

“How a Girl from Canada Break the Bigtime”

Esi Edugyan and the Next Generation
of Literary Celebrity in Canada

The field of literary celebrity studies has experienced something of a boom in recent years, with exciting studies of British and American modernist writers by the American scholars Jonathan Goldman and Aaron Jaffe and, closer to home, Gillian Roberts' *Prizing Literature: The Celebration and Circulation of National Culture* (2011), a study of the way in which prize culture marks the Canadian nation state as welcoming or inhospitable to immigrant writers in particular. Such critical activity has taken place within a broader context of renewed attention to literary production conceived as operating within and not necessarily against celebrity culture. These recent studies of literary celebrity are revealing a new modernism: not the elite recoil from tawdry popular culture that many of us were trained to expect from the likes of Eliot, Pound, and Woolf, but a modernism that is fully implicated in celebrity culture. As Goldman observes in his perceptive book, *Modernism Is the Literature of Celebrity* (2011), “literary high modernism and early twentieth-century celebrity . . . these two supposedly separate aspects of culture are, in truth, mutually constitutive, two sides of the same cultural coin . . . modernism and celebrity perform similar cultural work on the notion of the exceptional individual” (2). Both modernism and celebrity, that is, work to contemplate and affirm the central role of the individual within mass culture.

Along with dearticulating the old narrative of modernism's antagonistic relationship with popular culture, recent studies of celebrity writers feature an appreciation of the transnational reach of national culture, as well as a renewed awareness that the material aspects of literary culture matter. For

example, in his study of “Margaret Atwood, Inc.,” Graham Huggan reminds us that “neither Atwood nor her work can be seen outside their requisite material context, both as aspects of a thriving literary/critical industry in North America, Europe and elsewhere in the world and as part of a global image-making machinery that has helped turn Atwood into national icon and cultural celebrity” (210). Carrying this insight further, Laura Moss explores the relationship between Atwood’s roles as “national icon” and global “cultural celebrity,” noting that her role abroad as a native informant about all things Canadian makes her a perfect embodiment of the tensions of “transnational-nationalism”: the production of narratives about Canada for export abroad.

As these examples suggest, much critical and theoretical work on literary celebrity has tended to employ a backward glance, focusing on earlier generations of writers. Loren Glass’ book *Authors Inc.* (2004), for example, seeks the origins of American literary celebrity in Twain, London, Stein, Hemingway, and Mailer; Aaron Jaffe’s *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* (2005) focuses on mainstream modernists Eliot, Joyce, Pound, and Lewis; and Joe Moran begins his study of American literary celebrity, *Star Authors* (2000), with senior writers Philip Roth and John Updike before moving to the *relatively* more recent authors Don DeLillo (born in 1936) and Kathy Acker (born in 1947). The trio of Canadian celebrity writers in my own *Literary Celebrity in Canada* (2007), Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, and Carol Shields, came to prominence in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the exception of Shields, who published in the 1970s but attained literary celebrity belatedly, in the 1990s, with the publication of *The Stone Diaries*.¹ Still, born in 1935, she was a near contemporary of Atwood (born in 1939) and Ondaatje (born in 1943), writers who are, of course, still active but unquestionably senior. Recent, illuminating studies² of individual Canadian literary celebrities gravitate to the same generations of writers, like Huggan’s and Moss’ work on Atwood, Joel Deshayé’s perceptive article on Layton and Cohen, and Katja Lee’s astute essay on Farley Mowat.

There are important reasons why we have glanced backwards to understand literary celebrity, and why that backward glance returns us, more often than not, to the first three quarters of the twentieth century; as celebrity itself was transformed by the industrialization of entertainment culture in the early days of Hollywood, literary culture was anything but immune to its effects. And so, along with the usual suspects Oscar Wilde, James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein, Goldman devotes a chapter of his book

to Charlie Chaplin. Faye Hammill, in her study *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture between the Wars* (2007), makes this mutual implication of literary and filmic celebrity explicit in studying L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* in relation to early Hollywood, and devoting an enormously entertaining chapter to Mae West—as a celebrity *author*. But what do we learn when we train our glance on the present rather than on the past?

One recent, notable example of Canadian literary celebrity-in-the-making offers a rich field of possibilities for answering this question: Esi Edugyan, whose novel *Half-Blood Blues* won the Giller Prize in 2011 when she was only 33 years old. Edugyan's experience with literary celebrity, prize culture, and publishing companies at home and abroad, has much to tell us about how new generations of literary celebrities are affected by a mixture of challenging publishing conditions in Canada and the effects of celebrity culture. In what follows, I consider her publishing history and its current Canadian industrial context, the media discourses that construct questionable celebrity narratives about that history, and Edugyan's own narratives of success and celebrity in *Half-Blood Blues*.

Unlike Canadian literary celebrities of previous generations—such as Atwood and Ondaatje who began their careers working in alternative, small-scale modes of production (at House of Anansi and Coach House Press, respectively), where the economic stakes are lower—Edugyan's generation are under ever-greater pressure to succeed early in their careers. In conversation with filmmaker Atom Egoyan, Ondaatje reflected that working at Coach House afforded him a perfect apprenticeship, in which he and his fellow artists were free to experiment and “make mistakes, fall flat on our faces, it didn't matter . . . but a spotlight on me at the age of 21 would have killed me” (D6). He and Egoyan worry about the effects of this desire for instant success on the development of young artists.

Such a telescoping of apprenticeship seems surprising in the digital age, with its explosion of alternative platforms for sharing young writers' work. Edugyan's generation, beneficiaries of the new social media, would seem to be ideally positioned to construct for themselves independent venues for the early distribution of their work. The crucial factor, though, is the need for even minimal compensation for that digitally distributed work; as David McKnight notes of the founding of new small presses in the 1970s, they “benefitted directly from two federal government programs designed to provide employment opportunities for young Canadians: the Local Initiative Program and Opportunities for Youth” (315). In contrast, digital media

publishing success stories tend to follow a more capitalistic entrepreneurial pattern. The success of Terry Fallis' comic novel about political backroom shenanigans, *The Best Laid Plans*, is a perfect case in point. Fallis, a public relations man and former Liberal strategist, was unsuccessful in finding a publisher and decided, instead, to release podcasts of sections from the book. He then self-published the manuscript, using an online program called iUniverse. It went on to win the Stephen Leacock Medal for Humour in 2008 and was picked up by McClelland and Stewart, eventually sweeping the CBC Radio Canada Reads competition for best novel of the decade in 2011. As an apprenticeship narrative, this one is distinctly entrepreneurial, as opposed to the more collectivist narrative that Ondaatje fashions about the government supported small presses that, however dogged they were by financial woes, allowed young artists to experiment, fail, and experiment some more.

Edugyan's brief publishing history shows us how far the forces of literary celebrity have combined with specifically Canadian challenges to the publishing industry to prop up this individualistic, entrepreneurial narrative. She published her first novel, *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne*, with Knopf Canada when she was only 25, as part of Random House's "New Face of Fiction" series, which seeks to bring "spectacular first-time Canadian novelists to readers." Its website proclaims the star-making powers of the program; these first-time novelists are promoted as the literary stars of tomorrow. But as members of the writing community know, such promotion brings, along with its decided benefits, the pressure of sustaining such high expectations. And while *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* received mainly positive reviews, it was, in the words of Adrian Chamberlain, "a modest seller yet critically acclaimed" (n. pag.).

In the publishing business, merely modest sales can undo the salutary effects of critical acclaim, particularly in the case of new writers. As Atwood reflected in *Negotiating with the Dead*, "We've all heard the story about the writer whose first novel hasn't done well, and who then presents the second one. 'If only this were a first novel,' sighs the agent. 'Then I might be able to sell it'" (65). And so it proved with Esi Edugyan. Her second novel, *Half-Blood Blues*, a stylistically edgy story of members of an interracial jazz ensemble who fled from Nazi Berlin to Occupied Paris, was shopped around to various publishers with little success, to the point where Edugyan considered abandoning her writing career. But because she had been awarded writing residencies in France, Hungary, Germany, and Iceland, she thought she would persist and try to see her second novel through to

publication. As she reflected in an interview with Beth Carswell, “You finish a book and you’re really excited, and it might not perform the way you (or others) want it to perform, and you wonder why certain books aren’t more celebrated, and why others are, and so many great books seem to slip through the cracks. It can seem quite arbitrary” (n. pag.). The much-celebrated *Half-Blood Blues* was very nearly one of those books that slipped through the cracks. Eventually, the small British press Serpent’s Tail picked up *Half-Blood Blues*, but Edugyan’s agent, Anne McDermid, had trouble placing it in Canada, until Key Porter Books and a particularly astute editor, Jane Warren, saw its promise. Just as the situation was looking brighter, in the winter of 2010-2011 Key Porter Books went under, and Edugyan was without a Canadian publisher once again.

Those historical challenges to Canadian publishing form a crucial backdrop to this narrative of Esi Edugyan’s career. Though there are numerically fewer foreign-owned publishers in Canada, they tend to be larger, and they account for 59% of domestic book sales and 23% of Canadian-authored books. So, as Danielle Fuller observes, that means that 77% of works authored by Canadians are being produced by small firms, most of whom make profits of less than \$200,000 and have limited means to distribute or advertise those books (12-13). As David Creelman points out, small presses may apply for government subsidies, but that grant money may not be used for marketing purposes (61). Mid-sized presses, on the other hand, may have a marketing budget, but even they, in Creelman’s words, “have sometimes struggled to devote the resources and funds needed to create and sustain the media buzz that produces strong sales” (62).

Fortunately for Edugyan, one of those mid-sized firms, Thomas Allen Publishers picked up the already-copyedited manuscript, and when *Half-Blood Blues* won the Giller and was short-listed for the Man Booker, its publisher, Patrick Crean, was hailed as a rescuing hero and paracelebrity (James Monaco’s term for one whose celebrity derives from association with another celebrity subject [4]). He appeared on CBC’s online book club’s conversation, in host Sandra Martin’s words, “to tell us how he rescued *Half-Blood Blues*” (n.pag.). Edugyan, in her acceptance speech, singled out Crean as the man “who saved this book when it most needed saving” (qtd. in Barber, “Edugyan Wins Giller” n.pag.). Still, almost no one in Canada was celebrating Serpent’s Tail, the small, twenty-five-year-old British publisher which is, in its own words, committed “to publishing voices neglected by the mainstream”—except for Edugyan, who enthused, “It was a great working relationship—

totally smooth and painless and wonderful—and just the antithesis of what I was going through here” (qtd. in Barber, “Two Canadian Novels” n. pag.). The dominant narrative in the Canadian media had become, instead, one of transitioning from obscurity to fame, from small production to the big time with the help of a mid-sized white knight publisher.

Edugyan has identified the advantages of mid-sized publishers, noting, for instance, when her novel, along with Patrick deWitt’s *The Sisters Brothers*, was short-listed for the Man Booker prize in September 2011, “The one thing that both of our novels have in common is they were released by mid-sized publishing houses. . . . With publishers like Anansi [deWitt’s publisher], you see really interesting stuff being published” (qtd. in Pearson n. pag.). The implication here is that the mid-sized publisher is more likely to take on risks than the large conglomerates. But four days after Edugyan’s comments were published, the *Globe and Mail* announced that Picador, a Macmillan imprint, won an auction for the US rights to *Half-Blood Blues* for “an undisclosed amount” (“*Half-Blood Blues* Gets U.S. Deal”). The march from small or mid-size publisher to multinational proceeds apace. Even if an author happens to prefer the aesthetic advantages of smaller-scale production (what David McKnight calls “the consultative relationship that often exists [in small publishers] between publisher and author in determining layout and appearance” [311]), it is difficult for that same author to object either to the book being placed in more readers’ hands by a larger publisher—or to the extra income that this wider distribution generates. As Fuller has observed, distribution has historically been “a huge headache” for independent Canadian publishers, since their “lack of financial clout” has afforded them “few options” because both print and digital distribution are “dominated by large foreign-owned companies” (“Citizen Reader” 13). Edugyan, then, may express her preference for a smaller-scale mode of production, but there are manifold forces within the marketplace that militate against that preference.

A further complicating factor is that mid-size publishers in Canada, like Anansi, Thomas Allen, or the recently bankrupted (and revived) Douglas & McIntyre are particularly vulnerable to market pressures. One factor in Douglas & McIntyre’s temporary demise, for example, was what Charles Foran called their “expensive failed venture into digital publishing” (n. pag.). Foran pondered whether their attempt to compete with the multinationals on their own (digital) turf wasn’t doomed to failure without the economic cushion afforded by blockbuster sales from the likes of Dan Brown or J. R. R. Tolkien.

John Barber put the runaway success of novels like Edugyan's and deWitt's in this broader and more sombre industrial context, pointing out that although *Half-Blood Blues* became Thomas Allen's most popular title ever published (100,000 copies on the market as of the end of 2011), "Head-office retrenchment at the multinationals made itself felt" in that same year "as Canadian branches cut established authors loose and pared their once-ambitious Canadian lists" ("Great Novels" n. pag.). Those cutbacks, ironically, have sent many authors and their manuscripts back to small presses.³

Compounding these challenges is the way in which youth is figured in these tales of literary success. On one hand, newer voices are a mainstay of publishing and its marketing strategies; audiences are enjoined to read up-and-coming, next-big-thing authors, through programs such as Random House's New Face of Fiction. But when younger writers graduate from these novitiate forms of publication and promotion and when, ironically, the star-making aims of programs like New Face of Fiction succeed, public response is double-edged. When six finalists, among them Edugyan and deWitt, were named for the 2011 Giller, Barber announced in the *Globe and Mail* that "a new generation of Canadian writers took centre stage" ("Generation Giller" n. pag.), one that he dubbed, with a nod to Douglas Coupland, "Generation Giller." Joining deWitt and Edugyan were David Bezmozgis, Lynn Coady, Zsuzsi Gartner, and the *éminence grise* of the competition, Michael Ondaatje, nominated for *The Cat's Table*. For all of its air of celebration and hospitality, though, Barber's piece hints at the negative reception of Generation Giller. He reports that one of the judges, Annabel Lyon, explained that six books rather than the usual five were nominated because the field was exceptionally strong, but Barber neutralizes that explanation by adding that "[g]iven the distinctly youthful cast of the short list, observers joked that it was extended . . . this year in order to include at least one recognizable name." Ironically, that may have been the case; recognizable names are key to producing pre-award publicity "buzz." But the very fact that Barber includes this joke has the effect of delegitimizing the artistic achievements of younger writers on the short list.

Beyond the 2011 Giller competition, other recent narratives of youthful Canadian literary fame make this unfortunate connection between youth and obscurity. Barber, reporting on the previous Giller season, drew attention to "the short list's strong tilt in favour of new and obscure authors publishing with small presses," as though youth, obscurity, and small-scale production were mutually defining ("Johanna Skibsrud Wins" n. pag.).

Vit Wagner, writing in the *Toronto Star*, underscored Barber's point by describing the book that won the Giller that year, Johanna Skibsrud's *The Sentimentalists*, not as the dark horse in the competition but "the darkest horse." In a curious tautology, young Canadian writers who win expanded national and international audiences through the workings of prize culture are dismissed for not having had celebrity in the first place. This tends to happen because celebrity as a phenomenon drives such a wedge between the celebrity subject and the anonymous "mass" that border-crossing between the two states becomes difficult to conceptualize. One way to bridge the divide that has been prominent in the history of film stardom has been to consider the star as having been, from birth, destined for celebrity.

Once authors are caught in the klieg lights of prize culture, public measurements of their success become predominantly economic, and this disrupts the always precarious balance between the commercial and the artistic. James F. English sees the combination of those two forces in prize culture as producing a

deeper equivocality of all such prizes, which serve simultaneously as a means of recognizing an ostensibly higher, uniquely aesthetic form of value and as an arena in which such value often appears subject to the most businesslike system of production and exchange. (7)

In the career of Esi Edugyan, I perceive both competing forms of value at work, but after a literary prize consecrated her work, the relative emphasis upon them shifted. On one hand, the media coverage for a "critically acclaimed" "modest seller" like *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* tended to skirt the subject of sales, highlighting "winning reviews" (White 41), "widespread praise" (Barber, "Edugyan Wins Giller"), and honours such as being named a New York Public Library "Book to Remember" (Bethune n. pag.). The press coverage for *Half-Blood Blues*, on the other hand, luxuriated in multi-figure statistics. From the moment of the prize announcement, generous sales predictions abounded. For instance, the *National Post's* Mark Medley curiously linked the monetary value of the award with its power to spur sales: "The \$50,000 prize virtually guarantees that tens of thousands more copies of the novel . . . will be sold in the coming months." At the moment of the awards ceremony, 23,000 copies of the novel were in print in Canada, but in a matter of "[m]oments after the announcement, Patrick Crean, publisher of Thomas Allen, said: 'We're pushing the button first thing in the morning'" (Medley n. pag.). The first week after the announcement, accordingly, sales "surged 479 per cent," the *Toronto Star*

claimed (Bain n. pag.), and Victoria's *Monday Magazine* reported that "One day after winning the Giller Prize, *Half-Blood Blues* jumped from 3,376th on Amazon's bestsellers list for Kindle e-books to 360th" (Heatherington n. pag.). By January of 2012, there were 115,000 copies of the novel in Canada; in one week alone, 9,000 of those copies were sold, reports the *Victoria Times Colonist* (Chamberlain). Suddenly, numerical details of writers' sales and financial situation are front-and-centre, and while this is in some ways beneficial to the writer (creating more "buzz" for the book and ensuring that the bookstores will stock it), it also shifts the whole discourse of literary production for the newly successful author. Terms like "bestseller" and the heightened attention to the economic capital of a writer of so-called "literary fiction" increase the pressure on that writer to reestablish the balance between economic and aesthetic capital by reasserting his or her commitment to the art. One tangible way of accomplishing this is by publishing a subsequent work that is *critically* acclaimed. This further intensifies the pressure on the young writer.

Newly celebrated writers feel the public demands of the nation just as keenly as they feel the pressure to keep the precarious balance of art and commerce in check. In many profiles of Esi Edugyan and other young Canadian writers, the spectre of Canadian content emerges with predictable regularity. When Barber coined and celebrated "Generation Giller," he inserted near the end of his article a particularly disturbing innuendo:

All but two of the books—Gartner's *Better Living Through Plastic Explosives* and Coady's *The Antagonist*—were published simultaneously in Canada and abroad. Coincidentally, those are the only two books on the Giller short list that are set in Canada and include recognizable Canadian content. (n.pag.)

Barber says no more, but the implication is plain: certain of these young writers are fashioning their cosmopolitan narratives, it would seem, in order to court international markets. Such accusations echo the long-standing debate over nativism and cosmopolitanism in Canadian literary criticism; indeed, Barber's insinuations echo those of Stephen Henighan in his polemic *When Words Deny the World*. Though Henighan allows that he should be the last to criticize Canadian writers for setting their work outside Canada's borders, since he has done so in several of his books, he nevertheless proceeds to do so, lambasting the "gimmick of setting fiction 'anywhere but here'" as a vehicle "for steamrolling Canadian history" and turning "Canadianness—deep, historically rooted Canadianness . . . into a commercial liability" (170-72). Henighan's distinction between responsible

and irresponsible foreign settings turns upon the criterion of characters being recognizably Canadian in those foreign settings: one must be natively cosmopolitan. Cynthia Sugars, writing of the manifold ironies of positions such as Henighan's, observes that, today, there is an oxymoronic "insistence on the contribution of recent writers to a recognizably Canadian ethos (and by extension to Canada's international reputation) even as they are championed for their 'postnational' perspective; and/or an implicit disparagement of these writers for not being Canadian enough" (80-81). This is exactly the conundrum that Esi Edugyan and other young Canadian writers face, and it marks the policing of a familiar boundary in the world of Canadian literature: one that its youngest stars soon learn to negotiate.

When *Half-Blood Blues* was nominated for the Man Booker, the question of Canadian content predictably surfaced, but in this case at least one journalist, the *Toronto Star's* Kali Pearson, noted that "neither of this year's [Canadian] nominees' novels is set within our borders," and suggested that readers "stop lamenting the displacement of Frozen Wheat lit." However supportive Pearson's position, the issue is once again brought to the fore; we are clearly not ready, yet, for the displacement that Pearson anticipates. Other reviewers continued to hunt down Canadian content; Donna Bailey Nurse commented, of *Half-Blood Blues*, that "Canada exists far from the landscape of this novel," though she did grasp at the straw of Delilah Brown's Montreal childhood ("Blacks and Blues" n. pag.). In *Maclean's*, Brian Bethune resurrected the question of Canadian content in similarly nervous ways; Bethune notes that both Edugyan's *Half-Blood Blues* and Patrick deWitt's *The Sisters Brothers* "could scarcely be less Canadian in setting and characters . . . not CanLit as it once was and many still think it is" (n. pag.). (In the same review, Bethune marvelled that deWitt has never been to Toronto. Clearly, Frozen Wheat lit is not the only cherished belief about the Canadian publishing world that could use displacement.)

Esi Edugyan has felt the weight of such expectations, even as she has resisted them. Her response to Pearson's question about Canadian content was cautiously diplomatic: "It is interesting that neither of our [deWitt's and Edugyan's] books are set in Canada. . . . There is a great discourse going on about that—about Canadian books all being set elsewhere—and it tends to be a bother to some critics and readers" (n. pag.). Edugyan's carefully coded lack of sympathy with such nationalist acts of cultural policing is clear, despite the diplomatic air, and her positioning as a writer of colour compounds the inappropriateness of this policing of literary nationalism. Even so, in another

interview Edugyan answers the perennial question, “Can you tell us a bit about your next project?” by assuring her interlocutor that the requirements of Can Con will be met: “to give you a general idea, I will say it’s a novel with a Canadian setting” (Carswell). The pressures of producing the next book after a runaway success are palpable here, and they have a nationalist cast.

If one were to summarize the various narratives that have formed around the literary celebrity of Esi Edugyan, they would read as follows: (1) It is a matter of personal initiative, not collective action; (2) The exercising of this initiative causes one to move programmatically from obscurity to renown; (3) Youth, though desired by the market, is suspect and aligned with obscurity; (4) Profits are evidence of artistic success; (5) Cultural celebrity is an expression of national values. Of course, a writer can do little to control the sorts of narratives that media outlets formulate about her, but in the case of Esi Edugyan, the very novel that spawned her success counters many of the narratives about celebrity that I have listed above.

Half-Blood Blues reveals a writer who has been preoccupied with celebrity, giftedness, and obscurity. When the narrator, the elderly bass player Sid Griffiths, returns to Germany to attend a tribute to his former band member and gifted trumpeter, Hieronymus Falk, the lid is lifted on the story of how Falk, a German of African ancestry, fell into the hands of the Nazis and was sent to Mauthausen: a story that has everything to do with the possession or lack of celebrity. As Griffiths recalls early in the novel, “It’s no exaggeration to say that of all the gents who played in our band, I become the least famous. I ain’t never made it” (29). Sid’s sense of inferiority is confirmed by no less than the biggest jazz celebrity of the twentieth century; Louis Armstrong asks Sid to sit out their recording of the jazzed version of the Nazi anthem “Horst Wessel,” “Half-Blood Blues,” because his playing is not up to standard:

“Sid,” he said quiet like, “You going sit this one out. . . .” I give a funny little shrug, like it ain’t no trouble. “Aw, it alright Louis,” I said. “It alright. Sure. It alright.” It wasn’t alright. (242)

It certainly wasn’t, and Sid holds Hiero’s safety ransom for a measure of celebrity—for the “fame, fortune and all that damned et cetera” (31) that he affects to disdain in his later life.

The story of Sid’s fruitless pursuit of success flatly denies the individualist, entrepreneurial narrative of celebrity. *Half-Blood Blues* explores, on the contrary, the serendipitous nature of genius: the way it cannot be commanded, either by those who possess it or by those who lack it. As Sid reflects on Hiero’s playing, “He had that massive sound, wild and unexpected, like a

thicket of flowers in a bone-dry field” (32). Edugyan uses the same metaphor—the unexpected bloom—once again when Delilah interrogates Sid about Hiero’s past: “Lou was like him. When he was young. Would you say Lou’s *talented*? Would you still call it talent, if it blooms without any kind of nurturing?” (106). And as Sid’s grudge against Hiero grows to include a suspected romance between him and Delilah, he grows ever more resentful of the serendipity of genius, the way it crops up anywhere:

Cause I admit it. He got genius, he got genius in spades. Cut him in half, he still worth three of me. It ain’t fair. It ain’t fair that I struggle and struggle to sound just second-rate, and the damn kid just wake up, spit through his horn, and it sing like nightingales. . . . Gifts is divided so damn unevenly. (245)

Ironically, it is that uber-celebrity, Louis Armstrong, who attempts to scale back Sid’s obsession with genius as the measure of individual worth: “A man ain’t just his one talent. . . . You got the talent of making others your kin, your blood. But music, well it’s different. . . . But it ain’t a man’s whole life” (248). But although Armstrong’s words calm Sid’s bitterness for the moment, they do not quell it.

Even for artists who have seemingly moved from obscurity to success, Edugyan shows that celebrity is a relative, and therefore fickle, value. For example, although Armstrong’s agent Delilah Brown inhabits Satchmo’s aura of celebrity, her own position is, like Sid’s, insecure. At first, when she appears in Berlin to try to spirit the band members out of Germany and to Paris to work with Armstrong, she expects to be recognized instantly, as a celebrity:

There was a flash of impatience in her eyes. “I’m Delilah *Brown*.”
“Oh,” I said. “Of course.”
“The singer,” she said after a moment. (74)

But Sid and the other band members only recognize her when she is identified as Armstrong’s representative: “Hell. Now *that* we understood” (74). Try as she might to carve out her independent career, she remains a paracelebrity. Later in the novel, when she has become Sid’s lover, she allows him to see the vulnerability of her second-tier fame; she runs into Josephine Baker, the celebrated dancer and singer, and is clearly jealous of the attention that the African-American star has garnered in France. She calls upon Sid to join her in her criticism of Baker’s talents, and slowly he realizes that she feels the kind of pain that he does:

Then slow like, she lift up her green eyes and look at me with real hurt. Hell. This was my cue. I was meant to say, *You know you ten times the woman she is, Lilah girl. You know fame’s comin you way any day now, it ain’t lost you address.* (223)

But, of course, he doesn't, because to recognize Delilah's pain and jealousy would be to acknowledge his own.

The major celebrity presence—that of Armstrong—is not felt until two-thirds of the way through the novel, though he is spoken of, anticipated, and even feared long before he enters the stage. “I been dreading this hour,” thinks Sid when the band, now in Paris, work up their courage to contact Armstrong. And when they finally make a date to play with him, Sid comes onstage “with dread. . . . Louis Armstrong, brother. That gate cast a shadow even lying down” (230-31). This deferral of the celebrity who has, more than any other, cast that long shadow through the history of jazz, in a novel that is so obsessed with celebrity, is telling. For the celebrity that Sid and Delilah Brown so desire demands to be both acknowledged and yet displaced, all the better to recognize the celebrity of everyday life. Hieronymus Falk, whose legendary narrative as a celebrity ends with what the talent scout John Hammond calls “a glamorous death” (33), is, instead, living a heroically obscure life in Poland, far away from the klieg lights.

Looking over this much-celebrated novel's meditations on celebrity, they appear to be the opposite of the narrative that has been told about their author. In particular, celebrity may attach itself, arbitrarily, to one person or another—to Louis Armstrong but not Delilah Smith, to Hieronymus Falk but not Sid Griffiths—but it seems that it cannot be entrepreneurially programmed in the individualistic way that many media narratives of celebrity suggest that it can. The move from obscurity to fame that is the result of such individual agency is never assured, nor is it a linear march. There are side-doors, history's deviations, lost threads, betrayals. The operations of nation and nationalism may generate fame for some and strip it cruelly from others. But in the world of *Half-Blood Blues*, creativity survives in spite of the most repressive actions of the state because ultimately it cannot be entrepreneurially programmed by the state either.

When Esi Edugyan stepped in front of those lights on November 8, 2011, the Giller jury that chose her book urged readers to place it “next to Louis Armstrong's ‘West End Blues’” (“2011 Scotiabank Giller”). In so doing, they proclaimed Esi Edugyan to be Canadian literature's Hieronymus Falk: a prodigy propelled from obscurity to fame in a seemingly spontaneous fashion. But attention must be paid to the struggles as well as the consecrations, the economic, material conditions out of which Edugyan's celebrity has arisen, and the publishing and prize cultures which she and other young

Canadian writers must navigate, if we are interested in understanding literary celebrity today. As Sid Griffiths urges Delilah Brown,

“Go on. Tell me your secret.”

“You’re really interested?”

“In how a girl from Canada break the bigtime? Who ain’t interested?” (110)

NOTES

- 1 I also discuss Stephen Leacock, L. M. Montgomery, Mazo de la Roche, and Pauline Johnson in a chapter devoted to a history of literary celebrity in Canada, and I affirm that literary celebrity in this country is not exclusively a contemporary phenomenon; however, the three central case studies are more recent ones.
- 2 There are studies that focus on literary consecration in the present, though they tend to be analyses of phenomena rather than individual writers. Examples would include studies of mass reading events like Canada Reads and the Oprah Book Club by Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, as well as studies of prize culture like Roberts’ and English’s.
- 3 I am grateful to an anonymous reader of this article for pointing this out to me.

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