

Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*: Daniel Handler and Marketing the Author.

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Abstract

By inventing the fictional author Lemony Snicket, writer Daniel Handler engages directly with issues of authorial presence in his books, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. With Snicket's in(ter)vention, Handler mocks the didactic conventions of children's literature, as well as his own commodified presence as an author thereof. I argue that while the constructed fictional author is integral to mass-marketed literature, Handler's negotiation of his role is tellingly reflexive. Although Handler appears both aware and critical of his works' overtly commercial, materialistic nature, it is the integration of his own critical position that becomes the brand's defining characteristic.

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In contemporary celebrity culture, an author's public persona is entangled in the mass production and consumption of literature. Authorial identities constructed through biographical blurbs and professional photographs on book jackets, interviews, live readings, book signings, and so on serve an empowering function: "to sell books" (Douglas 813). Indeed, because the author's self-presentation itself sells, an author's identity can be carefully crafted into what is arguably a creative fiction. Kate Douglas contends that following Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author" and Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?" the book industry resurrects the idea of authorial self-presentation. Authors are mediated through tools such as promotional "blurb" into "knowable" and "accessible" celebrities (813; 809). The resulting mass-marketed, fictionalized individual in turn becomes a tool for generating profit. By inventing the fictional author Lemony Snicket, writer Daniel Handler engages directly with issues of self-presentation in his book series, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (henceforth *SoUE*). Handler employs the Snicket persona not only as pseudonym but also as narrator, character, and subject of supplementary publications, such as *The Unauthorized Autobiography* and *The Beatrice Letters*.¹

Snicket is intimately intertwined with the series as a commodity: the alter ego enables Handler to negotiate the pressures of contemporary commodity culture and to express his ambivalence about the conventions of children's literature. With Snicket's in(ter)vention, Handler mocks the didactic conventions of children's literature, as well as his own commodified presence as an author thereof. I argue that while the constructed fictional author is integral to mass-marketed literature, Handler's negotiation of the space between competing interests is tellingly reflexive. In paratextual elements—including cover matter, interviews, public appearances, and other promotional publications—Handler

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