in the 1960s, Barthes complained that the ‘image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions’ (1995: 126), thus paralleling author-centred French literary criticism, which was firmly grounded in a strong phenomenological tradition. Consequently, it would seem that the increase in the number of author celebrities following the Second World War might have helped trigger the post-structuralist anti-biographical discourse.

Today, the anti-biographical position is untenable for a number of reasons. To ignore the importance of authors of different kinds of witness literature—gender oppression, colonialism, or the Holocaust—is problematic both from an academic and moral perspective, since the authenticity of these texts, which is crucial, is closely connected to the figure of the author. This does not mean a return to classical biographical criticism, however; rather, it has to do with the insight that reading literature and understanding culture necessarily requires the reader to take different



kinds of contextual circumstances into consideration. Needless to say, authors or literary celebrities do not inhabit a privileged position in the negotiation of meaning in literature. Defending biographical criticism from a post-structuralist position, Stanley Fish pointed out back in 1991 that the ‘choice ... is not between reading biographically and reading in some other way (there is no other way) but rather between different biographical readings that have their source in different specifications of the sources of agency’ (Fish 1991, p. 13–4). Thus, theories of literary celebrity form an important part of a new biographical criticism as well as a challenge to traditional literary studies.

As has often been observed, definitions of ‘celebrity’ abound within the theoretical literature of the field. In this article, we conceive of a celebrity as a person who, due to intense media representation, has the ability to ‘attract attention, generating some surplus value or benefit derived from the fact of being well known (highly visible) [...] in at least one public arena’ (van Krieken 2012, p. 10), be it power, money, or ideological influence (Marshall 1997). Moreover, celebrities are signs, subject to interpretation and negotiation among its consumers (Turner 2004), given their ‘glamour’ and ability to make an ‘impact on public consciousness’ (Rojek 2001, p. 10). The authors to be considered here have become celebrities by way of their literary performances; in other words, their works of literature have paved the way for the media representation. Their celebrity is ‘achieved’ (Rojek 2001, p. 18), and always stands in direct relation to their literary works.

In order to understand how literary celebrity functions, viewed through the lens of literary studies, different aspects of literary celebrity will be discussed, using several examples of internationally well-known authors. A central example of a global author will be the Swedish author Selma Lagerlöf, as she provides evidence of the strengths in the concept, but also why it needs to be more accurately defined.

### **Differentiation regarding cultural capital**

In his seminal study, Moran (2000) focuses on such authors as Mark Twain and Philip Roth. One of his main points is that a literary celebrity, unlike celebrities in other fields such as sport or entertainment, combines commercial and media success with a considerable amount of cultural capital. These authors form part of ‘middlebrow’ culture. Consequently, best-selling authors such as John Grisham and Stephen King are omitted from the book because, according to Moran, they are ‘more read than read about’ (2000, p. 6).

There are some obvious objections to this statement. Presumably, Moran does not mean that Grisham and King are unknown to their readers. Just like Roth, they certainly are ‘read about’, and their private lives have been subject of various types of media coverage. Needless to say, Grisham and King are publicly recognised, and as distinct brands they are part of consumer culture. In one sense, though, they certainly are ‘more read’ when compared to authors such as Updike and Roth, as their works have more readers. From a traditional viewpoint, however, their cultural value is low: Grisham and King are not likely to be nominated for prestigious literary prizes or to be reviewed in ‘serious’ papers and magazines. In short, Grisham and King are ‘best-selling authors’. By contrast, Updike and Roth represent a ‘borderline’ phenomenon. They are authors of literary fiction with high sales figures. Such authors can successfully negotiate the conflict between economic success and cultural prestige (Moran 2000, pp. 6–7). Both types of authors can generate what is generally termed ‘big books’ (Thompson 2012, pp. 187–8), meaning the titles that agents and publishers regard as their most valuable assets and focus their marketing attention on. It is clear, however, that the celebrity of Updike and Roth differs from that of Grisham and King. Nevertheless, all four are literary celebrities.

Later applications of celebrity theory to literary studies are characterised by the same limitation to authors firmly established in the more prestigious parts of the literary field. In his *Authors Inc. Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States 1880–1980* (2004), Loren Glass explores the relationship between canonical American authors—from Mark Twain to Norman Mailer—and the US mass media. Drawing on Moran (2000), Lorraine York in her *Literary Celebrity in Canada* (2007) limits herself to authors from an intermediate position ‘between the forces of cultural and economic capital’ (2007, p. 21). Subsequent, ground-breaking studies on literary modernism informed by celebrity theory—by for instance Aaron Jaffee (2005), Jonathan Goldman (2012) and Timothy W. Galow (2011)—are characterised by an even stronger emphasis on culturally authoritative authors.

This self-imposed limitation to ‘quality’ writers is indicative of a still prevalent tradition in literary studies, even when, as in the examples mentioned, questions of the literary marketplace are brought to the fore. Obviously, such a narrow conception of literary celebrity leaves no room for commercially successful authors of popular literature such as J. K. Rowling and Stieg Larsson. Of course, they too should be considered literary celebrities. Like modernist celebrities, Rowling’s and Larsson’s celebrity has been ‘achieved’ through their accomplishments within the genres of fantasy and crime fiction respectively; to put it differently, their novels belong to the very best within the genres in question. Pace Moran’s argument for leaving authors of popular literature outside literary celebrity, Stieg Larsson is both ‘read’ and ‘read about’. Larsson’s life story has received a great deal of attention (Baksi 2010, Forshaw 2010, Pettersson 2012) and his death the year before his first novel hit the market in 2005 contributed to his (posthumous) celebrity.

If we are to take literary celebrity and make it a credible and useful concept within literary studies, we must take all the different parts of the field into consideration. Authors writing in more prestigious genres tend to be suspicious of publicity; however, reviews in daily papers, literary magazines, and select television shows are things most authors would welcome. The difference lies in the nature of the particular shows, papers, and journals, as well as, of course, on the manner of writing or the way interviews are conducted. In the case of authors of trade fiction, high media visibility and high sales figures are considered to be marks of success. Any kind of presence in the press, television, radio, or social media is considered a good thing.

### **Geographical differentiation**

Another necessary differentiation in the concept of celebrity derives from the existence—and importance—of geographical differences. As Olivier Driessens has remarked, ‘every culture or nation has its own heroes, stars and celebrities. Most of these people’s fame does not reach beyond cultural or national boundaries, which makes celebrity culture essentially a plural and heterogeneous phenomenon’ (2012, p. 3). The fame or celebrity of an individual author can thus vary according to geographical reach, be it local, national, or international. Some authors—like athletes and politicians—are ‘stars’ in a certain city or area, but practically unknown beyond; however, it is the national celebrity who is more often discussed and analysed. The Swedish novelist Björn Ranelid, for instance, began his career in 1983 as an acclaimed writer of literary fiction. While still publishing novels on a regular basis, today he is much better known as a performance artist and a regular on different television shows (Forslid and Ohlsson 2010). Far from every Swedish citizen has read a novel by Ranelid, but he is known and recognised by most people in the country. Though a literary celebrity in Sweden, only a few of Ranelid’s works have been translated into other Scandinavian languages. He has

not—and probably never will—make the leap to a Scandinavian celebrity, known and read in neighbouring countries such as Denmark and Norway.

Obviously, a great number of literary celebrities do operate on an international level as global celebrities. An investigation into these different categories—local, national, and global—would shed further light on differences in literary celebrity. It might also help clarify the conditions for different transition processes, for instance how or why national literary fame can develop into global celebrity. Geographical differences in the perception of a celebrity author depend on such things as genre, country of origin, and publisher. These aspects are complexly intertwined, and the publishing industry, tradition, the media, and the audience all leave their mark.

Due mainly to the structure of Anglo-American publishing and the global dominance of the English language, literary celebrities from the US or UK tend to achieve greater fame than their colleagues in other nations—they are present at parties, red carpets, photo sessions with heavily styled marketing material, and television shows all of a kind generally reserved for other kinds of media celebrities. This has been the case, for example, with the American author Stephanie Meyer. Her persona in the public domain, her back-story, is one that she and her publishing house have fashioned and retold; a highly orchestrated version of her life where the image of the middle-aged Mormon mother of three has been transformed into a likeable intellectual woman. There is the rags-to-riches Cinderella story combined with a woman who could easily be your next-door neighbour. In some versions of her life, the presentation has been filtered through her own fiction, where she becomes synonymous with Bella, the female protagonist of the *Twilight* novel series, despite having little resemblance to her (Steiner and Larsson 2011).

The fact that the story of the author Stephanie Meyer is well contained, controlled, and systematic can to a large extent be explained by her publisher—Little, Brown Books, a subsidiary of Hachette Book Group, and a company within one of the largest media conglomerates in the world, Lagardère—who had a well-thought-out strategy and a strong international position that assured them some control over the spread of different versions, or distortions, of the Meyer story. Furthermore, there is a sense of all things American being the world norm, thereby avoiding exoticism or other alterations to her image. As such, Meyer is an interesting example of a worldwide celebrity author being treated in essentially the same way in most Western countries.

Yet not all celebrities are created equal, and a comparison between Meyer and the Swedish crime-fiction author Stieg Larsson is illustrative. There are many possible angles in such a comparison—gender, genre—but in terms of global publishing clout, only nationality and publisher will be discussed.

When Stieg Larsson's Millennium trilogy became an international best seller, he was already dead, and so of course he could never generate the same type of media exposure and online activity that Meyer did. A dead celebrity author is a strange case, but when famous people have died prematurely their deaths have often created an even stronger link between them and their readers, for they can now be fitted more easily to the audience's ideals. In the case of Larsson, a stable version of his image (stable because it would not be altered by his own actions) was to be expected, but reception varied considerably. In Sweden, or for that matter in the other Scandinavian countries, Larsson is not seen as a typically Swedish author. His work's affinity with British and American crime fiction has often been stressed, as has his ability to create images of the dark side of modern society seen in most countries today. Even though the stories are set in Stockholm and other identifiable places around the country, they are not regarded

as fiction that depicts Swedish national characteristics. However, outside Scandinavia, Larsson's work has been received and read as relating an image of contemporary Sweden—a nation that is no longer the welfare state it could once boast to be (for example, Fraser 2009). The stress on the Larsson's 'Swedishness' can be viewed as exoticism, or perhaps as a way to compartmentalise the texts. Unlike an American celebrity, any author from a non-English speaking country, or even from any country outside the US and UK, will easily be perceived as different and exotic—positively plastered with national signs and codes. The meaning of global celebrities who originate from the US or the UK seems to be subject to variation to a much lesser degree than that of global celebrities from other parts of the world.

Nationality is not the only explanation for how the celebrity story is spread and contained; in most cases, the original publisher is of great importance. A local publisher does not have the means or the experience to create and maintain worldwide control of an author's persona. The global media conglomerates operate on an international scale with their authors' images, while by comparison a more nationally oriented publishing house will hand over marketing and branding to the various companies in other countries that have bought the rights. In effect, this means that the image of authors such as Larsson, Mo Yan, and Carlos Ruiz Zafón will be altered and possibly transformed depending on the country and circumstances of publication.

### **Diachronic differentiation**

The need for geographical differentiation in the theory of literary celebrity is matched by a need for diachronic differentiation. Applications of the theory are not generally ahistoric. On the contrary, the awareness of differing conditions for celebrity due to the actual, historical circumstances—for example, the immense difference between the turns of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries—is obvious in most applications of

the theory. However, once the celebrity of a certain author has been established, the literary celebrity is treated without much attention paid to the changing status, conditions, and importance of his or her celebrity. The prevailing notion appears to be ‘once a celebrity, always a celebrity’. What is needed is a greater focus on the changing uses of celebrity, even long after the death of the author in question. The public use of Swedish Nobel laureate and celebrity, Selma Lagerlöf, in her native country in the decade following her death, differs significantly from how she has been represented on television some fifty years later.

From the turn of the twentieth century, Lagerlöf was a well-known author, appearing frequently in other media, for example, around her 50th birthday in 1908. Early on, Lagerlöf had noticed a split between her private and public identities. According to Rojek, this is a typical experience among celebrities (2001, p. 11). In a letter to her friend Valborg Olander the year before she turned fifty, Lagerlöf wrote that ‘I have got this feeling of being transformed into some sort of lifeless institution, some sort of brand name that people use for making business’ (Wägner 1942–3, p. 224). Notwithstanding, Lagerlöf herself made use of her fame in order to restore the country estate where she was born, where ‘Mårbacka Oatmeal’ was produced and exported with her signature as Nobel Laureate on the packaging.

Fundamental to Lagerlöf’s celebrity were her literary performances, in other words her successful novels and collections of short stories. As a female writer in the early twentieth century, she had a unique confidence in her own ability and talent, and herself took important steps in order to promote her literary career. She gave readings of portions of her novels, and she sent her debut novel to the most influential critics of the day asking for reviews.



After the publication of *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* in 1906–1907, Lagerlöf received wide public recognition of her talent. In 1909, she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature as the first Swede and as the first female author. Five years later, she was elected member of the Swedish Academy, again as the first woman ever. Another sign of Lagerlöf's position as a national icon was the fact that eight of her novels were adapted for the screen between 1917 and 1924. New cheap editions and translations made her novels available to fresh groups of readers in Sweden and abroad. Furthermore, academic research throughout the twentieth century has strengthened Lagerlöf's position as a literary celebrity.

The 150th anniversary of Lagerlöf's birthday in 2008 saw some 200 events across Sweden, and had a significant media impact. The national public service broadcaster, for example, set up a website entitled 'Selma Lagerlöf 150 years — we honour an excellent author'. Two television shows aired on Swedish television during the anniversary year of 2008 show how representations of Lagerlöf, and the values ascribed to her, have differed over the years. The first, *Selma Lagerlöf—100-årsjubileum* ('Selma Lagerlöf— 100 Year Commemoration', 2008), was a rerun of a 1958 documentary about Lagerlöf followed by a studio discussion. The second, the biopic *En brusande färd* ('A Bustling Ride'), was produced for the commemoration in 2008.

For today's viewers, the 1958 documentary may have seemed a bit outmoded, dominated as it is by stills. It resembles a traditional laudatory biography. The narrator reads solemnly from a manuscript that is emphatically literary in style. The stills and film clips are accompanied by nineteenth-century national romantic music of a type that already seemed outmoded at the time of the original production. In the programme,

Lagerlöf is described as an intellectual author, and the biographical perspective is dominant.

The programme pays tribute to Selma Lagerlöf for having depicted Swedish culture per se. According to the narrator, Lagerlöf's novels wholly set outside Sweden and dealing with non-Swedes were not very successful, in contrast to the novel *Jerusalem* (1901–1902), describing the motivations and dilemmas of people from rural Sweden who leave their homes for Palestine. According to the narrator, it was the Swedish connection that set Lagerlöf's creativity free and explained the success of the novel. Thus *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* is characterised as an 'inspired piece of literature about Sweden'. A nationalistic perspective thus is central to the documentary, perhaps unsurprisingly given that the Fifties were a time of recovery in Sweden after the Second World War, bringing a noticeable rise in prosperity, especially in comparison with many other European countries.

Lagerlöf is portrayed as utterly modern. By allowing her novels to be adapted into films, she contributed to the 'Golden Age of Swedish Film'. A scene in which Lagerlöf closely examines a strip of film underscores this. Additionally, she is shown owning a brand-new car, an icon of modernity if ever there was one. This image of Lagerlöf was slightly revised during the studio discussion that followed the airing of the 1958 show. Nationalism was still an issue, and viewers were reminded that Selma Lagerlöf was the first female Nobel Laureate. The thousands of letters addressed to the author during her lifetime were the starting point of her thank-you speech at the Nobel Prize award ceremony. In their letters, Lagerlöf's readers often described the way they had been moved by her works, and then went on to seek her advice, and sometimes even to ask for money. The letters were said to testify to the fan culture that grew up

around Lagerlöf. Consequently, national pride may still be legitimate; however, it is founded on the idea of the author as bosom friend, willing to help her devoted readers.

The admiring tone recurs in the second show to be considered here: *En brusande färd* ('A Bustling Ride'). From the very outset, it is made clear that Lagerlöf was a dedicated feminist author. Needless to say, this perspective held a prominent place in literary studies from the 1980s onwards. Refusing to marry in order to study to become a teacher and later a writer, Lagerlöf opposed the will of her father. Her rebellion against her father is conceived of in the programme as the epitome of developments in the 1890s, at the time of Lagerlöf's debut as an author. This was the time of the 'death of God' and the fall of the patriarchs. Thus, her first novel *Gösta Berling's Saga* (1891), although set during the 1820s, dealt with problems in her own time. Consequently, it remains a modern and important novel, even for today's readers. The general impression of the programme is that Lagerlöf was a hard-working, feminist author.

Furthermore, the programme depicts her as an energetic entrepreneur. With the help of the Nobel Prize money, she bought back the country house where she was raised and rebuilt it as a 'modern home for a career woman with a great deal of entertaining'. Thus, Lagerlöf created a proper home for a 'world-class author'. She is shown as constantly busy and actively taking part in social issues, for example, women's rights and the peace question. In addition to the feminist success story, the programme answers questions about Lagerlöf's works by referring to her life and experiences—to her biography. Adaptations of her novels are used to illustrate the narrative of her life. The implicit assumption is that her novels deal with or 'mirror' the life of her biographical self.

Evidently, in the case of Selma Lagerlöf, her celebrity has been used and reshaped in different ways over time, from national icon to struggling feminist. The

proposed diachronic differentiation exposes such changes in the representation of a celebrity at different points in history. As a sign, the celebrity is open to interpretation.

### **Functions of literary celebrity**

What is the potential of celebrity as a critical tool in literary studies? To begin with, the mere use of the concept of celebrity may still be considered a critical practice, since media visibility and the market have been considered to fall outside the scope of traditional literary studies. Literary criticism informed by celebrity studies may at first sight resemble established genres such as literary biography or reception studies. In contrast to for instance Hermione Lee's *Virginia Woolf* (1996) or Ann Rigney's *The Afterlives of Walter Scott* (2012), focusing on the 'life and letters' and the aftermath of the author's oeuvre respectively, the celebrity perspective implies a transgression of the traditional boundaries of literary studies. Celebrity theory provides tools and concepts for a more thorough analysis of the commodification and mediatization of the author.

The concept of celebrity may be applied in many different ways in literary studies. In a somewhat harsh recent article, Turner states that celebrity studies 'is populated with analyses of individual celebrities either as media texts interesting in their own right or as pointers to broader cultural formations or political issues; in either case, the focus of analysis is upon the details of their representation through the media' (2010, p. 13). With this approach, celebrity studies runs the risk of becoming part of the celebration of selected individuals, thus losing its critical potential. Indeed, if merely descriptive, such a study might even help fuel the process of celebritisation. Following Turner, we contend that what is needed in literary studies is a much greater emphasis on the function of celebrity. This is what Lorraine York does in her illuminating *Literary Celebrity in Canada* by focusing on the importance of celebrity for negotiating complex issues such as national identity. Until 2006, three writers have been included along with

the sport stars, actors and directors honoured in the Canadian Walk of Fame located in Toronto's theatre district, among them Margaret Atwood. Given her international success and status as a national spokesperson, the inclusion of Atwood seems thoroughly logical. The example of Lagerlöf also testifies to the possibility of using literary celebrity to dissect the construction of national identity.

Literary celebrities may also provide material for the construction of cultural identity on an individual basis. Once again, we turn to Selma Lagerlöf and a third television programme, *Selma*, aired in prime time at Christmas 2008. This two-part show gave rise to a heated debate on the use of Lagerlöf as a celebrity. Even if the overall framework of the show was documentary, many scenes and details are fictional.

Female love and sexuality as well as criticism of patriarchy and female subordination, are the dominant themes. The setting of the first part is Sicily, where Lagerlöf and Sophie Elkan are sharing a room in a tourist hotel; the second, Nobel Day fourteen years later, as Lagerlöf is about to receive her prize. The opening scene immediately establishes an intimate relationship between Lagerlöf and Elkan. Later on, naked in a bathtub, Elkan discusses the possibility of crossing 'the border' in order to find out whether she is still 'normal'. Additionally, although the show hints that Selma is attracted to the famous Swedish painter Carl Larsson (1853–1919), staying at the same hotel, she spends a night with a young Sicilian woman, who turns out to be a prostitute.

In the second part of *Selma*, a young man is blackmailing Lagerlöf not to read out the thank-you speech for her Nobel Prize as she originally intended. Faced with the threat of her love letters to Elkan being made public, Lagerlöf refrains from making a political statement on women's rights. Instead, she pays a tribute to her father, as the real author actually did. However, simultaneously, she blames him. More importantly,

Lagerlöf's visit to her mother in the final scene illustrates that her mother's diligence and hard work have always been her inspiration. Her mother, not her father, was her role model. Symbolically, Lagerlöf puts the Nobel medal in her mother's hands.

As these three examples from the representation of Selma Lagerlöf in 2008 show, literary celebrity can be used in different, contradictory ways. During the 1950s, Lagerlöf was represented as an inspiring national icon; very different from her representation in 2008, when one account had her as a struggling feminist and the other as a lesbian. The heated debate that followed the broadcast of the drama testifies to the use of celebrity in the construction of cultural identity, and the programme's reception was very varied: some critics deplored the portrait, while others praised the outspoken depiction of her as a lesbian. Both these reactions are justified in different ways.

Traditionally literary biography most often has protected the author's name and reputation. Turner (2004, p. 102), on the other hand, argues for a more non-condemnatory attitude towards celebrity, acknowledging celebrity consumption as a tool for identity construction that comprises instances of negotiation, and where the celebrity does not necessary serve as a role model.

Clearly, the celebrity perspective has the potential to provide a more comprehensive literary history. The concept helps us identify and better understand the intricate relationship between, say, high modernism and mass culture, a relationship which until recently has often been denied by literary critics, who see nothing but opposition and even antagonism between the two. Glass, Jaffee, Goldberg, and Galow have all pointed out previously denied or hidden connections between authors from the 'highbrow' literary field—for instance, Eliot and Pound—and the market.

Furthermore, celebrity theory might help clarify the important, complicated, and, in literary studies, ever present issue of value. From the very outset at the turn of the

nineteenth century, literary studies have been intimately linked to the question of literary worth. However, the premise has been, and still is, an evaluation where the selection accords with the definition of fine art that was established at the end of the eighteenth century, according to which literary value was seen as inherent in the literary work itself. Ever since, stylistic originality has largely been equated with literary value (Bloom 1994, 2000; Crowther 2007).

In the last couple of decades, however, many scholars have emphasised the constructedness of literary value. Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1988) uses a more philosophical perspective; Jim Collins (2010), media theory and cultural studies. The basic premise is that a text only gains value in relation to someone or something, an individual or institution, and that value is created by negotiation, where different needs, interests, and abilities, and indeed the struggle for status (Bourdieu 1996) and money, are the driving forces.

One key aspect in this ongoing debate about the making of literary value is how the author representations, and thus celebrification—the process by which an individual gains celebrity status (Driessens 2012, p. 3)—influence the manifold and complex value-negotiation process. Better descriptions and analyses are needed of how authors stage themselves at live or mediated literary events, and how this contributes to the value negotiation.

By bringing the economic and media dimensions to the fore, celebrity studies might help us better understand and describe the process of canon formation. Neither the literary text nor the gender of the author (for which read male) themselves determine the continuous evaluation and negotiation process of literary worth. Media visibility and commercial aspects are other important factors with a bearing on this process.

## Conclusions

The concept of celebrity certainly deserves attention in literary studies. The former anti-biographical stance towards the author figure is no longer tenable in today's media-saturated society. The public *persona* of an author is undoubtedly an important part of his or her authorship.

As a critical tool, however, the celebrity concept needs to be *differentiated* in a number of ways. In this article, we have argued for differentiations by cultural capital, geography, and chronology. Furthermore, the *functions* of literary celebrity must be brought to the fore. Literary celebrity is—and always has been—a key component in the construction of national identity or individual reader identity. It also provides a more comprehensive literary history. Literary celebrity is also vital in the complex process of negotiating value. The way in which a writer is portrayed in the media will affect the evaluation of his or her texts.

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