Introduction to re-issue of *We're So Famous*

by Charles Bock

We met in graduate school, while attending a master of fine arts program for creative writing. If I'm being entirely accurate, it was a low-residency program—you went for a couple of weeks every six months but handled most of the writing work through monthly correspondence with that semester's professor. Both Jaime and I had applied in no small part because this particular college had a famous name. Actually, that is to say the undergraduate program was *infamous*, a small and isolated den in Vermont where artistic black magic was practiced, and from which emerged writers with gaudy and nefarious reputations: One of its freshman students had written a bestselling novel that had become an R-rated Brat Pack movie with an amazing sound track. This particular young author had become hugely famous, his name appearing in book reviews and gossip columns alike. But he wasn't alone. At least two of his friends from undergrad writing workshops *also* published novels. Bret Easton Ellis, Donna Tartt, and Jonathan Lethem, all of them had come through Bennington's writing workshops. So, separately, Jaime and I had decided to enroll in the next-best thing, Bennington's mail-order correspondence graduate school deal. We were going to be writers too. We were in our twenties. This is how things went.

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Fast-forward a bit. Summer of 1996. The back pages of an issue of the now-defunct fashion and culture magazine *Details*. A photo spread featuring two attractive young

women. The pair called themselves Shampoo, but Jaime couldn't quite figure out if they were models, singers, a band, or what. It seemed to him that these two, their fake names and personas and very pulses and souls, had been entirely devised explicitly for the purpose of becoming famous. However fame happened, Shampoo couldn't have cared less. This idea seemed novel to Jaime. Their bold absurdity, their willfully oblivious and naked ambition.

Fast-forward a bit more, to 1997. Way down in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, the very excellent writer Mary Robison fished out, from among the entrants to a short story competition, a tale of three talentless girls who wanted to be famous. The piece was soon named a finalist for *Mississippi Review*'s annual prize and was published in that excellent literary magazine, then edited by Frederick Barthelme, marking it as the first fiction among our peers in grad school to see the light of day in any kind of respected literary magazine. Back in Arizona, Jaime set to expanding the story, in the hopes of making a book of it. "I remember the dilemma at the outset," wrote Jaime in an e-mail, "was how to write a book that was borne of my loathing of celebrity culture without it turning into a scathing screed that only like-minded individuals would get and nod their head to. So I tried to create a more charming narrative that still seethed with disdain for celebrity worship at the expense of everything real. And then who would be the messenger?"

The messengers ended up being Paque, Stella, and Daisy, three high school friends from Phoenix. On the pages that follow, you will meet them—they start out living together in a model home in an unfinished housing community at the base of a mountain. The girls have dropped out of school because why not? Sometimes they ride around town in limousines because a friend's dad has a limo service, and business is usually slow. Back

in the eighties, being willfully ironic on television was new and daring and a way of saying, *I am not a part of this bullshit.* Like so many of us who grew up at that time, the girls look to David Letterman, without any irony, as their icon of ironic humor. Quotes from *When Harry Met Sally…* are a way of punctuating conversation. Not ten pages into the book, one of our trio, Paque, voices what seems to be as much of a treatise or agenda as these girls possesses:

> Everyone is sick of today's hyper-ironic music. People crave fun, we think. And the music of the '80s *was* fun. 'The Perfect Way' by Scritti Politti was a song you could dance your ass off to, and 'Safety Dance' by Men Without Hats was another one. Me and Daisy do like some '90s stuff, but most of it isn't fun. . . . Putting the fun back into music is the answer. Fun: 'Love Shack' by the B-52's. Not fun: anything by Metallica. Fun: 'I Want Candy' by Bow Wow Wow. Not fun: Smashing Pumpkins. The all-time most fun song ever: 'Come On Eileen' by Dexy's Midnight Runners. Whenever me and Daisy hear that song we dance our asses off. If the music makes you want to jump out of your skin and dance (for instance, anything by Madonna from the '80s and early '90s), then it's good.

Harmless, right? An equation as simple as girls just wanting to have fun. Early name-dropping of Tower Records also feels right for this time period, because Tower Records was where teens went to check out all the record covers that had nearly naked women on them. My nostalgic delight-o-meter was set atingling that much more in the early pages

with another reference: Millers Outpost, a basically forgotten chain of stores that appeared through the southwest in the eighties—if you were in junior high school back then, you bugged your parents to take you there for your Levi's jeans, your shirts from Ocean Pacific.

So then, from the opening pages this book is filled with signifiers, specific markers from what seems a quite specific and innocent time. But don't be fooled. There's more at play. Two of the girls form a band named Masterful Johnson, and though they have no discernable musical abilities, the group somehow manages a shot at stardom. This ends with a lip-synching fiasco at a summer concert, an event very much inspired by the pop duo Milli Vanilli, who were caught and excoriated for lip-synching during the early nineties, when grunge kicked in and authenticity—or at least a pose of authenticity—was key to success. Soon after, there's a shooting, maybe a murder. The girls get out of town briefly, to Manhattan. Stella lands in Hollywood, where she takes a crazy, mixed-up whirl at acting. Understand, during recording sessions, we never get one word about musical integrity; during talks about auditions and acting, nothing about craft or art is put into play. Rather, Stella turns out to be big on dead pools and participates in message board discussions about which celebrities will kick the bucket next. Stories of famous and rare celebrity deaths—Bob Crane from *Hogan's Heroes* and his autoasphyxiation tragedy; Jayne Mansfield's beheading—start creeping into her conversations. In her search to track down a burned-out rocker for her dead pool, Stella sets to writing letters to celebrities—Axl Rose, Jennie Garth—who've come in to get photos developed at the booth where she works her day gig. Of course Stella ends up meeting the crashing rocker. Of course they shack up, just off of Sunset Boulevard, fading in and out of a high in one

of the cabanas at the Chateau Marmont. Naturally, these scenes are captured as the pages of a screenplay.

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Taking on the subject of fame is a way of addressing the culture while also delving into that universal desire to have our own name known. Fame connects to the need for attention, to be *seen*, that is part of us from infancy onward; for the teacher to bestow attention on *me*; the fantasy worlds of being the best, celebrated, being beloved. This is worth thinking about and wrestling with. Usually, as we mature through teendom and into adulthood, our need for attention gets redirected, at least a bit, in some way: We still want all the fame, and want to be known, we want love. But we also run, in a critical and pragmatic manner, into just how the world works. Maybe we want to do something significant, something that *earns* attention. We get older and the price has to get paid, and while it's not like anybody's necessarily turning down the chance to become famous, sustenance—both emotional and physical—becomes a priority. Sooner or later, the idea of fame, or rather, the importance of it, has to take a backseat to the dreaded details and demands of the specific life we are living. When this backseat-taking doesn't happen, what does that mean about Johnny or Jenny X? What does that say about him or her, when he or she clings to childlike illusions?

When he wrote *We're So Famous*, Jaime wrestled with those questions through the form and medium of fiction, while at the same time engaging with the parameters of the form of the novel itself. And so this novel has three narrators—Paque, Stella, and Daisy—each of whom gets her own section, speaking in a voice that has empty similarities to her

friends', but is still uniquely clueless in its own right, and that tells its own particular part of this larger, comic, mildly tragic tale. We get the time-capsule-preserved cultural references, the expertly dropped names of yore, the hints and influences of those writers Jaime loves and by whom he was influenced (Ellis, F. Scott Fitzgerald). Also a litter of epistolary sections, chat room discussions, those screenplay pages.

My own favorite character is shy, gentle Daisy, whose name carries a distant echo from *The Great Gatsby*. Daisy is the girl who laughs at every reference, who turns her back at the doorway where a grisly celebrity murder happened. She is the sensitive, squeamish one, the most decent one, the one who isn't ambitious or lovestruck, but is just kinda, well, overwhelmed. While everything is circling the drain for our friends, she writes for advice to the pop band Bananarama, care of their fan club. Once you understand just how sweet and toothless Daisy's gesture is, you see the perfect angles of this construct. A joke that, even with time, remains too perfect to be funny.

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I've known Jaime for twenty years now. The man has worked and evolved and willed himself into something of a literary entrepreneur, putting together numerous anthologies and cofounding the literary magazine *Post Road*, which is now run out of Boston College. He also rescued a bookstore in Boston, Newtonville Books, with his wife, the hilariously sharp Mary Cotton. Jaime wrote three more novels, the Charlie Martens trilogy that features *Vernon Downs*, *World Gone Water*, and *Garden Lakes*. But his love for writers is real. Writers come in and out of the bookstore, in and out of his anthologies,

in and out of the book trailers he makes for his books. He's shown a true talent for sensing potential and finding a pulse, for cultivating talent, running with ideas. It's no exaggeration to say he's woven himself into our national literary fabric.

It is the spring of 2016, and there have been other evolutions as well. Paque, Stella, and Daisy have long given way to *1 Night in Paris*, the misadventures of Khloé and Lamar, the Kardashian game app, and the Adidas Yeezy Boost. In the same way that our technology has accelerated, and our news and entertainment and consumptive cycles have accelerated, it also seems that the appetite for fame has accelerated, as has its residual price. This doesn't mean there aren't any more sweet, innocent songs that make us want to get up and dance; certainly there are. It doesn't mean that things are only headed in one horrid direction. But the scales in this equation have indeed tilted. The darkness and willful vacancy also seem to have coalesced and metastasized. My sense is that the sweetly curious narrators you will find in these pages provide more insight as to how we got to this cultural moment than many more-heavy-handed books. This alone makes *We're So Famous* worthwhile. And what follows will surely make you want to jump out of your skin and dance.