

❖ **Kelley, Kitty Oprah: A Biography Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2010
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Still the most powerful woman in the world's media, Oprah Winfrey, on the eve of retiring her phenomenally successful eponymous talk show, has become the subject of a massive, scandal-filled study by the queen of the unauthorised biography, Kitty Kelley. Having previously plunged deep into the lives of such luminaries as Frank Sinatra and Elizabeth Taylor, Kelley has applied her techniques of gossip hunting and reputation destroying to a complex and extraordinarily powerful, figure.

As a woman who has used the media to establish her fame, Winfrey carefully manages the image she has so scrupulously built up, and all of her employees are bound by a draconian lifelong vow of silence, making Kelley's job exceedingly difficult when it comes to digging up dirt. Indeed, Kelley is infuriated by the idea that a woman who used tabloids and gossip to build her fame should now be so adept at freezing out these same agents. Kelley paints a portrait of an obsessively sensitive woman who despises negative portrayals of herself and views anyone who discusses her personal life with outsiders as an enemy and a traitor. That these enemies have included almost every member of her immediate family is the kind of tragedy that Kelley revels in, using Winfrey's stepfather – unafraid of the litigious personality of his daughter – as her primary source.

While admiring her success and her remarkable life story, Kelley is strangely hostile to Winfrey's championing of New Age books, and her devotion to the ideas of self-help. It is Oprah's upfront (and constantly shifting), spirituality that comes in for the most contemptuous commentary, not just from the biographer; but from the few commentators willing to go on record as critical of Winfrey. Given her own life's trajectory, Oprah's belief in the boundless possibilities of self-advancement are not surprising. But her overt religiosity, unrestricted by any conventional religious affiliation, seems genuinely confusing, and perhaps personally challenging, to Kelley. She is discomfited by Winfrey's evolution "from a child of Old Testament speakers into a New Age theorist ..." (224).

Kelley's writing style is engaging and slick, rich with quotes and comments in the best tradition of newspaper – and more specifically tabloid – journalism. The 544 page book is well structured and as easily read as a novel. And in spite of Kelley's reputation as a destroyer of her subjects, and despite her parade of quotes from people and articles decrying Oprah and her influence, I came away with a compelling regard for Winfrey and her achievements.

The compulsively confessional television personality has succeeded in creating a personal mythology of extraordinary pathos, and in constructing a mythic autobiography that has remained constantly attuned to the zeitgeist for over 20 years. Kelley's book, while posing as a debunking and a tearing apart of that myth, has in fact only contributed to it. It is merely another ritual implement in the particular personality cult of Oprah, and it would seem to be catering, not to her critics, but to her multitudinous fans.

Along with brilliantly directing her own career, Winfrey has also become a career-maker in her own right, establishing the success of hundreds of writers, actors and personalities through the application of her own special imprimatur of celebrity approval. This has been most pronounced in the area of literature, a particular interest for the bibliophile Winfrey. Her consistent interest in books and writing has marked an extraordinary trend in contemporary American media culture, one unprecedented, and largely uncopied.

Worried about her consistently sentimental taste in books, Jonathan Franzen refused to allow her to select his novel *The Corrections* for her book club in 2001. Kelley suggests that this prompted Winfrey to turn her back on the publishing world "because she had become accustomed to getting perpetual praise from the press ... Now she had hit a little turbulence over her lack of literary taste, and being derided as Our Lady of the Lowbrows had nicked her in a vulnerable spot" (283). While Kelley discusses in depth the ways in which Winfrey has continued since to incorporate books and writing into her broadcasting and publishing output, she probably affords her too little credit for the commercial impact this has had on the publishing industry and on the incomes of those individual authors lucky enough to glory in Winfrey's approval.

Oprah's own conflicted history with identity politics is explored in the book. She saw herself early in her career as a victim of the NAACP, through their boycott of the Spielberg film *The Color Purple*, in which she starred. Kelley accuses her latter-day championing of African-American issues as facile and celebrity-obsessed. She quotes one of her mentees archly calling Winfrey's new found interest in African American history as "slave drag" (335).

As befits a scandal-soaked unauthorised biography, there is more than the occasional excursion into *schadenfreude*. Chapter 17 deals in intricate detail with Oprah's failure in her quest to succeed as a feature film actor and producer. In dissecting the disastrous flop that was her film adaptation of Toni Morrison's groundbreaking novel *Beloved*, Kelley slides into some awkward areas of race and history that I am surprised haven't aroused more commentary and criticism.

As one of the stellar few who can go through life using only one name (and indeed, only one letter in her monthly magazine 'O'), Oprah has her name embossed on the cover of this mammoth biography, using the distinctive font that she herself favours in the credits of her show. Given the remarkable number of copyrights and trademarks she has applied to words, phrases and things associated with herself, I'm surprised this font was not similarly embargoed.

Kelley, a singular figure whose personality is almost as big and as exaggerated as the people she writes about, sets a cracking pace as she attempts to divulge the secrets of Winfrey's fascinating life. Though she prides herself in tearing down the grand egos of her subjects, Kelley, in spite of her intentions, can do little more in this book than celebrate the almost textbook rags-to-riches narrative that describes Oprah's life and career.

About the Reviewer

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