
In her earlier book on Canadian literary celebrity, Literary Celebrity in Canada, Lorraine York (2007) heads her chapter on Margaret Atwood with a comment Atwood made in 1973: “I've been described as the Barbra Streisand of Can Lit ... But I think of myself more as the Mary Pickford, spreading joy” (99). As York mentions, Atwood’s observation is both wry and self-aware. Mary Pickford, a Canadian actress who eventually became a Hollywood starlet during the silent era, made the transition from the margins of her profession, far from the engines of international celebrity, to a central role as a prominent film producer, public benefactress, and founder of the United Artists film studio. Near the beginning of her own illustrious career, when she herself was becoming a celebrity author, Atwood’s pithy comment provides ample evidence of her awareness that her own career trajectory had much in common with Pickford’s.

In Margaret Atwood and the Labour of Literary Celebrity, Lorraine York examines Atwood’s acute awareness of the potential and the dangers of celebrity—and the rewards of managing it wisely.

In this lively and provocative book, York focuses on Atwood’s celebrity as the product of Atwood’s early decision to approach the work of writing and publishing as a cultural industry. Work began in the 1960s, when Atwood took the advice of her friend and mentor Jane Rule to get an agent. In 1976, Atwood professionalized her work and image further when she became the first Canadian author to incorporate herself as O.W. Toad, an anagram of her own name (p. 7). From her careful reading of the correspondence archived by Atwood and O.W. Toad, York shows that Atwood is neither helpless in the face of unmanageable fame, nor an empty sign managed by others. Rather, Atwood is a canny author and self-aware cultural worker who treats the craft of writing as an art, and treats the management of her career and image as serious business. “Margaret Atwood” as a brand is the result of decades of collaboration between Atwood; the office of O.W. Toad and its assistant—who manages her correspondence and her public appearances to promote new books and projects; her long-time agent, Phoebe Larmore; and a group of editors who work with the content and presentation of Atwood’s writing at every step in the production process. Atwood has created a network of business associates who help her make decisions and manage the business of what Graham Huggan (2001) has called “Atwood Inc.,” while she remains at the centre of the production of both her image and the cultural products that bear her name. At the same time she is often ironic, even caustic, about her own fame and about the idea of writing as a business.

York reserves her judgment about Atwood’s stance about celebrity, calling it “complicated” (p. 132). She does say at many points that the study of literary celebrity itself could benefit from approaching Canadian publishing as another field of cul-
tural production in Pierre Bourdieu’s sense: as an ecosystem where the author interacts with other cultural agents. I heartily support this approach, which is still rare in Canada. But I must take issue with York’s contention that there is relatively little scholarly material available on the history and activity of literary agents, editors, or other kinds of cultural workers. This is true for the Canadian context, but not elsewhere. Studies of this type do exist in international book history about contemporary publishing, agents, and editing (Simon & McCarthy, 2009; Thompson, 2010; Wirtén 2009). There are memoirs by important publishers and editors about editing (Athill, 2002; Epstein, 2002; Schiffrin, 2001), there is research about books and marketing (Miller, 2007; Scott, 2009; Squires, 2007), and, from cultural studies, there is research about cultural workers (Beck, 2003; Hesmondhalgh, 2011; McRobbie, 2002), which connects the labour of cultural industries, such as television, print, and new media, together.

The strength of Margaret Atwood and the Labour of Literary Celebrity, and what makes it a fascinating and pleasurable read, is its depth of detail about Atwood as a case study. It is no easy feat, York shows, to be critically acclaimed, a bestselling author, and an international success who is also an excellent businesswoman and, sometimes, an activist and public figure. Atwood does not undertake all this alone. Margaret Atwood and the Labour of Literary Celebrity highlights the labour of Atwood’s team as evidence of the often-invisible work of the publishing and bookselling industries, which is indispensable for authors who want to have productive and lucrative careers. To understand Atwood’s literary celebrity, York says that we should adopt approaches like Graeme Turner’s (2004), which emphasizes the cultural industries (and their workers) that produce the celebrity as a product. At the same time, York sees Atwood as an agent with full presence, who works hard to maintain an ironic distancing from many of the apparatuses of celebrity, so that she can retain her cultural capital as not “just” an author, but as a literary author who makes quality books. In one of the funnier moments of this study, York shows that the 2011 attempt by former Toronto City Councillor Doug Ford to ridicule Atwood’s critique of a plan to close Toronto public libraries ran straight into the power and craft of Atwood’s stardom. Atwood’s ability to manage social media and use her own celebrity to intervene in public debates meant that Ford was no match for her, her hundreds of thousands of Twitter followers, and international public opinion. As York writes, “the author is a primary source in an industry that feeds many others—agents, editors, researcher, librarians, book designers, publishers, critics like me, and yes, Councillor [Doug] Ford, you and your city too” (p. 31). Doug Ford, and his now infamous brother, former Mayor Rob Ford, could learn a thing or two from Atwood and her management of celebrity.

References


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