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The sliding scale of celebrity authorship: Three writers face their adoring (and otherwise) public with very different results

Abstract:

This paper examines three authors' lives in relation to their response to their status as 'star authors' (Moran, 2000). All three experienced a meteoric rise to fame as a result of a single work of thinly-veiled if not autobiographical fiction, with this work being widely acclaimed, translated into other languages and perhaps unsurprisingly in the current celebrity obsessed culture, Hollywood films. How these authors negotiated their fame and the subsequent praise and criticism that followed, is the focus of this paper. The three authors are Elizabeth Gilbert, Bret Easton Ellis and Harper Lee.

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‘If I bitch about being recognised in airports, put a sock in my mouth. The book benefited my life at every level.’ Elizabeth Gilbert (Marshall, 2009)

In the galaxy of what Joe Moran termed ‘star authors’ (2000) one of the brightest current stars is Elizabeth Gilbert, author of best-selling memoir *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman’s Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* (2006). *Eat, Pray, Love* as it is more commonly known, transformed Gilbert from an award-winning but little-known journalist and non-fiction writer into a star author in a matter of months after its debut in February 2006, and remains on the *New York Times* Bestseller list 137 weeks later (New York Times, 2009). It has been translated into 30 languages and there are over 7 million copies in print (Montgomery, 2009).

Gilbert interacts with her readers via her personal website, with television appearances and, most importantly, through meeting her reading public readily and patiently (Montgomery, 2009). Her humorous, insightful talk at the 2009 TED (Technology, Education, Design) conference has been rated one of the most popular of all time by the millions of subscribers to that website. Gilbert typifies the 21st century wordsmith: accessible and unabashedly revealing herself in print and online.

However, the manner in which Gilbert has both responded to and embraced her success has been the subject of both praise and criticism. From the date of the publication of *Eat, Pray, Love*, many book critics have been divided in their opinions of the author and her work. Her book has for instance been described as ‘narcissistic New Age reading’ (Callahan, 2007) but others have found the author to be ‘a feminist icon’ (Hays, 2009). Gilbert’s frankness about her writing and life seemingly allow the same kind of honesty in her reviews; she is described as ‘self-congratulatory and self-absorbed’ and ‘funny, self-deprecating, fiercely intelligent’ in the same review (Leibovich, 2006). Regardless of opinions of the book itself, one thing is undeniable: Elizabeth Gilbert is cognisant of her audience, and gives them what they want; more of the kind of insightful self-reflection that propelled her novel to the top of the bestseller lists. Her interviews provide self-effacing glimpses into her life, her self-doubt and her ongoing ‘spiritual journey’ (Oprah.com, 2009).

Gilbert twice accepted invitations to appear on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (Montgomery, 2009), securing her place in the pantheon of writers lauded by the influential talk show host. Perhaps she was forewarned by the experience of Jonathan Franzen, who after complaining bitterly to several interviewers about his selection on Oprah’s Book Club, was quietly *uninvited* to the planned filmed dinner celebrating his book and then tried without success to get re-invited after reconsidering (Zeitchik, 2001). Franzen’s *The Corrections* won the National Book Award, but lost the opportunity to bask in the reflected glory of what is known as ‘The Oprah Effect’ (Konchar-Farr, 2004). Winfrey’s influence on American readers is well-documented with Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* garnering an additional 40,000 sales after the book was featured in her 1996 Book Club list. This was despite the novel’s age: it was first published in 1977 and had sold less than 2,000 copies in the year before its inclusion on Oprah’s list (Furman, 2003). So too, with *Eat, Pray, Love*. While not a Book Club selection (Marshall, 2009) Winfrey championed both the author and message of *Eat, Pray Love* enthusiastically, leading to the creation of an *Eat, Pray,*

Love: Spiritual Journeys section within the popular talk show hosts' website (Oprah.com, 2009). This ensures ongoing interest and publicity for the book and its author.

And then there's the TED talk. Gilbert's 2009 TED talk 'on nurturing creativity', delivered at the invitation-only Technology, Entertainment, Design conference in California, has been rated as one of the Most Favourited All-Time on a website which features talks by such luminaries as Jane Goodall, Oliver Sacks, Richard Dawkins and Al Gore (TED, 2009). In it, Elizabeth Gilbert speaks about the rigours of writing, and the origins of creativity. She also candidly discusses the difficulty of having published an enormously popular book and especially the self-doubt plaguing her attempts to write a subsequent book. Indeed, she acknowledges that 'everywhere I go now, people treat me like I'm doomed' (Gilbert, 2009). Gilbert's candour is matched by her intelligence, wit and ability to move beyond the criticism that finds *Eat, Pray, Love* self-obsessed: 'like travelling the world with a lovely and intelligent girlfriend who can't stop talking about herself' (Potts, 08). She also wryly acknowledges early in this seemingly unscripted lecture that 'it's exceedingly likely that my greatest success is behind me' (2009). With the cinematic version of *Eat, Pray, Love* due for release next year (Yessis, 2009), it is unlikely that the book or Gilbert will fall from the public eye, but Gilbert is being realistic: subsequent success of this degree may be difficult to achieve.

This kind of bold honesty gains Gilbert both admiration and disparagement, criticism she has responded to frankly in interviews (Memmott, 2008), all the while maintaining her open-book policy on her private life in others (Marshall, 2009). In an article describing Gilbert's latest venture, a home wares emporium she established with her husband, Gilbert is described riding her bike through her small New Jersey town and helpfully assisting lost devotees of her novel find the store, and it would appear, her (Nicholson Webber, 2008). Gilbert's accessibility mirrors Moran's suggestion that star authors 'actively negotiate their own celebrity rather than having it simply imposed on them' (p.10), placing her at the opposite end of the star author spectrum from Harper Lee. Lee, much like Gilbert, found fame with a novel that resonated with readers, but struggled with and eventually abandoned subsequent creative output. This is a struggle Gilbert addresses eloquently in her TED talk, but about which Lee refuses to be drawn, becoming instead somewhat of a recluse, reduced to living on the margins of celebrity authorship. This has led to much speculation about the lack of later work and about the author herself.

'I am still alive, although very quiet' Harper Lee (Tabor, 1995)

Nelle Harper Lee's journey as a star author has been an awkward and short-lived one at best. Her only novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* was released to favourable reviews in 1960, became an overnight sensation, received the Pulitzer Prize the year after, and remained on the bestseller lists for 88 weeks (NEA Big Read, 2006-2009). In 1962 the novel was made into a film Lee herself described as 'one of the best translations of a book to film ever made' (Bellafante, 2006) and which is regarded as 'so true to its

namesake that the two have merged in the public mind' (Mifflin, 2006). The film won three of the eight Oscars it was nominated for. Shortly thereafter, Lee stopped giving interviews, retreated from public life and has remained there ever since.

Despite constant requests, she has never granted any interviews about *To Kill a Mockingbird*, her life or subsequent writing projects. Lee has steadfastly maintained a steady silence, even in the face of exploitation and occasionally cruel speculation about the novel, its origins and her personal life. Her few public comments have been delivered via her agent and then in the most minimal way. This mirrors the direct approach taken by the author in some of her last known public statements. When asked in 1962 if success would change Harper Lee, Lee replied 'She's too old.' The interviewer pressed on: 'How do you feel about your second novel?': 'I'm scared' she replied. (Maslin, 2006)

Lee's reluctance to engage with the press and an adoring public may be well-founded: the book's success was somewhat marred, but not inhibited, by its placement on banned lists in the US, due to what some still regard as questionable content. At the time, Lee responded to the news that school boards were holding hearings to determine whether *To Kill a Mockingbird* should be included in the curriculum by sending ten dollars to a newspaper, explaining the donation was for the enrolment of 'the Hanover County School Board in any first grade of its choice' (NY Times, 1966).

This very Scout-like sass would have won Lee few fans in the Civil Rights era, and her dry sense of humour, honed in the pages of her college humour magazine, may well have put others off: '... told her book had great appeal for children, she deadpanned, "But I hate children. I can't stand them"' (Mifflin, 2006). Harper Lee's approach to her overwhelming fame is to present an honest but not altogether media-friendly persona. This is in effect herself, but this is a very different star author self than someone like Elizabeth Gilbert. After these initial attempts at gregariousness, for instance, Lee proved that she, in the words of Garrison Keillor, 'knew when to get off the train' (2006).

And disembark she did, remaining virtually mute as *To Kill a Mockingbird* became a bestselling behemoth. The highly anticipated second novel never appeared, and Lee's occasional forays to meet her admiring fans are limited to conversations with high school students under strict privacy, although she has been known to pose for photographs (Bellafante, 2006). In a very brief interview with *The New York Times* in 2006, Lee 'spoke only about the students and the essay-writing contest' held each year at the University of Alabama (Harris, 2006). It was then revealed she had been attending the awards ceremony over the previous five years, unbeknownst to the general public. However, what Moran regards as 'unshowy integrity' (2000, p76) could have contributed to Lee's exploitation at the hands of friends, critics and, very disappointingly, her own publisher. Childhood friend Truman Capote, who was renowned as being somewhat of a poor friend in his lifetime, and whom Lee assisted with the research for his highly-acclaimed creative non-fiction work *In Cold Blood* (1965), claimed condescendingly, for instance, 'I got Harper interested in writing because she typed my manuscript on my typewriter' and that 'It was a nice gesture for her, and highly convenient for me' (Shields, 2006).

When Lee helped publicise the highly faithful film of her already well-regarded novel, Capote poured hypocritical scorn on her, declaring ‘I think it very undignified for any serious artist to allow themselves to be exploited in this fashion’ (Capote quoted in Maslin, 2006). Whether this catty comment had any influence on Lee’s decision to decline further contact with the media shortly thereafter is unknown. One may surmise though that it might not have made the decision too difficult.

The cruel urban myth that Capote, the inspiration for Dill in Lee’s novel, was the actual author of *To Kill a Mockingbird* was finally disproven upon the release in 2006 of a letter acknowledging her authorship from the late writer himself (Block). Other associates also proved to be even less than worthy of Lee’s trust. A letter from Lee to her publishers, written in 1993 in which she refused to provide an introduction for another reprint of her book that year, was used in a subsequent reprint and advertised by HarperCollins as ‘A New Foreword by the Author’. In it, Lee admonishes her publisher, stating ‘Introductions inhibit pleasure, they kill the joy of anticipation, they frustrate curiosity...‘Mockingbird’ still says what it has to say; it has managed to survive the years without preamble’ (Lee quoted in Tabor, 1995). Until, and against the author’s wishes, now. Lee responded via her agent that she was ‘surprised’ by the letter’s reconfiguration as a Foreword (ibid).

‘Well, it’s better to be silent than to be a fool’ Harper Lee (Boston Globe, 2007)

Like Elizabeth Gilbert, Harper Lee has been sought out by Oprah Winfrey, but unlike Gilbert, she has turned down every request for an appearance on the talk show (Buncombe, 2006). Lee did however give Oprah the kind of coup so many others have sought and failed to get, handwriting a letter which was subsequently published—with the author’s approval—in the July 2006 issue of *O* magazine. The letter gives no further clues about the paucity of publications between Lee’s 1960 novel and the 2006 essay, but does describe her great love of reading and libraries and the privilege of literacy (Lee, 2006).

Reviews of Charles Shields’ *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee* (2006), a comprehensive account of Lee’s life gleaned entirely from interviews with former associates and library research, acknowledge the up-hill battle the author faced attempting to uncover well-hidden truths about Lee (Keillor, 2006). Reports of his rather unscrupulous research methods—he ‘faked his way onto an online reunion site to contact Ms Lee’s classmates’ (Maslin, 2006)—demonstrate the lengths to which Shields went to gain access to an author who had, true to form, declined his requests for interviews. Despite this reticence on the part of its author, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is considered one of the best-loved American novels of all time, and its enduring legacy keeps the novel, if not its reclusive author, in the public spotlight. The novel is regarded as timeless and topped the list of books British librarians consider ‘every adult should read before they die’ (Pauli, 2006). In 2007, Lee was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by George W Bush for ‘an outstanding contribution to America’s literary tradition’ (Pauli, 2007).

Just as it was considered a sin to kill a harmless mockingbird, so too the majority of the American people, particularly Lee's fellow Monroeville citizens, have taken it upon themselves to protect her oft-reported need for privacy (Shields, 2006). Their popular re-creation of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is staged every summer in the town square and courthouse, and speaks of their ability to protect with one arm that which they capitalise on with the other (Hoffman, 1998). The National Endowment for the Arts took a far more generous approach, comparing Lee to her own character:

As Sheriff Tate says of Boo Radley, 'draggin' him with his shy ways into the limelight—to me, that's a sin.' So it would be with Harper Lee. From her, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is gift enough. (NEA Big Read 2006-2009)

Harper Lee's star authorship is a technological universe away from that of Elizabeth Gilbert's, and yet in her silence she has created a situation where 'the author's apparent distance from celebrity seems to contribute to their fame' (Moran, 2000 p 54).

'Do you believe me? Really? Even after reading my book?' Bret Easton Ellis
(Grossman, 2005)

In the middle of these two binary opposites on the sliding scale of negotiated celebrity sits Bret Easton Ellis, 1980's literary Brat Pack member and one-time *enfant terrible* of the publishing world. Ellis' rise to fame occurred while he was still in college, finding debut novel success with the publication of *Less Than Zero* (1985). Described by reviewers as 'a not-very-tender account of the empty-eyed, drug-drenched LA party scene (Grossman, 2005), the book won immediate attention, some critical acclaim and was quickly made into a commercially successful but critically panned film (Maslin, 1987).

From this inauspicious beginning Ellis has been both feted and reviled: a star author regarded as 'the brattiest of the Brat Pack' he was aligned with in the 1980s and 'the bad boy of American letters' (Wyatt, 2005). Featured in *People* magazine at the time his debut novel was being shopped around Hollywood, his appearance was already given more attention than his creative work: 'If he weren't already a writer, he'd have to be an actor playing a writer' (Bottoms, 1999). Then again, perhaps this is part of his creative work: subsequent interviews reveal that 'Ellis likes to make a show of his awkwardness and inaccessibility' (Lawrence, 1999) and that his demeanour in interviews is regarded suspiciously, with *Time* recounting his 'teasing, Cheshire-cat quality, as if his whole personality were just a game he plays with other people' (Grossman, 2005). Ellis' notoriety extends well beyond his work, but it is his work that has seen him regarded as 'doubly cursed' (Birnbaum, 2006).

These descriptions are not without merit; in 1991 Ellis' third book *American Psycho* was dropped by its initial publisher, picked up by another and banned in several instances once it was finally released to great condemnation and almost universal disgust. It still sold 'hundreds of thousands of copies' (Wyatt, 2005). In response, Ellis defended his work initially and then retreated as it became apparent his aloof comments were going unheard against the backlash and threats of violence against

him (Lawrence, 1999). In seclusion, Ellis struggled with addiction, his father's death and 'frittered away his royalties' fully immersed in the kind of nihilistic lifestyle he wrote so convincingly about (Waters, n.d).

In 1999, Ellis released *Glamorama* (1999), a well-received novel detailing familiar territory, replete with supermodels and the club scene, but *sans* the ultra-violence and resulting horrified criticism that had greeted earlier works. Also well-received was the author's more open approach to interviews, in which he revealed the origins of *American Psycho* and candidly spoke of the effects of the death threats and his distress at the furore directed his way (Lawrence, 1999), a tactic he used to his advantage in the next century with the release of his semi-fictional memoir.

Ellis may have taken his lead from successful more media-savvy authors like Gilbert, or he may have matured and been honestly repentant. Then again, the memoir, *Lunar Park* (2005) a 'pseudo-memoiristic preamble [which] becomes a horror story' (O'Rourke, 2005) points to a man so comfortable with his star author status that he is able to satirise it. Imbued with what Ellis himself declares a 'heavy dose of self-loathing about celebrity' (Grossman, 2005) *Lunar Park* is a complicated meta-fictional version of self-reflection, where 'author and character are one' (O'Rourke, 2005), but very little is revealed about either. The editor who discovered Ellis, publishing *Less Than Zero* when he was barely 20 years old, says of *Lunar Park*, and Ellis specifically, 'he's playing with truth...[combining] the celebrity memoir and excessive confessionals that our society seems to be obsessed with' (Wyatt, 2005)

In this, Ellis seems better able than in the past to exploit his fame, play with notions of identity and remain at a self-imposed arm's distance from his own celebrity, a struggle he has addressed at length (Birnbaum, 2006). One outcome of this is barely-contained misgivings from interviewers about the extent that the author is anything more than a product of his own imagination, with one interviewer claiming: 'even if Ellis decided to drop all the layers and the games, you get the feeling that he wouldn't know how' (Grossman, 2005).

In *Glamorama*, Ellis has character Victor Ward say, 'we slide down the surface of things' and it appears that Ellis has himself taken these words to heart. They are from a U2 song lyric, and are thus not even Ward's own idea, which adds to the sense of irony. This is after all, Ellis' stock in trade: vacant, 'aimless, nihilistic' characters—and now he is including himself among them. In *Lunar Park*, the character Bret Easton Ellis is attempting to seduce his student: she's writing her thesis on his work and he 'admires her taste' (Mars-Jones, 2005). Given Ellis' sharp rise to fame and just as spectacular plummet from the cosmos of critical favour, this self-preserving lack of sincerity may be almost understandable.

'I said what I had to say' Harper Lee (Maslin, 2000)

Each of these star authors has occupied similar stratospheres of the sparkling sky, but with very different results: Gilbert, the earthy journeywoman is given to philosophical discussions about fame, fortune and creativity, Lee's quiet dignity has spoken more

for her work than words ever could, while Ellis is seemingly still toying with his fame and struggling with his identity.

So too, each author's experience is a reflection of their era of ascendancy. Gilbert's message is delivered via streamed media, whereas Lee's words were relayed second-hand, her frankness diluted by not only the medium which delivered it but also affected by the politics of the time, and also more than likely, her gender. A smart-mouthed liberal woman from the South in 1960 was always going to run contrary to popular mores of the time (Maslin, 2006). Ellis is the frustrated middle-child of the trio, his satire obviated by the focus on the excessive violence of *American Psycho* and his ironic commentary on modern American urban life has been lost in translation.

Gilbert's star shines in such a way that enables her to connect with her fans on a personal level—all seven million apparently—by 'gently, ever so gently' (Montgomery, 2009) informing them that she needs to 'move on' from *Eat, Pray, Love* and asking them politely to let her do just that. This plea is a far cry from the stock-standard reply Harper Lee would offer, were her Southern manners far less ingrained. Whether asked for interviews, appearances on Oprah or to accept awards in her honour, the indefatigably polite but reserved Ms Lee responds with a personal letter. But if she were to respond using a standard reply, she claims it would very simply say 'hell, no' (Bellafante, 2006). In these responses, these star authors respectively embrace, exploit and excuse themselves from their celebrity status, placing them firmly in the mainstream (Gilbert), decidedly at the margins (Lee), and somewhere in the middle of the two (Ellis).

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