

Review of reviews: Books

Book of the week

Supreme Power: Franklin Roosevelt vs. the Supreme Court

by Jeff Shesol

(Norton, 640 pages, \$27.95)

It might surprise you that a book about a fleeting 1930s political battle could provide serious entertainment, said Richard Posner in *The New Republic*. But Jeff Shesol's fat new account of President Franklin Roosevelt's failed 1937 attempt to add up to six seats to the U.S. Supreme Court is both "splendid to read" and amazingly timely. President Obama, like FDR, is a liberal president with a healthy congressional majority and an ambitious agenda—and, like FDR, he's faced with a Supreme Court that seems "more than willing" to oppose him, should the opportunity arise. Roosevelt's outrageous solution was an attempt to water down the court's conservative bloc by expanding the bench from nine judges to as many as 15. His "court-packing" gambit failed, but the threat did help save the New Deal, by spooking some



When FDR tried to 'pack' the court of the court's most conservative justices into stepping down.

Supreme Power is more than a mere "blow by blow" account of the contretemps, said Jay Wexler in *The Boston Globe*. "Shesol is a terrific storyteller" who ushers readers into every hushed or smoke-filled room where the drama unfolded. Ultimately, the author accepts the consensus view that FDR's scheme was doomed by hubris: The

president sprung his proposal on Congress without warning, dishonestly packaging it as an effort to help the court's septuagenarian justices keep up with their caseloads. Yet Shesol doesn't think the proposal was as rash as many historians claim. FDR genuinely believed that he had come up with a completely constitutional means of ensuring, at a time of economic crisis, that the government wouldn't fail the country because of a few old men in robes.

Bill Clinton, for one, thinks FDR did the right thing, said Jonathan Alter in *Newsweek*. At a recent party for Shesol, Clinton said that if Obama wants to protect his health-reform programs against Supreme Court legal challenges, he should openly challenge the ideology of the current court majority. Dragging justices into a political battle, the logic goes, usually reduces their mystique. As in 1937, the nation today is engaged in a profound debate about the appropriate role of government in its citizens' lives, said Casey Greenfield in *The DailyBeast.com*. Shesol's lively narrative gets to the heart of that debate better than any "dense treatise" ever could.

Novel of the week

Tinkers

by Paul Harding

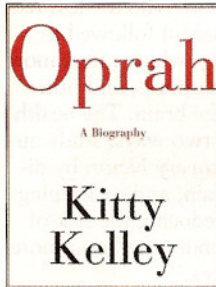
(Bellevue Literary Press, \$14.95)

Last week's surprise winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction initially escaped many critics' notice, said *The Wall Street Journal*. The first small-press novel to win the honor since John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* did so in 1981, Paul Harding's slim debut "chronicles in elegant prose" the dying days of a New England man with a passion for repairing antique clocks. George Washington Crosby lies, hallucinating, on a bed in his living room, reflecting back on his childhood and his father, an epileptic who sold soap from a wagon. Yet this novel's not about his life so much as it is "about the labyrinthine journey all of our lives will take" during our final hours of consciousness, said Chris Bohjalian in *The Boston Globe*. Harding sometimes overwrites, but his protagonist's memories "are rendered with an exactitude that is poetic." Harding's raw materials are "the ebb and flow of life," said Carole Goldberg in *The Hartford Courant*. He regards every detail "with a watchmaker's eye."

Oprah: A Biography

by Kitty Kelley

(Crown, 524 pages, \$30)



"A Kitty Kelley biography of Oprah Winfrey is one of those King Kong vs. Godzilla events in celebrity culture," said Lauren Collins in *The New Yorker*. In one corner: a tenacious rumor hound who has made millions by publishing takedowns of Frank Sinatra, Nancy Reagan, and Jackie O. In the other: a "ubiquitous billionaire celebrity" who also happens to be "the richest black woman in the world." By far the biggest revelation in Kelley's new book is that the queen of the confessional talk show is "a big phony when it comes to her own past," said Jeremy Olshan in the *New York Post*. Kelley's sources claim that Oprah exaggerated her tales of childhood poverty and sexual abuse, then went to great lengths to veil her sexual orientation.

Little, if any of this, is really news, said Helen Kennedy in the *New York Daily*

News. Kelley "appears to have found every disgruntled person that Winfrey ever brushed past" in a hallway, yet most of the book's juiciest stories have been shared previously by Oprah herself. She told us years ago about the crack she smoked and the baby she bore at 14. Sure, we didn't know about that early failed affair with John Tesh. But is there anything to be gained from Kelley's endless, rehearsed speculations about whether Winfrey and her longtime best friend, Gayle King, are lovers? Winfrey became the star she is by exposing her flaws and most painful memories, so that others could speak freely about similar hurdles, said Heather Havrilesky in *Salon.com*. "This is a woman who deserves our prying?"

Kelley's celebrity hit jobs do have one consistent value, said Louis Bayard in *The Washington Post*. They make us "feel how hard it is to be these people." We learn a lot about them, as Kelley dramatizes the hunt for information they'd rather keep private. In fact, there's "a lot of good stuff in *Oprah*"—fascinating tidbits that could only have resulted from admirably dogged reporting, said Tina Jordan in *Entertainment Weekly*. In the end, though, "it's hard to love a book that makes you feel dirty while you read it."