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Home > Features > Karl Ove Knausgaard

Karl Ove Knausgaard

Literary Celebrity

Ben Streeter
To make sense of Knausgaard’s meteoric rise, we need to see that his prestige preceded his consecration in the Anglophone literary press.

The myth is that the literary genius produces a work so brilliant that a market of readers, obviously capable of discerning a fine work of literature when they see one, naturally reward the artist’s winning effort with high sales figures. It’s only right that a creative genius who produces such compelling art should reap the benefits, the myth goes. But people who are not in a relatively elite social position to begin with, Sarah Brouillette reminds us, are not likely to become writers of so-called literary writing in the first place.[i] Prior to his consecration as a literary god, Karl Ove Knausgaard held vast reserves of good will and social capital in the literary and cultural institutions of his home country, Norway. He paid his dues, you might say, writing reviews, editing, interviewing celebrities of a greater stature than his, experiences which are recounted throughout the My Struggle series. And prestige is a highly regulated system of back scratching and counter scratching. In return for his prize wins, Knausgaard founded a small publishing house—adding to the infrastructure of the literary institution that raised him, and in passing boosting his image as a literary darling, like so many bestselling authors in the US opening quaint indie bookshops. Who doesn’t love a small publisher in the age of Amazon.

This theater of gestures and counter-gestures as James English, in The Economy of Prestige, calls the awarding of literary prizes, explains why Knausgaard is expected to do something in return.[ii] Not only did he win prizes, he was groomed as a unique talent from a young age, as for example when he was the youngest writer ever to be granted admission to an elite writing program. At 30, he became the first debut author to win the Norwegian Critics’ Prize. He also won the Brage Award, the Book of the Year Prize in Morgenbladet, the P2 Listeners’ Prize, and the Norwegian Critics’ Prize, and was nominated for the Nordic Council Literary Prize.[iii] In these instances, Knausgaard benefited from Norway’s behavior as a self-interested nation promoting its literary talent in what Pascale Casanova calls a World Republic of Letters.[iv] Awarding literary prizes are a way for countries to express themselves as important players on the world literary stage. Norway has a national interest in getting home-grown literary works such as My Struggle to become a part of a hegemonic English-speaking world culture. [v] In the words of Tim Parks, My Struggle has become “one of those books which periodically impose themselves as ‘required reading’ at a global level.”[vi] But to this ostensibly sudden explosion of celebrity on the world stage, Knausgaard actually brought substantial reserves of cultural prestige. He was well-known, as his books bear witness, in the music world, in the writing world, in newspapers and radio and so on. Prior to his English translations and astronomical success, Knausgaard boasted significant relationships in the world of art and culture in Norway. One way of reading his rise would be to say that he played by the rules of the game. He rose through the ranks: starting as a reviewer of rock music for the local paper as a teenager, moving on to a prestigious writing program, working for years to attain regional and national recognition, finally graduating to international acclaim. Knausgaard is a myth to perpetuate the idea that the meritocratic system works.

But this theory rests on the notion that Knausgaard had a lot to do with the fact of his success. Let’s take a closer look at that idea. The very form of the series was something out of Knausgaard’s hands. It was his editor Geir Gulliksen who suggested the serialized format of My Struggle. The latest book includes a detailed account of the back and forth between the writer and his editor over how many volumes there should be. In Book Six, Knausgaard says that once he was sold on the serial format, he wanted to take it as far as publishing one book a month for a year. The editor dissuaded him on the basis of cost, and so they settled on six instead. The business savvy Gulliksen perhaps sensed that the serial novel would be having a moment, as proved to be the case with Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan novels as well. The trend has continued apace, with Rachel Cusk’s Outline trilogy,
for instance. The enterprise may also have benefited from an autobiographical turn among younger novelists in North America, as Christian Lorentzen says, among them Tao Lin (*Taipei*), Sheila Heti (*How Should a Person Be?*), and Ben Lerner (*Leaving the Atocha Station*). [vii] And not only in the US but in the UK, with Edward St. Aubyn’s *Patrick Melrose* novels.

Further laying the groundwork for his seemingly astronomical ascension were the soft launches that were his earlier works. All of his novels, from his debut in 1998, had been Norwegian bestsellers. [viii] Before the first installment of *My Struggle* was published in English, Knausgaard had already cemented “his stature as a commanding new voice,” said the *New York Review of Books*, conflating strong sales figures and worthiness of critical attention. What was it that this new voice was commanding, book sales? Also paving the way for a successful rollout to a mass Anglophone readership were the hyperbolic reviews of *Book One* in Denmark, Sweden, Germany, and Italy. In the UK, critics began to talk about “an existential literary experiment without parallel in Norwegian literature.” [ix]

Nevertheless, despite Knausgaard’s proven track record in Europe, only a small publisher in Brooklyn would take a chance on introducing *My Struggle* to a US audience. Archipelago is a nonprofit—with a staff of four—funded in part by the New York state government and charitable foundations. The scrappy bookseller raised $20,000 on Kickstarter to fund production of *Book One*. [x] Archipelago started by selling Knausgaard’s *Book One* as a paperback for around $10. Tim Parks says the enterprising publisher, seeing the success of the book, then decided to publish the remainder of the series as $27 trade cloth editions, figuring it could turn a greater profit with a higher-end edition. In Norway, by comparison, the hardcovers were selling for $50 apiece. [xi] Note the capitalization on Knausgaard’s celebrity, rushing out a quick four-part book series in the past year, each selling for close to $30 in an attractive and slim edition, and published in four rapid-fire installments in the span of a year. The market will milk the phenomenon for all that it’s worth. Only after the success of the small publisher did a larger publishing house swoop in and bring its marketing muscle to bear. The powerful Farrar, Straus and Giroux stepped in to buy the paperback rights to Knausgaard’s *Book One* from the “minnow” Archipelago. [xii] Such a prestigious imprint as FSG confers prestige and symbolizes literary excellence. [xiii] It also boasts networks of circulation: many more FSG books are written up in the literary press than are books put out by struggling indie presses such as Archipelago.

Knausgaard also comes at a time when the lines between commerce and the literary have blurred. Critical assessments of literary works routinely come equipped with a link to add this item to your cart. (See what readers like you also bought!) And vice versa: when you go to buy your copy of *My Struggle* from the website of Archipelago, you will find yourself directed to a piece in *The New Republic* that exclaims the vast number of *My Struggle* translations — 22 languages and counting in 2014. [xiv] And as Rachel Cusk says, “as each volume is translated into other languages, Knausgaard’s literary fame increases.” [xv] For Tim Parks, we live in an age “in which we have come to expect that these huge international bestsellers will happen.” The publishers are like so many surfers, Parks says, treading water, hoping to catch the next monster wave. Publishers can see a wave building and building, as each translation, each literary prize adds to the momentum. For publishers, translating a foreign writer who has been certified as a prize winner and a bestseller is low risk and high reward. Publishers need global stars like him. Think of Roberto Bolano, another bona fide literary superstar in English translation.
The shortness of the life cycle of the contemporary literary celebrity can be seen in Knausgaard’s rapid rise and equally short-lived fame and subsequent decline in popularity (see Fig. 1). Google Trends shows interest in Knausgaard increasing after 2012, with search volume peaking in 2014 and again in 2015 (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Internet search volume for Karl Ove Knausgaard, Google Trends, 2004-2018. [xvi]

For comparison, an analysis of Google metrics shows Elena Ferrante’s rise and fall follows a similar trajectory (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Internet search volume for Elena Ferrante, Google Trends, 2004-2018. [xvii]:

In 2012, My Struggle appeared in no fewer than nine book-of-the-year lists in newspapers across the world. The Man Booker Prize seems every year to list the latest iteration of My Struggle. My Struggle: Book Six (https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2018/september/my-struggle-book-six-karl-ove-knausgaard) likely will be listed as a book of the year by The New Yorker, meaning each installment in the series would have held the honor. However, The New York Times is panning Book Six, now that the Knausgaard train has run out of steam. The Times too rode his coat tails, hiring the broody Norwegian to write humdrum travelogues for the cover of its weekend magazine.

US reviews of My Struggle frequently cite his Norwegian sales figures as a measure of literary value, adding to the griping about commercial benchmarks blending with measures of artistic merit. [xviii] In Norway, the books sold roughly half-a-million copies, equivalent to one My Struggle for every nine Norwegians. Many reviews also relate to English readers that the books were so phenomenally successful in Norway that some workplaces there have had to declare “Knausgaard-free days” so that their employees could get back to work. All of this hyperbole comes before his book has even been released in the US.

“A key technique” of the contemporary publishing industry, Sarah Brouillette says, “has been intensive marketing of writers’ most apparent biographies.” [xix] A major point of interest is Knausgaard's friction with family members, which is foregrounded in reviews as well as in the books. Publishers are best able to circulate to the
media those works with compelling author stories attached to them. The New Yorker notes Knausgaard’s celebrity was fed by the “extra-literary commentary” and legal threats in Norway, detailed in Book Six. Knausgaard’s first ex-wife made a radio documentary, Tonje’s Version, and his brother Yngve was commissioned by a newspaper to follow him around. In the first third of Book Six, Knausgaard details the acrimony between him and his uncle Gunnar. After the second volume was published, Knausgaard said his mother called to ask him to stop writing, saying it was too much. The process was “very traumatic for her.” [xx] His second wife, Linda, to whom he was then still married, relapsed into depression on the publication of Book Two. Her incapacitating depression and hospitalization for bipolar disorder are detailed in the final third of Book Six. (They were divorced in 2016.)

The second juicy morsel that has lent itself to tabloid like coverage is the choice of title. First, Knausgaard wanted to name the book Argentina. It was the suggestion of a friend to name it My Struggle. The link to Hitler’s book is elaborated on for a good four hundred pages in the final installment. A 2012 review in The International Herald Tribune, “Norway’s Bad Boy of European Letters,” said that what also sparked controversy in Norway, was the book’s perceived violation of “fundamental social norms” in Scandinavia, with its stolidly Lutheran culture. The media circus that ensued, the review said, followed Knausgaard to New York, where he was on tour promoting his book. [xxi]

Many reviews perpetuated the myth of Knausgaard as a uniquely prolific writer. The Guardian said he cranked out 20 pages in a day. [xxii] The New Republic also noted his seemingly superhuman pace of writing: “At one point, he stayed up for 24 hours and wrote 50 pages about his early days with Linda, trying to capture the rush of feeling. He wrote the fifth volume, 550 pages long, in eight weeks.” Adding to the mystique of the genius writer is the image of the tortured artist who stays up through the night writing his masterpiece. The Wall Street Journal published a profile of Knausgaard — its so-called “literary innovator” of the year in 2015 — with photos of an overflowing ashtray, empty bottles strewn on the floor next to a battered copy of Elaine Scarry’s The Body in Pain to signal intellectual legitimacy. [xxiii]

But while the artist is the most important origin of a work, cultural critic Sarah Thornton says that the hands through which it passes are essential to the way in which it accrues value. [xxiv] My Struggle is excerpted in prestigious magazines, and published by elite imprints of powerful publishing houses, for example. Knausgaard’s works are reviewed in the consecrating pages of prestigious institutions, in reviews often written by big names, names that also appear on the books’ marketing materials. And once Knausgaard achieved celebrity status, the cycle of celebrity is set in motion. By association, celebrities who endorse him benefit from his shining moment. Zadie Smith and Jeffrey Eugenides recommend him. Chuck Klosterman, a columnist for The New York Times, calls him “amazing.” [xxv] For The Guardian, Rachel Cusk, who also works in the genre of autofiction and in the form of the series (see the Outline trilogy), called My Struggle “perhaps the most significant literary enterprise of our time.” Surely her praise is not without self-interest. A rising tide of lifts all boats. Her review in The Guardian, like others, ends with a promotion of the book for sale (free shipping!), thus blending objective review with commerce. It also promotes the reviewer’s forthcoming book. A double cross promotion!

Cusk highlighted a passage from Book Two (A Man in Love) in which Knausgaard describes his “struggle” as feeling like his life was not his own, crowded out by the creeping demands and responsibilities placed on him by, as it were, a middle-class modern life:
I have always had a great need for solitude. I require huge swathes of loneliness, and when I do not have it, which has been the case for the last five years, my frustration can sometimes become almost panicked, or aggressive. …. Time is slipping away from me, running through my fingers like sand while I … do what? Clean floors, wash clothes, make dinner, wash up, go shopping, play with the children in the play areas, bring them home, undress them, bathe them, look after them until it is bedtime, tuck them in, hang some clothes to dry, fold others and put them away, tidy up, wipe tables, chairs and cupboards.

The same passage was quoted in the New Republic and again in Slate by Christian Lorentzen, a cultural critic and taste-maker who also writes for New York and The London Review of Books.

Here is different excerpt, this one from Book Six:

What does it mean to write?

First of all it is to lose oneself, or one’s self. In that way it resembles reading, but … the loss of the self in writing is in a different way complete, as when snow vanishes into snow, one might think, or any other monochromism with no privileged point, no foreground or background, no top or bottom, only sameness everywhere. Such is the nature of the written self. … In writing we lose control … and the question is whether the uncontrollable and incalculable properties of the singular I in actual fact are a representation of its true state, or at least the closest we can get to any representation of the actual self.

This meditative essayistic digression goes on for another ten pages, along the way referring to the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz, who lived in exile and obscurity in Argentina (which he wanted to name the book after), and the French cultural critic Roland Barthes.

Prizes are just one way for a consumer society to conceive of artistic achievement in terms of stardom and success, as English says. [xxvi] Newspapers say that Knausgaard is not only “a global sensation” but that he is “stylish” and something of a rock star. [xxvii] As a star, Knausgaard was expected to make public appearances. Knausgaard made an appearance at the PEN World Voices Festival, in May 2012, where he was described as “ruggedly handsome.” [xxviii] Many observers remarked on his gender and the likelihood that his success would not have been available to a female writer working in the same vein. Rachel Cusk, for one, is a female autofiction writer who has been criticized for her confessional writing, unfairly when compared with Knausgaard, some say.

Knausgaard is compared with Proust in many reviews, including The New Yorker and The New York Times. But also down-market papers such as the Kansas Wichita Eagle, for whom My Struggle is “a masterpiece of staggering originality, the literary event of the century.” [xxix] The Toronto Star says the book is “Norway’s greatest literary work” and Knausgaard is “the Nordic Proust.” The Independent in the UK raves: “quite brilliantly described”; “sublime”; “a tour de force.” It even credits the first installment with a mystic power to “restore jaded readers to life.” [xxx] Once his celebrity reaches critical mass, even reviewers who did not care for the book are obliged to not only write up a review, but to concede the genius of the writing. Scotland’s Sunday Herald pans the novel but admits the scene of the aftermath of the father’s death “is masterfully and unflinchingly described.” [xxxi]

So how did a Norwegian living in Sweden who named his autobiography after Hitler’s become the star consecrated as “the ideal writer of the present moment” by leading US literary journal n + 1? [xxii] His Anglophone publishers, capitalizing on the success of early translations, were able to quickly translate more of the books, which had already been written, sold in vast numbers, and awarded prizes. This made it possible to
create a rush in the market, the sensation of something special happening. By the time Knausgaard’s first volume of *My Struggle* was published in English, in 2012, all six volumes were finished. The last one, *Book Six*, published in 2011 in Norwegian. Looking back in 2018, we can see that the Knausgaard gravy train sold a lot of tickets to readings, drove a lot of traffic to articles and reviews, and boosted the profiles of other writers in the same genre. More than a “writer’s writer” he was truly a publisher’s writer.


[xii] Parks, “Raise Your Hand If You’ve Read Knausgaard.”


[xiv] Hughes, “Karl Ove Knausgaard is Your Favorite Author’s Favorite Author.”


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