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Why we love to see big names brought down to size; It's all about the love, envy and gossip, experts say

By ANNA HANKS

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Published January 5, 2003

Martha Stewart was in the headlines most of last year for alleged insider trading. Winona Ryder's legal troubles were covered with more enthusiasm than the recent midterm elections. And most of us knew about Michael Jackson dangling his baby off a Berlin balcony faster than we knew that Saddam Hussein had allowed weapons inspectors into Iraq.

These days, it seems like every moment of celebrities' days is covered as actual news by mainstream news outlets. And the closer to a major life meltdown the celebrity is, the more the non-entertainment media seem to cover them.

The fact is, Americans love celebrities. And we love to watch them stumble — not just in the tabloids, but on the evening news, too.

"We get entertainment out of watching celebrities fall," said Robert Thompson, the director for the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University.

And recently, the opportunities to catch them falling from glory on traditional news and lifestyles outlets have been plentiful:

* Last week on

The Today Show, after stories about murdered missionaries in Yemen and nuclear weapons threats from North Korea, came news of singer Diana Ross' arrest on suspicion of drunk driving.

* Superstar Whitney Houston came clean about her drug use recently on

Primetime Live, and morning and evening news shows clamored last fall to get the "real story" behind pop singer Mariah Carey's "breakdown."

* Allegations that domestic diva Martha Stewart engaged in insider trading were discussed in the

Wall Street Journal.

* In November, all three 24-hour news channels cut away from midterm election coverage for actress Ryder's sentencing after she was convicted of shoplifting, Thompson said.

Daniel Green, managing editor of thesmokinggun.com, a Court TV-owned Web site full of police reports and court documents on celebrity crimes and misdemeanors, said he thinks the reason people like to see things like mug shots of celebrities is that often a celebrity's public image is manipulated so carefully by public relations people and agents that the public enjoys seeing a side of them that isn't stage-managed.

The yearning to see celebrities' darker sides may be the result of schadenfreude, a German term describing a desire to have bad things happen to successful people.

"You might think that a feeling so wicked we don't even have a word for it in English must be a pretty rare thing. But a nasty enjoyment of the misfortunes of others is universal, even though the only word we seem to have for it is in German," said Mary Elizabeth Williams in a 1999 review of John Portmann's book

When Bad Things Happen to Other People.

"It has a little bit to do with the fact we like dirt," said Dr. Lance Oberg, a Waco psychiatrist in private practice. "It's just a part of our baser nature."

Keith Hankins, a Waco psychologist, thinks there may be two different factors playing into our interest in celebrities doing wrong. One, he said, is our own need to achieve and grow and develop. And in American culture, celebrities have achieved success.

"Celebrities, when they've made it, they've really, really made it," Hankins said.

This achievement creates jealousy, along with the subconscious wish that perhaps this success shouldn't last, he said.

"I kind of wish they'd stumble so there would be room at the top for me," is what people might be thinking about celebrities, Hankins said.

On the other hand, Americans love good rags-to-riches stories, too.

Hankins thinks the popularity of singer-dancer-actress Jennifer Lopez and rap star Eminem might be because their tough roots show that they achieved success on their own. Part of Eminem's mythos is that he rapped his way out of the wrong side of Detroit, as seen in his critically acclaimed movie,

8 Mile. Similarly, Lopez sang and danced her way up from a rough Bronx neighborhood. These days, her song "Jenny from the Block" is in heavy rotation on MTV, she's starring in the new movie

Maid in Manhattan, and she's making headlines as the fiancée of

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