



Fame Junkies

by [Jake Halpern](#)

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About the Book

Why are celebrity magazines the only ones whose circulation is growing? Why do more people watch the ultimate competition for celebrityhood, *American Idol*, than watch the nightly news on the three major networks combined? Why do we care who Paris Hilton is dating?

In *Fame Junkies: The Hidden Truth Behind America's Favorite Addiction*, Jake Halpern, who has reported on Hollywood for NPR's *All Things Considered* for several years, explores the fascinating and often dark implications of our national obsession with celebrity. From kiddie talent conventions to the editorial offices of *US Weekly*, Halpern takes us on a journey that illuminates how our fixation with the stars plays out in America today, and, in particular, what impact this obsession is having on three subcultures:

- aspiring stars
- personal assistants and entourage insiders
- diehard fans

Halpern's research into the world of aspiring stars leads him from Personal Best, a modest modeling and acting school in Buffalo, to the International Model and Talent Association convention in New York City, a showcase of twelve hundred children from across the country hoping to land acting or modeling contracts, to Oakwood Toluca Hills, a gated community just outside Hollywood inhabited entirely by would-be child stars and their parents. The children and teenagers he meets are convinced that fame is a cure-all for life's problems and that they're *entitled* to become stars. This mentality is reinforced by a number of factors, including increased "slots for the famous" on television (primarily due to reality TV), self-esteem curriculums in our schools, and the innately attention-craving nature of the adolescent psyche.

To explore the vortex of people who surround celebrities, the assistants and entourage insiders, Halpern becomes an honorary member of the Association of Celebrity Personal Assistants (ACPA) and spends time with one such assistant who has worked for Oliver Stone, Sharon Stone, and Dennis Hopper, and who teaches at a school run by the ACPA to train aspiring assistants. Halpern also investigates the psychological phenomenon of "basking in reflected glory" (or BIRGing). To some, celebrity is so compelling that merely being in the presence of someone famous can make them feel special.

To delve into the world of diehard fandom, Halpern travels to Pittsburgh, where he meets Rod Stewart's biggest fan, Marcy Braunstein, who has a giant shrine to Stewart in her house and who officially nominated him for a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Halpern accompanies Braunstein to the induction ceremony and later rides in Stewart's limo with him, talking to him about the nature of fan obsession.

Halpern makes numerous pit stops on his journey, visiting the LAPD's Celebrity Anti-Stalking Unit, sitting in on a *Us Weekly* editorial meeting, and spending time in the lab of a renowned Duke University primatologist who demonstrates that chimpanzees like to gaze at photos of the most powerful and dominant ("famous") chimps in their social group, to the point of being willing to give up food to do so.

In addition, Halpern conducts his own study, teaming up with Syracuse University's Newhouse School of Public Communications to poll 650 children in Rochester, New York, on their attitudes toward fame and pop culture. Among the disturbing findings of his original research:

- When given the option to become stronger, smarter, famous, or more beautiful, boys chose fame almost as often as they chose intelligence. Girls chose it more often.
- 43.4 percent of teenage girls want to become celebrity personal assistants when they grow up. They chose this option twice as often as "the president of a great university like Harvard or Yale," three times as often as "U.S. senator," and four times as often as "the chief of a major company like General Motors."
- When asked whom they would most like to meet for dinner, teenage girls who indicated they were appreciated by their parents, friends, and teachers tended to choose Jesus Christ; those who felt underappreciated were likely to choose Paris Hilton.

From the statistical results of his own "fame survey" to his anecdotal findings from interviews with wannabes, assistants, fans, and experts (including addiction specialists — who say that an encounter with a celebrity can provide an addictive high — evolutionary anthropologists, child psychologists, historians, media experts, and others), Halpern provides an unparalleled look into America's celebrity obsession. *Fame Junkies* helps us to understand how psychology, biology, technology, evolution, and profit all conspire to make us so fixated on the famous.

About the Author

Jake Halpern is the author of the critically acclaimed *Braving Home* and has written for the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *LA Weekly*, among other publications. He is also a commentator and freelance producer for NPR's *All Things Considered*.

A Conversation with Jake Halpern

Can a book about celebrities be serious?

Absolutely. Of course, many academics would never admit this. In general, academics — and perhaps even some journalists — are reluctant to study celebrity because it doesn't seem like a sufficiently weighty and important subject. Yet, as I point out in my book, celebrities have a massive presence in American culture, and this often does have very serious implications. After all, we live in a country where more people watch the ultimate competition for celebrityhood, *American Idol*, than watch the nightly news on the three major networks combined. Here's an even more disturbing example: in 2004, the nightly news shows on the three major networks spent a total of just 26 minutes covering the bloody conflict in Darfur, while they spent roughly 130 minutes on the Martha Stewart scandal. In 2005, the coverage of Darfur dropped to just 18 minutes. This is pretty disturbing information and it warrants serious consideration.

What is the danger of having so many young people who want to become famous?

I argue in my book that we're raising a generation of celebrity-obsessed young people who are convinced that they should and will be famous during the course of their lives. This belief is reinforced by a number of things, including the apparent abundance of fame on TV, self-esteem curriculums in our schools, and the innately attention-craving nature of the adolescent psyche. Ultimately, this phenomenon poses a number of dangers, including the fact that it may be fueling an epidemic of narcissism. Indeed, preliminary studies involving the Narcissism Personality Index (NPI) indicate that no other demographic group in the world is as narcissistic as the American teenager.

Are teenagers in America really more self-important than they were in the past?

There is certainly information to support this notion. This piece of data is my favorite. It comes from the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory. This personality test has been given to teenagers since the early 1950s. If you compare the results from teenagers who took the test in the early 1950s to results from teenagers who took it in the late 1980s, it's quite interesting. One of the most striking differences between these two groups was the way they responded to item 58, which reads: "I am an important person." In the early 1950s, only 12 percent of teenagers endorsed that statement; by the late 1980s, that number had jumped to roughly 80 percent.

In your book, you talk about the notion of "basking in reflected glory." What does that mean?

The term "basking in reflected glory," or BIRGing, was coined by research psychologists in the 1970s. It refers to people who build their sense of self by living vicariously. Not surprisingly, it is a practice often used by people with low self-esteem. For example, college students with low self-esteem are far more likely to embrace their school's football team when it wins and dissociating themselves from that same team when it loses. Research also indicates that subjects with low self-esteem will go out of their way to point out that they have the same birthday as someone who is very successful. I found this amazing. After all, having a birthday in common with someone is such a weak connection. If people are so eager to BIRG that they would latch on to a connection that is as trivial and tenuous as a shared birthday, it is no wonder that so many others would stand in the rain for hours just to catch a glimpse of a celebrity like Brad Pitt or Angelina Jolie. It takes surprisingly little for us to BIRG.

What were some of the most surprising things you discovered in your fame survey?

One thing that shocked me was that, when given the option of "pressing a magic button" and becoming stronger, smarter, famous, or more beautiful, teenage boys in the survey chose fame almost as often as they chose intelligence, and teenage girls chose it more often.

Another thing that interested me was that even teenagers who did not expect or wish to be in the spotlight were nonetheless obsessed with the trappings of fame. I asked teenagers to choose which profession they would most like to have when they grow up. Among girls, 43.4 percent indicated that they wanted to become assistants to a celebrity. They chose this option twice as often as "the president of a great university like Harvard or Yale," three times as often as "U.S. senator," and four times as often as "the chief of a major company like General Motors." What's intriguing about this statistic is that, among girls who indicated that they received bad grades in school (C's or below), the percentage who wanted to become assistants rose to 67 percent. What's more, among both boys and girls who got bad grades — and who described themselves as unpopular — the percentage who opted to become assistants rose further to 80 percent.

This book is quite different from your previous one. What inspired you to write it?

The truth is I've always been drawn to people who have a tendency toward obsession. For a long time I was interested in people's attachment to their homes, and eventually this interest led me to quit my job as a reporter and set out to write my first book, *Braving Home*. In the course of doing this, I spent months living in some of the most dangerous places in America — rickety houses precariously situated on erupting volcanoes and on storm-battered islands — with the hope of learning why these diehard folks refused to give up their homes.

My interest in *Fame Junkies* grew out of this same curiosity. The big difference was that the niche I was exploring was governed not by our devotion to home but by our devotion to celebrity. I wanted to delve into a world where celebrity was not just a persistent distraction but a full-blown, all-encompassing obsession. I had my eyes on the vortex. This, of course, meant that I had to set out for Hollywood.

Is it true that subordinate monkeys will actually give up food in order to stare at photographs of dominant monkeys?

That's right. I spent a fair amount of time hanging out with the scientists who conducted this experiment at Duke University. The male monkeys also give up food to stare at the hindquarters of female monkeys. Interestingly, there are good evolutionary explanations for why these monkeys act as they do. In the wild, male monkeys enhance their chances of reproducing by studying the hindquarters of the females in their troop to discern which of them is most aroused and interested in mating. Typically, the monkeys will also keep a close eye on what the dominant males are doing in order to avoid trouble, much the way a kid nervously looks at a bully who enters the schoolyard. The monkeys may also watch a dominant male in the hope of finding a window of opportunity — when he is asleep, or not paying attention, or simply absent — that allows them to sneak off and mate with one of the females. Over time, those monkeys who were more adept at gathering information about dominant males and sexually receptive females may well have had better luck at surviving and reproducing.

The same thing may apply to humans. It is quite possible that our modern-day desire to keep tabs on the powerful and the sexy, à la *US Weekly*, stems from our ancient past. In prehistoric times, the average male gathered as much data as he could about the group's strongman or leader: how he was feeling, what he liked to eat, which females he favored, whether he had been hunting, if he'd been injured, where he liked to rest, when he usually went to sleep, and how long he slept for. All of this

information was incredibly useful in helping him forge alliances, or plot coups, or make plans to have sex covertly with one of the leader's women. So a socially astute prehistoric male with a keen eye for sizing up the powerful was probably far more likely to survive and reproduce — especially if he also kept tabs on his most fertile-looking females. Over time, this sort of natural selection may have favored a behavior that resembles celebrity-watching.

More facts from *Fame Junkies*

- Since 2000, circulation of major news and opinion magazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*, *The New Yorker*, etc.) has increased by 2 percent. Circulation of entertainment magazines (*People*, *US Weekly*, etc.) has increased by 18.7 percent.
- In 2002, celebrity-endorsed clothing labels accounted for 6 percent of the apparel industry; in 2005, it jumped to 10 percent. Analysts predict another 15 percent rise by 2009.
- According to Gallup polls conducted in 1963, the people Americans most admired were political figures, such as Lyndon Johnson, Winston Churchill, and Martin Luther King, Jr. In 2005, Americans most admired celebrities such as Bono and Donald Trump.
- The recent explosion of reality TV, combined with the availability of celebrity "vacancies" and saturation of the media with celebrity-focused magazines and TV shows, has created a perception that it's easier to become famous. Thirty-one percent of American teenagers believe that they will become famous one day.
- The obsession with becoming famous and with celebrities appears to be at least slightly addictive. Addicts resort to behaviors that temporarily get them high, change their moods, and offer relief. It's been shown that being near celebrities gives the average person a temporary high. Also, the promise of validation and adoration that comes with fame can be both instantly gratifying and spiritually irresistible, especially to those with low self-esteem.
- Teenagers most in danger of being exploited by expensive modeling and acting schools are those who have been neglected by their parents — if they aren't getting enough attention at home, they fantasize about getting it elsewhere.
- According to "belongingness" theory, evolution has created a mechanism within us that makes us crave social acceptance. The formation of social relationships (and especially relationships with the famous) stimulates the production of opioids, chemicals in the brain that make us feel pleasure.
- Americans are lonelier than ever: we marry later (five years later, on average, since 1956) and increasingly live alone (up nearly 20 percent from 1950). One way to combat this is to form "parasocial" relationships with characters on TV or in movies — we come to feel that we actually know celebrities through the roles they play. Parasocial relationships can sometimes eclipse real relationships.
- According to a doctor who conducted the largest study of stalkers ever compiled, stalking is an addiction of sorts, and "often stalkers are trying to escape an unpleasant mood state."

2007 Tour for Jake Halpern

NEW YORK CITY

Barnes and Noble, Chelsea

January 8, 7:00 p.m.

BOSTON

Brookline Booksmith

January 10, 7:00 p.m.

BUFFALO

Hallwalls

Sponsored by Talking Leaves

January 11, 7:00 p.m.