The one-way intimacy between fans and stars is the fuel that powers celebrity culture.

Fans continually observe the star in his or her performative settings. Eventually, they come to believe that they know the star and, for those inclined to hero worship, to know a star is to love him or her. No surprise, therefore, that, should the star suffer deadly misfortune, fans will grieve as if they’ve lost a real loved one.

This isn’t new. In 1926, screen idol Rudolph Valentino’s death, aged 31, of complications following surgery for perforated ulcers triggered suicide attempts, sincere and theatrical, from New York to Paris. What was described as a “ghoulish carnival” erupted on the streets of Manhattan as a crowd of 100,000 fought for a last glimpse of the original Latin lover. It took 100 mounted officers and the deployment of the NYPD Reserve to restore order.

And the outpouring of grief upon the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997 briefly threatened the monarchy and put paid once and for all to another long-established British institution, the stiff upper lip.

Even so, I suspect many Kiwis were taken aback by the scale and intensity of the reaction to retired American basketballer Kobe Bryant’s death in a helicopter crash. Admittedly, the circumstances were desperately sad: his 13-year-old daughter, an aspiring basketballer, was also killed along with seven others; they were on their way to a youth tournament at Bryant’s sports academy outside Los Angeles.

And Bryant was an all-time great in a game with global reach, the third biggest component – after American football and baseball – of the money-making juggernaut that is US professional sport.

His death created a dilemma for the mass media that is hard-wired to eulogise and sentimentalise whenever a celebrity dies suddenly and prematurely. Most outlets opted to abide by the notion that you shouldn’t speak ill of the dead, although historians and sensationalist biographers do little else. Indeed, the legal principle that you can’t defame the dead is a green light for biographers of the warts-and-all school and publishers who see profit in striking while the iron’s hot – having their hatchet jobs on bookshop shelves before the departed’s nearest and dearest are all cried out.

The source of discomfort was a 2003 rape accusation levelled at Bryant, then 24, by a 19-year-old hotel employee, a sordid business the basketballer thereafter referred to as “the Colorado situation”. The case was dismissed a week before it was due to go to trial after the alleged victim, who’d been subjected to a months-long smear campaign...
orchestrated by Bryant’s defence team, informed the court she wouldn’t testify. Through an attorney, Bryant issued a quasi-apology, the qualified nature of which can be surmised from this sentence: “I now understand how she feels that she did not consent to this encounter.” A civil suit was settled for an undisclosed sum in 2005.

Bryant processed it by giving his wife a US$4 million diamond ring and creating his “Black Mamba” persona that, by most accounts, was as disobliging as the name suggests. The game of basketball – officialdom, players and fans – downplayed or ignored the incident; eventually, the media followed suit. Yet, reading extracts from both parties’ initial statements to police, one’s sense is that the accusation has a – sickening – ring of truth that the denial conspicuously lacks. As a conflicted admirer wrote after Bryant’s death, “It’s impossible to read through the legal documents and not come away repulsed.”

Which is presumably why, amid the eulogising, Washington Post reporter Felicia Sonmez tweeted a link to a 2016 Daily Beast story containing extracts from the court documents. She received a torrent of social-media abuse, including death threats. The Post, which in 2018 published a cloying profile of Bryant in his post-basketball incarnation as Hollywood mover and shaker and wannabe Renaissance man, suspended her. After an outcry, Sonmez was reinstated, with the Post grudgingly admitting she hadn’t contravened its social-media policy.

In his 2013 autobiography, Phil Jackson, who coached Bryant and the LA Lakers to five NBA championships, said he was “surprised, yes, but not entirely” by the rape charge, citing Bryant’s anger and immaturity at the time. Although Jackson described Bryant as “a chosen one” after his death, the Bryant who emerges from the autobiography is a high-maintenance, foul-mouthed jerk who took way too long to fully grasp that basketball is a team sport.

Although Bryant clearly became a devoted family man, he likewise emerges from the mostly fawning accounts of his post-basketball career as someone who mistook the ability to parlay celebrity into wealth for talent and seriousness of purpose.

As the Beast’s Corbin Smith, an unconflicted non-admirer, wrote, “When he was 19, Michael Jackson invited [Bryant] to his house and told him, ‘Never fall in line’. Which really goes a long way to explain why he played basketball like a self-absorbed maniac for nearly 20 years and followed that up with making insanely bad entertainment products.”

When golfer Tiger Woods emerged from the long shadow of his disgrace to reclaim the men’s No 1 world ranking in 2013, Nike rushed out ads with the slogan, “Winning takes care of everything”. So it would seem. Bryant was a winner. In the immediate aftermath of his untimely death, few were inclined to spare a thought for the loser in “the Colorado situation.”