



Fame Junkies: The Hidden Truths Behind America's Favorite Addiction

Jake Halpern

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In this groundbreaking book, Jake Halpern embarks on a quest to explore the fascinating and often dark implications of America's obsession with fame. Traveling across the country, he visits a Hollywood home for aspiring child actors and enrolls in a training program for would-be celebrity assistants. He drops by the editorial offices of US Weekly and spends time at a laboratory where monkeys give up food to stare at pictures of dominant members of their group. Whether he is interviewing Rod Stewart or the nation's leading experts on addiction, Halpern deftly uncovers the strange working of our fame obsessed psyches. By interweaving stories from his travels with new research, including original findings from his own "fame survey," Halpern explains how psychology, technology, evolution, and profit conspire to make the world of red carpets and velvet ropes so enthralling. Fame Junkies is a provocative and insightful portrait of an America that wants nothing more than to see and be seen.

Fame Junkies: The Hidden Truths Behind America's Favorite Addiction Details

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From Reader Review Fame Junkies: The Hidden Truths Behind America's Favorite Addiction for online ebook

David says

This book is ok. If you read media criticism or social commentary stuff there is probably nothing in it you haven't heard before [we are fed and consume the necessity of becoming famous; kids are more narcissistic these days; we're bowling alone and fantasizing about becoming stars to make up for lack of connections in real world; the Today show had more on Martha Stewart going to jail than on Darfur.....:].

Aside from the familiar big picture, some of the vignettes were interesting -- kids and their families getting ripped off by talent discovery camps/workshops, meetings of the Association of Celebrity Personal Assistants, etc.

Overall, it made me appreciate the objectivity of my main hobby, distance running. People who can't carry a tune may be able to delude themselves that they're about to become the next Bruce Springsteen, but stopwatches don't lie, so it's hard to sustain the view that you'd be right up there with Kenenisa Bekele if only the right agent would discover you.

Lize says

(From 2005) I'm fascinated by 'pop culture' and why it is so all-consuming for so many people. Lots of interesting stuff in here that I didn't know about, like the IMTA (International Modeling and Talent Association) talent conventions that attract kids from all over the country who are hoping to 'make it', all of whom come from local modeling and acting schools, which seem to exist even in the tiniest towns. It's full of interviews with and tales of agents, stylists, publicists and celebrity personal assistants (the late Dennis Hopper's assistant features prominently), and really only bogs down when the author goes into the obligatory scientific stuff as to *why* people are so obsessed by celebrities and driven to seek fame (the survey he used to ask a group of kids about their attitudes was seriously lame). The scariest part by far, though, was the chapter about the 50ish woman who is (allcaps) OBSESSED with Rod Stewart, and seems just *this* close to being a dangerous stalker:

"I guess Rod just makes me feel important. Like when he acknowledges me at a concert, or I get a picture with him. On the other hand, if I'm trying to give him flowers at a concert and he doesn't take them from me, or he takes them from someone else, I'm *crushed*. Because I'm looking to be acknowledged, and when I'm not, I take it personally."

Yikes.

Kressel Housman says

Even though I live in the Hasidic world where I'm fairly well-insulated from celebrity worship, my reaction to this book proves that fame still has the power to turn my head. As soon as I saw the title of the book, I had to read the summary, and as soon as I'd read that, I immediately got the book out of the library and put aside the book I'd been reading in favor of it. I whipped through it in a matter of days.

The book is very similar to the expose on the wedding industry I read earlier this year, *One Perfect Day: The Selling of the American Wedding* by Rebecca Mead. Just like Mead interviewed different people associated with different parts of the wedding industry, i.e. wedding planners, bridal shop owners, and a justice of the peace at a Las Vegas quickie chapel, this author, a colleague of hers at *The New Yorker*, interviewed people just on the periphery of fame, i.e. the head of a modeling/acting school and the kids who attend it, a paparazzo photographer, the personal assistants of several celebrities, and Rod Stewart's #1 fan. Sprinkled throughout are psychological studies on self-esteem and reactions to fame. The insights are all pretty much common sense - we form "para-social" relationships with the celebrities we like; people seek fame because they want to be loved - but the journey is lots of fun. There is a little hand-wringing about what our culture has come to, but the tone is not overly judgmental. As the author makes clear, everybody, from a prominent Hollywood director to a professor of media studies to the author himself, loves getting attention, and everybody is impressed when others get it.

I recommend this book, especially to young people. A book that would teach us to be more satisfied with the love we're getting would be better. That's the ideal antidote to fame-seeking. But till then this is a good way for a teenager to be introduced to sociology. It's an analysis of the dream world they know and love shown with a good hard dose of reality.

Katherine says

This book isn't as trashy as it looks. It comes off as a genuine journalistic effort to understand why we're so interested in the famous. There's a healthy mix of facts and figures with anecdotal interviews and studies. The author's remove felt forced and maybe even a tad judgmental at times; he seemed too eager to draw conclusions. That says, some of the anecdotes and survey results are interesting. I don't think this is the best writing on the subject, but it's not bad.

Glenda says

Interesting read exploring some of the reasons why so many are interested in the lives of celebrities, including those wanting to become famous themselves, or those that simple want to be around the famous (i.e., celebrity personal assistants, fans/fan club presidents) or to BIRG (Bask In Reflected Glory).

I thought the aspects of "para social" relationships seemed particularly relevant, as described here: "The notion of such a relationship was first discussed by two psychologists, Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl, in a 1956 article for the journal *Psychiatry*. They argued that television gives viewers "the illusion of a face-to-face relationship with the performer." Over the course of many episodes, viewers come to feel that they know a given performer or a fictional persona." and "is it is now easier than ever to form para-social

relationships—not just with fictional personae but with actual celebrities as well. It all comes down to access,..."

There is increasing isolation in our culture so it's easy to see how one might see either celebs or fictional characters as "friends" or part of their life by simple involvement through daily watching (think of Netflix and watching a favorite show over and over again). The culture of fanfic, blogs, Pinterest boards, Facebook pages, etc. extends this reach - in both healthy and unhealthy ways I think.

It's not particularly surprising news, but it is a telling fact about our culture that celeb stories get more coverage than hard news (one example given was "in 2004 the nightly news shows on the three major networks spent a total of just 26 minutes covering the bloody conflict in Darfur and 130 minutes on the Martha Stewart scandal.")

The children seeking fame (or the examples he presented) were a bit sad - in that many of them are looking at it as a salve to other problems (being like or being popular) and at the end of the day, it's about wanting to belong and be loved, right?

I'm sure there are valid and good reasons to want to be famous, or want to BIRG; though those weren't really covered here (as expected).

Melody Newby says

I was given this book as a gift, however, I was drawn to the subject matter because I have always been interested in attaining some kind of fame for myself. When I was asked "What do you want to be when you grow up?" as a child, I always responded, "A movie star". I even auditioned for acting programs going into university. To be honest, I am far from famous at all but the advent of social media has allowed me to enjoy something of a fan base online.

Why do we obsess over celebrities and want to be them/like them? Jake Halpern uses a variety of psychological theories and studies to explore why so many of North America's youth are pursuing fame. He throws out several possible reasons and observations: the entitlement of North America's youth, narcissistic personalities, the wanting to be part of something bigger, the need for acknowledgement and acceptance and the desire to place oneself as close to a celebrity as possible in order to acquire fame through osmosis were all ideas Halpern introduces as reasons people pursue fame, follow celebrities and try to meet them. I didn't enjoy the writing in the book. I felt it was too 'primary' for me, however, great for lower level readers or those who just want an easy read with very little challenges in comprehension.

Ultimately, Halpern deducts that our obsession with celebrities is not about them, it's about us and our needs and when those celebrities we claim to love grow old and fall out of the public eye, we discard them because they no longer fill that need. It's a sad conclusion, but I feel that he is on to something.

Shawna says

Very well-researched and interesting. Also very disturbing in some ways, although not disturbing enough to make me cancel my subscription to People magazine.

Taryn says

Insightful look into why we care so much about celebrities. I think this book is so relevant today because we have a celebrity as president. We have constant access to celebrities through live video feeds on Instagram and Facebook, the apps themselves, Twitter, TMZ, etc. How is this affecting us emotionally, mentally?

Written in 2005 and almost foreshadowing our future: "American Idol has more viewers than the nightly news on the three major networks combined. And our interest in celebrities doesn't appear to be waning." So much so that our country just elected Donald Trump as president. The next page goes on to name him as one of men Americans most admired in a poll conducted by the Gallup Organization in 2005.

Pam says

A look at our popular culture from the mid 2000's. Interesting read about that time period and even more interesting to see the fame worship phenomenon continue.

Mark says

I wanted to like it more... but it just didn't get up & move somewhere interesting.

Rose says

From "Fame Junkies:"

[Hal Riddle, a retired character actor, grew up in Calhoun, Kentucky]. "And I'll tell you what: when you grow up there, Hollywood seems like a wonderful, far-off, never-never land -- a place of beauty and riches and everything else." He recalled when his father had taken him to see his very first movie, a saga about the life of Jesse James. "I remember that the audience was applauding these actors, and in my heart I wanted to be up there on that screen too."

When he was a young man, Riddle moved to New York City and found work as an actor in the theater. His first Broadway appearance was a supporting role in 'Mister Roberts'; his performance often earned a round of applause when he excited the stage. The first time this happened, he was overwhelmed: "I almost felt like a child who gets up and sings his ABCs for the first time and the teacher pats him on the head and says, 'Very good -- you learned them all.'" Eventually he moved to Hollywood, where he landed minor parts in a number of movies, including several with Elvis Presley. He remembers being desperate to have Elvis's fame. "Elvis got everything he prayed for and I didn't," he said with a smile. Then he added quietly, almost to himself, "Then again, look how things turned out for Elvis."

* * * * *

[Author Jake Halpern is attending the induction ceremony of Rod Stewart's Hollywood Walk of Fame star.]

Stewart made a very brief speech in which he thanked his family, his manager, his record label, and all his fans. Then he made his way off the stage and onto the sidewalk, where he posed for photographs alongside his star. The paparazzi immediately began yelling orders at him.

"Put your hand on the star!

"Put your foot on the star!"

"Dance for us!"

"Kneel down!"

The voices degenerated into a cacophony of wild barks. Soon fans joined the fray, desperately calling for Stewart to autograph some piece of memorabilia. Before long, even casual passersby began stopping to get a closer look, and as they did, a giant, pulsing mob began to form. "Who is at the center of all this?" asked a man who pressed close to me. His wife, who was just a step behind him, was trying to hold him back.

As the mob continued to grow, I saw Stewart shoot a panicky look at his pregnant fiancée. A handful of policemen and security guards pressed themselves against the mob and struggled to keep order, but the crowd had a will of its own, and there was little they could do. In the tumult I took an elbow to the head, was almost shoved into Stewart's oldest daughter, and somehow ended up back next to [Rod Stewart fan] Braunstein.

"This is awesome," she said, tears running down her cheeks. "There he is, standing by his star. I just can't believe it. I can't believe it."

Stewart and his visibly frightened family managed to make their way back to the giant stretch limo waiting by the curb. The doors slammed shut, the tires screeched, and the car sped away as a gang of desperate fans stood on their tiptoes to get one last glimpse of their idol.

* * * * *

"Why do you suppose most kids want to be famous?" I asked [eleven-year-old Clint, a former child actor].

"I think people don't want to be lonely. They want companionship, and fame is a substitute for that, I guess. You know, if you are a star, you aren't lonely, because there are always paparazzi and people like that around. I think the motivation for most people is that they want to be loved. Because you have to figure -- what is life like for most kids? If you live in a normal suburban neighborhood in Ohio, or some place like that, you go to school, you get hassled by the teachers, you come home, and you get hassled by your parents. And then you just stay in your room and watch TV and play video games all afternoon. Pretty lonely, isn't it?"

I asked him if he'd felt lonely after he quit acting.

"Yes, a little bit, I guess. It can be hard, because you get used to having everyone around you. You get

hooked on the noise and the light. But I think that if you can't face yourself, then you shouldn't be doing this, and you probably need to sort some things out, because one day you won't have the job and the fame, and then -- when you're all grown up -- you'll really be afraid."

Clint paused for a moment, as if to mull over this final theory, and then added, "Well, I don't know for sure, because I have never been a grown-up."

Pam says

I picked up this book because I have several star struck nieces who like to keep tabs on stars with ET, and other such shows. There was some interesting info in it. And I didn't disagree with most of the conclusions, but...

I find it a bit hard to bite that what holds true for 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th graders pertains to adults. The polling of those kids takes place at a time when most of us had more time on our hands than we ever would again, no life experience, and relatively few commitments outside the home. I'm not sure this group reflects the rest of the population very well.

It may be that the reason every one seems to know what the star of the moment is doing, is that it gets shoved down our throats. If you didn't want to know who was the father of Anna Nicole's baby - you basically had to turn off your TV and radio, not look at a magazine cover and stay off any internet news sites - for weeks!! My husband and I cancelled our subscription to Newsweek years ago because it seemed to be heading to a tabloid format.

The whole argument from the media "we only produce what people want to hear" is for the birds. Check out the variety of entertainment that is being acquired through enterprises such as Netflix. There is good demand for something other than the top box office films (not that they're all bad - but they're not all good either).

I don't doubt that entertainment is full of "fame junkies" - but don't you think there are also "artists" out there who feel a need to express themselves and to them the dog and pony show is just a necessary evil?

Kay says

Insubstantial with a few amusing stories, but nothing revelatory. Standard been there insight.

Diana DeLaFuente says

Great book about Americas obsession with Fame and Celebrities.

Keith says

NPR producer and commentator Jake Halpern investigates America's obsession with celebrity in this

examination of what he refers to as “America’s Favorite Addiction”. Here, America’s children seem to be fame-starved and the lengths to which both they and their parents go to allow them to either bask in the light of fame, or hopefully to become famous themselves is both humorous and disturbing. The longing to share in the glow of prominence is certainly not a new desire and the author provides examples extending far back into our cultural history and even quotes some scientific studies suggesting that gossip and the status provided by celebrity may have provided an evolutionary advantage to successful reproduction. As fascinating as that theory may be I felt that the segment dealing with the Association of Celebrity Personal Assistants (ACPA) to be truly dumbfounding. His interviews with young people who dedicate years of their lives---usually not for any significant financial gain or future---to serve and to be near celebrities are genuinely insightful into star worship in the modern age. The interviews are in-depth and interesting and the appendix is chuck-full of source material; an interesting journey into a seldom discussed topic.
