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The feud that just won't end

Legendary book editor Nan Talese still can't believe what Oprah did

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Before it disappeared from cyberspace this summer just as its owners were claiming Oprah Winfrey's lawyers were after them, *ihateoprah.com* was often so busy you couldn't get on. Oprah detractors abound, as do hordes of fans. As for the rest of us, who has not felt a moment of ambivalence about the queen of daytime TV?

Nan Talese, the legendary book editor and publisher of über-novelists like Margaret Atwood and Ian McEwan, came out swinging at Oprah several weeks ago. "I'm really, really bothered by the sanctimoniousness of Oprah Winfrey," she told a gathering of bookish types this summer in tiny (and aptly named) Grapevine, Texas. Not only that, but Oprah was "mean and self-serving," with "fiercely bad manners." Talese was in Grapevine attending the annual Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Writers' Conference. In space, no one can hear you scream -- any more than Talese supposed she'd be overheard in the closed room where she stood up and shot back at an Oprah fan (an Opraholic, as they're known) who'd made an "extraordinarily sanctimonious" comment of her own, about Oprah's truth and goodness, in one of the conference sessions.

Caught by C-SPAN cameras, the rebuke of the year has now been viewed on YouTube nearly 500,000 times. Talese won't dwell on it. "I didn't see a camera," she says now. "I certainly didn't expect it to become public." What about the story on *time.com* and *cnn.com*, on book blogs everywhere (and even on some anti-Oprah sites still operating) that Talese had gone to Grapevine on the Oprah attack? "Heated and breathless," she says. "Total fantasy on the part of the reporter."

But it's easy to see how the story got spun, and why it took off. In one corner we have Talese -- private, genteel, rarefied enough to doubt that writers write for the market, and purveyor of the finest thoughts in the East. In the other corner we have Oprah -- populist, profiteer, and the biggest mouth in the West. It's also easy to see why Talese remains angry. She and Oprah first locked horns 18 months ago when Winfrey invited her onto the Jan. 26, 2006, *Oprah Winfrey Show* along with James Frey, one of Talese's most celebrated writers.

On the phone from Doubleday's New York offices just below Times Square, Talese says that she and Frey were lured to Chicago under false pretenses. They'd been invited to appear on an Oprah show about "Truth in America," but "that was apparently duplicitous. Oprah had no intention of doing it. She

changed the show to 'The James Frey Controversy' and didn't tell us. It's shocking that Oprah would use her very good name and all that she's done for books in such a way. It seems cruel and unnecessary."

But Oprah said it was she who'd been conned. With Talese and Frey caught in the lights beside her, she eyed the camera to announce that she'd been in television since she was 19 (she's 53 now) and had never been in this position: she'd been duped. Her latest Book Club pick -- the memoir *A Million Little Pieces*, Frey's harrowing account of his recovery from addiction -- wasn't holding up to investigation by The Smoking Gun website, nor to subsequent grilling on *Larry King Live*. Frey's story about truth -- the self-deprecating honesty you need to beat addiction -- was turning out not to be terribly true, at least not in the way Oprah would have liked.

In the book, Frey claimed involvement he hadn't had in a schoolmate's death, as well as a swashbuckle with police and a long jail term where there'd been none. He even ginned up a suicide and his rush to the rescue. (Inevitably -- Frey worked once as a Hollywood screenwriter, after all -- he arrived just too late.) He'd written himself into someone else, a wannabe blackguard whom he'd shown reviewers as early as 2002: "As a kid I read about addicted writers and rock stars and I thought they were cool. I wanted to be one when I grew up."

Some readers like embroidery and expect it in a memoir. Others don't. Back when Frey went on *Larry King Live* to defend himself from The Smoking Gun, Oprah herself called into the show to say the book still "resonated." It would help addicts. All the hubbub was "much ado about nothing." Talese points out that she and Oprah read the same book with the same passion. "We both believed it was an extraordinary retelling of an experience." Oprah was a reader who liked embroidery, until her fans -- her clique, Talese calls them now -- reminded her via an email deluge that there was one Truth, with Oprah its champion. Talese calls the about-face that followed a sham. Behind the scenes, Oprah still loved Frey's book. "She was just trying to get back her fan base," Talese says. "She had to save her own skin, and the way she did it was with the hide of James Frey."

And then, says Talese, came Oprah's next con, when a few days after the Larry King show Oprah invited Talese and Frey to Chicago. Talese likes her privacy and didn't want to go. But Frey did -- out of gratitude to Oprah, he explained to Talese on the plane that day. He'd last heard Oprah defending him to Larry King, after all, as a guru to addicts. Did he suppose he'd be the next Dr. Phil?

Six journalists joined Talese and Frey on the *Oprah* show, and all six agreed with Oprah. "I was appalled," Talese recalls. "My jaw practically dropped when [a columnist] started talking about how wonderful Oprah was, how she should get some prize or other. I thought, 'What is going on here?' " But perhaps there was little mystery in it. "We all follow the pack," Talese says. "Look at the war in Iraq."

Little mystery either that Frey sexed himself up, the novelist (and recovering alcoholic) Stephen King wrote afterward, in solidarity with addicts everywhere. "Substance abusers lie about everything, and usually do an awesome job of it. A recovering alcoholic friend of mine reminisces about how he convinced his first wife that raccoons were stealing their home brew." Talese agrees. "When someone starts out and says, 'I have been an alcoholic, I have lied, I have cheated,' you don't think this is going to be the New Testament. You know you have an unreliable narrator. I don't do enough books like this to know that you ask what's been changed."

Talese says she knows Frey as "an incredibly polite Midwestern young man with exquisite manners" who sent flowers as thank-yous to Doubleday's publicists. She thinks that he invented another, tougher self to beat his addiction, and that this self -- "it's larger than life and can overcome things" -- spoke in the memoir for therapy, not profit. ("I'm known for not publishing commercial books," she says, having nurtured her bestsellers "from the beginning, as unknowns, for their talent. I wouldn't trust myself to say if something is commercial, because I can't figure it out.")

If it wasn't business for Frey or Talese, it was for Oprah. She knew it had been rough, Frey reports that Oprah said to him at the end of the show, but it was "just business."

Talese says the controversy gave rise to "a tremendous misperception of what publishers do. They trust the authenticity of their writers. Readers do the same thing. I don't fact-check, and I won't now."

Much of the fuss centred on what liberties a memoirist is allowed. None, Oprah ruled. Publishers must classify their books more carefully. Yet a week after the Frey show she announced her new pick, *Night*, Elie Wiesel's account of concentration camps that's widely regarded as a novel, even by Wiesel himself. Oprah called the book a memoir. "She seemed perfectly comfortable skipping the subject," says Talese. "She buries important issues." Her selective attention is "a very sticky wicket."

Autobiography and memoir are acts of self-creation, and Oprah, bootstrapped up out of Mississippi mud, might know that better than anyone. Talese won't speculate on why she missed the point, saying she's embarrassingly uneducated about Oprah: "All I know is the effect of her choosing books. It's not just sales. It's readership. Oprah brings a sense of excitement to books. That's a wonderful thing." She can't or won't say whether Oprah's tastes run light, as the writer Jonathan Franzen suggested when he declined Oprah's imprimatur for *The Corrections* in 2001. Oprah loves the glamour of misery in books and in life (tellingly, she's outfitted the girls at her new school in South Africa with high-thread-count sheets), and she loves a redemptive, happy ending. Might she be overlooking some eminent reads that involve neither?

"I'm sure she might be," says Talese carefully. "But this industry publishes 60,000 new books a year. It's amazing she can pick at all." If she'd been picking for Oprah a few years ago, Talese would have chosen J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. But it's bleak, difficult, intellectual, universal. "Oprah is much more interested in the personal. It's not warm and cozy and emotional. It might be true that [*Disgrace*] is beyond her and her audience, but it's okay that she does bring them to that which they can understand."

A year ago, Doubleday settled a class action to provide refunds; all the while the book continues to sell a least 1,000 copies a week. When he turned 38 earlier this month, a year to the day of the Doubleday settlement, James Frey announced he had a new book. Talese told the press that while she'd been "strongly interested" in it, HarperCollins got there first. The book is a novel. Frey's new editor says he'd have felt differently had it been a memoir.

Show of hands, now. Will it be an Oprah pick?