

When I sat down this week to work on my column about “Cloverfield,” I found my mind wandering. Not because I didn’t enjoy what I was writing – I have inherited, if nothing else, my father’s gift for amusing myself. No, I got myself distracted thinking about Heath Ledger.

If you haven’t heard, the 28-year-old Oscar nominee and father died on Tuesday, of a suspected drug overdose. Heath Ledger is probably best remembered for his roles in “10 Things I Hate About You,” “A Knight’s Tale,” and “Brokeback Mountain,” not to mention his much-publicized upcoming role as the Joker in “The Dark Knight.”

Publications and news services all over the world are doing obituaries of Ledger, summarizing his life as we the public know it: his career triumphs and missteps, his public relationships, his daughter. I won’t bother to recount that information here. Nor will I pretend to know much about what the actor was like personally. I don’t know the songs he sang to his daughter or the way he secretly styled his hair or the CD’s he would never ‘fess up to owning.

People die, and people die young. Many great legends of film and television have passed away within my lifetime, and sadly many more will. But still, I cannot concentrate today, because Heath Ledger is the first actor to pass away who grew up alongside me in film. When I was a teenager, Ledger was starring in teen-oriented films. As I matured, so did his roles, until we both became adults. I watched the Oscars when he was nominated for Brokeback Mountain, and I was happy for him when he had a baby girl with his girlfriend. With only a little over three years between our ages, he’s been in my peripheral vision as long as I’ve been old enough to drive myself to a movie theater. And now I am in the strange position of grieving, just a little, for a complete stranger.

Celebrity is such an interesting, slippery thing, isn’t it? In every aspect of American interests, fame is used to grease the machine that keeps things running. Sports fans have their heroes and hated villains. Comic book fans have favorite writers and illustrators. And though I haven’t experienced it firsthand, I have no doubt that math geeks adore particular mathematicians. Fame exists and thrives every field, in every category of American culture.

Some people say that we use it as an unhealthy way to avoid being present in our own lives. There might be some truth in that. I think there’s a small, dirty little part in all of us that is thrilled when Britney Spears shaves her head, or Martha Stewart gets arrested. It’s the same part that’s happy when the prom queen breaks a heel and throws up behind the bleachers, or the sycophant at the office forgets to set his alarm one morning. It is the satisfaction of seeing perfection fall, and it’s cruel and grubby and human.

But you see, people who look at Paris Hilton and curse the nature of celebrity are only working with half the equation. Even now, in this media-driven world, we do still admire what’s best in ourselves, our race of human beings. Over the centuries we have held up royalty and poets, songwriters, politicians, and pop stars. We single out the great, the leaders, the trendsetters, the brilliant, and we watch what they do. Every generation has, not a single voice, but many, and they will eventually dictate how we are remembered. We’re proud of them, we envy them, we try to be them. And that’s how progress works.

I never met Heath Ledger. I am not so naïve as to think that reading Entertainment Weekly gives me any clear picture of him as a person. But I know he was a good actor, maybe could have been a great one, and that today, for the first time, I have lost a voice of my generation.