On October 1, 2018, the United States Supreme Court began its 2018-2019 term. Although Chief Justice John Roberts, as is customary, occupied the center chair, the center of much of the nation’s attention was on Associate Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. And not necessarily for any reason having to do with the workings of the Court.

Putting aside the notable example of William O. Douglas, Supreme Court justices are usually unrecognizable as public figures. Ruth Bader Ginsburg, however, has proven to be the exception. Twenty-five years after Justice Ginsburg joined the Court, few would have guessed that she would become a cultural icon. Distinguished jurist, yes, Brandeis, certainly to be mentioned alongside Holmes and Brennan, certainly come to be known, has become a fixture of Donizetti’s opera “Don Pasquale”, with Felicity Jones as a young mezzo-soprano, is scheduled to be the subject of numerous print profiles, is even recognized as she is brilliant.

Earlier this year a documentary on her life, RBB, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival to effusive reviews and grossed nearly $14 million at the box office. On the Basis of Sex, a feature film starring Felicity Jones as a young Ruth Bader Ginsburg is scheduled to be released on Christmas day. And if that were not enough, there is Kate McKinnon’s lively impression of her on Saturday Night Live, the Justice herself demonstrating her exercise regimen to late-night television host Stephen Colbert.

When it comes to the written word, one could fill a shelf with titles ranging from learned legal studies of her jurisprudence to children’s coloring books. Her own tome, My Own Words, a collection of her writings and speeches, was a New York Times Best Seller. A new comprehensive biography, Ruth Bader Ginsburg: A Life, by Jane Sherron de Hart, was just published by Knopf. But it was Notorious RBG: The Life and Times of Ruth Bader Ginsburg by Irin Carmon and Shana Knizhnik that truly marked her arrival on the cultural landscape. An instant best-seller, the book grew out of a Tumblr of the same name created by Ms. Knizhnik.

T-shirts, stickers, bobble heads, lapel pins, and action figures are all emblazoned with her likeness. The slogan “You can’t spell truth without ‘Ruth’” is everywhere and on just about everything. But more sophisticated among us, there is a “Ruth Bader Giner” Cocktail, a FCTRY, a toy manufacturer in her native Brooklyn, is marketing an RBG action figure for $19.99 complete with wire-framed glasses, gavel, and her ever-present jabot.

And, speaking of jabots, the colorful lace collars that adorn her black robes have become a subject of particular fascination. With her extensive collection of these jabots, the Justice has turned a fashion accessory into a political statement by wearing specific jabots when announcing majority or dissenting opinions from the bench.

Little wonder that in 2013 Glamour Magazine named her one of their “Women of the Year.”

At first glance, she is the most unlikely of media sensations. She radiates an intelligence and a dignity that seem from a bygone era. Yet it is this soft-spoken quality that strikes a chord with contemporary audiences. When asked how she feels about having her name linked with the rapper The Notorious B.I.G., she delightfully observed that since she was both born and bred in Brooklyn, they had a lot in common.

Justice Ginsburg’s unlikely rise to pop culture phenomenon can be attributed to many factors. Some of them are rooted in her much-deserved reputation as a trailblazer. Her story demonstrates not only the capabilities of an exceptionally gifted individual, but, of equal importance, the advancement of women in our profession, as well as American society as a whole.

Although Justice Ginsburg graduated first in her class from Columbia Law School in 1959, no law firm in Manhattan would offer her a job. Justice Felix Frankfurter refused to hire her—or any woman—as a law clerk.

Ultimately, Judge Edmund L. Palmieri from the Southern District of New York was persuaded to offer her a clerkship, although she was a mother with a child at home. That child was her daughter, Jane. Ginsburg, who today is a noted law professor at Columbia.

Undaunted by the rampant sexism of the day, she had been a career for the ages. She first carved out a place for her self in the 1960s as an academic, adding luster to the law faculties at Rutgers and Columbia. Not conforming her talents to the classroom, she co-founded the Women’s Rights Project at the American Civil Liberties Union in the 1970s. She argued six gender-discrimination cases before the Supreme Court, winning all but one. By the time President Clinton appointed her in 1993, she was being favorably compared to Thurgood Marshall.

Part of her appeal lies in her engaging personal life which is filled with both heartbreak and happiness. The daughter of Jewish immigrants from Flatbush, her mother died from cancer the day before she graduated from high school. Celia Bader would always be an inspiration to her daughter, as would the Justice’s “life’s partner,” the renowned tax attorney Martin Ginsburg.

Married for more than half a century, theirs was an enviable union of equals that was decades ahead of its time. Marty, who had a husband who was a partner at a New York law firm.

Justice Ginsberg saw the majority’s decision as a “cramped” interpretation of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, “incompatible with the statute’s broad remedial purpose.” She stated that her colleagues either were not comprehending or being indifferent to “the insidious way in which women can be victims of pay discrimination.” She concluded her written dissent by forcefully noting that “the battle is in Congress...” [T]he Legislature may act to correct this.”

That was in 2007. Two years later, Congress amended the 1964 Civil Rights Act with the Fair Pay Act, which automatically resets the 180-day statute of limitations “each time wages, bonuses, or other compensation is paid.”

Beyond the law, her dissent has also launched her legacy. A new generation of law students found themselves in the writings of this opera-loving octogenarian jurist who was old enough to be their grandmother. Embraced by
tech-savvy millennials, the newly christened "Notorious RBG" came to life. Ruth Bader Ginsburg began to exercise an influence that extended far beyond the staid, bound volumes containing the United States Reports.

It is safe to say that no justice has been the subject of more popular interest and, yes, adulation. When she makes a public misstep, as she did during the 2016 presidential campaign, her sincere acknowledgment of the error was accepted with good grace and the recognition that an icon is also mortal.

The pop culture trappings that surround the Justice pale in comparison to the substance that the woman represents. Here is one of the rare instances where the reality far exceeds the imagery. Never afraid to speak her mind or to take a stand, her life thus far has been exceptionally well-lived, and rich in achievements, not just accolades.

And herein lies the greatest single reason for all the public fascination, even for conservatives who are at odds with her judicial philosophy. After all, if Justice Scalia and Justice Ginsburg can become the best of friends, then there is hope for us all in these polarized times.

Political differences aside, her story resonates because she is an authentic human being who through her life's work has made a tangible difference in the life of the nation. And she did so with an appealing combination of intellect, elegance, and commitment.

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4. Ronnie Fein, Ruth Bader Ginsburg Cocktail (April 18, 2015) www.rouxandfins.com, the recipe for the cocktail is:
   - 4-6 ice cubes
   - 3 ounces dark rum
   - 1 ounce ginger liqueur or brandy
   - 2 teaspoons orange juice
   - 6-8 pinches ground cinnamon
   - 2 slices of orange
   - 2 mint leaves, slightly crushed
11. Id.
13. Id. at 522.