

Oprah Winfrey: Bright (but Gullible) Billionaire

MARTIN GARDNER

There are two Oprah Winfreys. One is the African-American woman who struggled against incredible odds in abject poverty to become the wealthiest, most admired woman in America. No one has summarized this Winfrey better than Ken Frazier in a letter to me that I quote with permission:

She has done some enormous good, it seems to me. She has, among other things, strongly empowered women, instilled a love of reading books through her book club program, taken on a number of very difficult issues with a seriousness and directness not usually associated with daytime TV, funded and built schools in South Africa, and otherwise served as a successful role model for millions of women worldwide.

The other Oprah Winfrey is an attractive, intelligent woman with a heart of gold, but who has only a pale understanding of modern science. On her daily television show (which, she announced in November to stunned viewers, will end after its twenty-fifth season, 2010–11) she promotes, as frequent guests, men and women who preach views and opinions that are medically worthless and in a few cases can even lead to death. This naïve Winfrey is the topic of this article.

You may have noticed that in every photograph you see of Winfrey, either on the cover of her magazine *O* (and she's on every cover) or elsewhere, she looks young and gorgeous. Not so on the cover of the June 8, 2009, issue of *Newsweek*. In large white letters across her hair are the words "Crazy Talk. Oprah, Wacky Cures & You."

The cover story by Weston Kosova and Pat Wingert is a bombshell. For the first time in a mass-circulation magazine, the Queen of Television is pummeled for her constant praise of dubious medical opinions and other forms of bogus science. But before covering *Newsweek's* hatchet job, let's take a quick look at Winfrey's amazing life.

Oprah Gail Winfrey was born in Kosciusko, Mississippi, in 1954 to two unmarried teenagers who separated soon after. Winfrey was raised by a grandmother in such poverty that her dresses were literally made of potato sacks. She was raped at age nine and molested by an uncle, a cousin, and a family friend. She became pregnant at fourteen and gave birth to a son, her only child, who died in infancy.

Winfrey was an honor student at a Nashville high school, obtaining a scholarship to Tennessee State University. After two years of college, she began working in radio and television, which eventually led to a career on the highest rated daytime TV show in the world.

Today Winfrey is said to be the most powerful woman in America. She is a billionaire two times over. Although her show is based in Chicago, her main home (she owns several here and there) is on a huge estate in Montecito, California.

In addition to *O* (circulation two million), she publishes a magazine called *O at Home*. Winfrey also owns a corporation called Harpo (Oprah backwards), which handles a variety of products, and created Oprah's Book Club, which can propel a book into an instant best seller. Her power even stretches to the political realm: her support of Barack Obama is said to have won him a million votes.

Now for a look at the explosive *Newsweek* article.

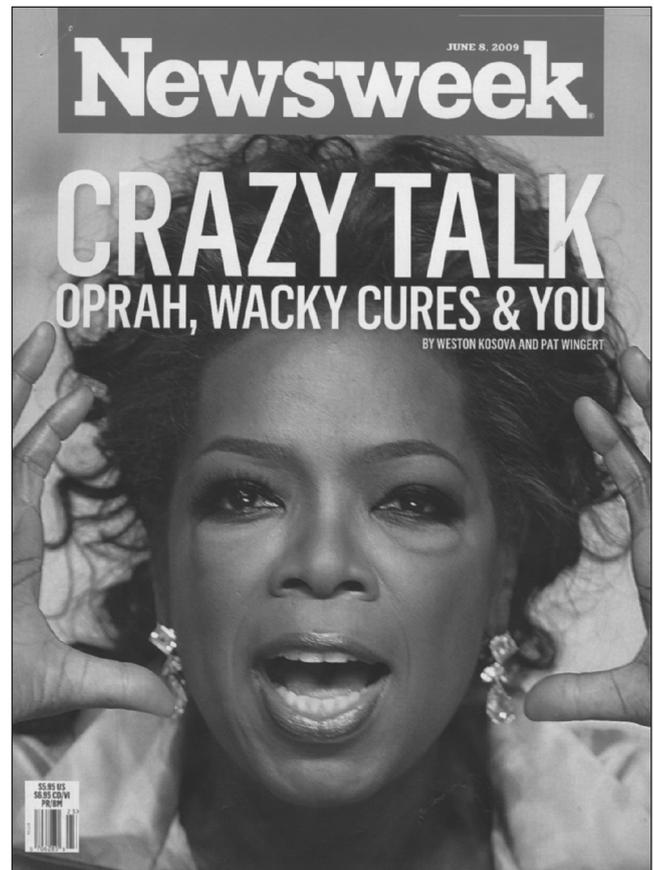
The piece opens with lurid accounts of actress Suzanne Sommers's many appearances on Winfrey's show. Every morning, Sommers rubs estrogen cream on one arm and injects estrogen into her vagina; two weeks a month, she smears progesterone on her other arm. She also swallows a bewildering variety of vitamin supplements, gives herself injections of growth hormones, and wears a nanotechnology patch to lose weight and promote sleep.

Martin Gardner is author of more than seventy books, most recently When You Were a Tadpole and I was a Fish, and Other Speculations About This and That, published by Hill and Wang in October 2009.

Sommers claims to use only "natural products" and criticizes all the big drug companies that make billions, she is convinced, by hawkling dangerous products.

Winfrey's enthusiasm for Sommers's wild medical opinions is boundless. She urges her viewers to buy the actress's treat-yourself books. After following Sommers's advice about taking estrogen, Winfrey wrote in *O*, "I felt the veil lift. After three days the skies were bluer, my brain no longer fuzzy, my memory was sharper. I was literally singing and had a skip in my step."

Mainstream doctors hold contrary views. They scoff at the notion that Sommers needs all this medication. Excessive use of



hormones, they say, can increase the risk of heart attacks and strokes and even cause cancer.

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Another frequent guest on Winfrey's show is Jenny McCarthy, actress and star of numerous films and TV shows. She first became famous for modeling in *Playboy* and later became better known for her outrageous humor.

McCarthy is in the *Newsweek* article because of her vigorous efforts to convince the world that autism is caused by vaccinations. She has an autistic son, Evan, who she insists became autistic after he was vaccinated for measles and other diseases. In her book *Louder Than Words: A Mother's Journey in Healing*, she

claims that chelation therapy has helped her son. This therapy, considered quackery by almost all doctors, blames autism on mercury that was once used in vaccines.

The notion that vaccinations cause autism has been thoroughly discredited by dozens of studies, yet it continues to flourish among ignorant parents. Winfrey buys the myth hook, line, and sinker. She has promoted McCarthy's absurd views on numerous shows. In May 2009, Winfrey announced that her production company had signed McCarthy for her own talk show. Like the healing myths of Christian Science, McCarthy's crusade is likely to result in needless deaths of children who succumb to diseases that could have been prevented by vaccinations.

Dr. Christine Northrop, a physician who opposes vaccinations, is also a frequent guest on Winfrey's show. Her medical views are closely linked to New Age mysticism that treats the soul as well as the body. Northrop uses tarot cards to help diagnose illnesses and even sells a set of her own called Women's Wisdom Health Cards.

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Northrop's advice to women with thyroid problems is to take iodine supplements. According to David Cooper, professor of endocrinology at Johns Hopkins, taking iodine will make the thyroid condition worse. Cooper calls the notion that iodine will help "utter hogwash."

In 2004, Winfrey praised a new type of plastic surgery called thread lift. In the procedure, a threaded needle is punched through the skin and used to tighten it. Winfrey played a video showing the procedure, followed by before-and-after photographs. According to *Newsweek*, the before picture showed the woman without makeup and in an unflattering light. The after photo showed her face covered with pancake makeup. Winfrey then called the woman to come up from the audience, her face plastered with makeup. The audience burst into applause. The thread-lift fad has since waned, mainly because it has no lasting

effect and can even cause scarring.

Winfrey is still touting alternatives to plastic surgery. The latest craze, called thermage, uses radio waves to tighten the skin. The machine that produces the waves sells for \$30,000. Sales soared after Winfrey's endorsement, but she had little to say about the therapy's dangers and its risks of scarring, which angered even the firms selling the machines.

One frequent guest who offers good advice on how to lose weight and stay healthy is Dr. Mehmet Oz, a Turkish-American surgeon at Columbia University. However, Oz, who now has his own spin-off show, promotes a variety of high-priced food supplements, such as acai berry, MonaVie, and Roservatol, which have no more benefit than a well-balanced diet. He also promotes alternative medicines, notably acupuncture, which he has praised on Winfrey's show, ignoring the fact that the vast majority of doctors consider it worthless beyond its placebo effect. He can be faulted further for sitting silently while Winfrey spouts what he must know is balderdash.

Oz is said to be a disciple of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. Swedenborg wrote at length about his out-of-body visits to other planets whose inhabitants and cultures he describes in his writing.

Oz's best-known book is *Healing From the Heart*. He is the coauthor of *YOU: Being Beautiful*, which is the last of five *YOU* volumes.

Winfrey's enthusiasm for New Age books reached its apex when she promoted the monumental idiocy of *The Secret*. It can be described as a hilarious parody of books by Norman Vincent Peale. Instead of God working miracles, the universe itself does it. *The Secret* teaches that the universe consists of a vibrating energy that can be tapped into with positive thoughts, allowing you to obtain *anything* you desire—happiness, love, and of course fabulous wealth. Want to lose weight? Then stop having fat thoughts and think thin! Want to become wealthy? Stop thinking poor thoughts. Think rich!

"I've been talking about this for years," Winfrey said. "I just never called it the secret."

The Secret was first a film produced in Australia in 2006 by New Age author Rhonda Byrne. Two years later, the book version was issued in the U.S. by Astria, an imprint of Simon and Schuster. The editors at Simon and Schuster can smell a best seller as soon as they read a manuscript's first page. Move over Mary Baker Eddy! Thanks to Winfrey, *The Secret* has sold over seven million copies in the U.S. alone. *Time* published a recent issue featuring one hundred of the world's most influential people. In a fit of poor judgment, they included Byrne on the list. She now lives in California not far from Winfrey's estate. Her newfound wealth, of course, is proof the secret works (for more, see "Secrets and Lies," SI, May/June 2007).

Let Dr. David Gorski, a surgeon at Wayne State University School of Medicine, have the last word: "The bottom line is that, when it comes to medicine and science, [Winfrey] is a force for ill." □