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In this file photo Britain's Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex and his wife Meghan, Duchess of Sussex walk down the west steps of St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, in Windsor, after their wedding ceremony. — AFP

Oprah Winfrey: Cultural powerhouse and trailblazing billionaire

He may be the Queen's grandson, but she is American cultural royalty: Oprah Winfrey, whose bombshell interview with Prince Harry and Meghan Markle dominated headlines, is a billionaire TV phenomenon renowned for coaxing secrets and tears from countless celebrities. From Michael Jackson and Tom Cruise to Lance Armstrong and the Duchess of York, Winfrey is responsible for some of America's most memorable sit-down interviews over the last three decades.

Harry and Meghan were the latest to open up when a tell-all interview with the talk show queen aired by CBS on Sunday. Winfrey, 67, is also one of the world's biggest influencers, inspiring millions of Americans to read more, buy her favorite products and even change how they talk, eat and vote. She has appeared in movies, co-authored several books and presides over a vast and varied media empire, with Forbes magazine estimating her personal wealth at \$2.7 billion.

The multiple-award-winning interviewer has long promoted mindfulness and self-improvement too, becoming a self-help guru for many. Her colossal influence extends to politics: in 2008, she endorsed Barack Obama's presidential bid, the first time she had ever publicly backed a candidate for office. Fans have long encouraged Winfrey to run for president herself. In 2018, she was forced to dampen speculation that she would seek the Democratic nomination to take on then-president Donald Trump.

Winfrey, born in 1954, rose from a childhood of poverty and abuse in small-town Mississippi to become the world's first female African-American billionaire in 2003. She began her broadcasting career while she was still in high school and landed a job as a news anchor in Nashville at age 19. Her emotional ad-libs won her a Chicago morning talk show in 1984, which was syndicated nationally as "The Oprah Winfrey Show" in 1986. The show, which ran for 25 seasons until 2011, became the most-watched talk show of all time and was estimated to reach 40 million US viewers a week.

Book club

Audiences tuned in for the emotional connection she made with guests and viewers, with celebrities from all walks of life choosing her couch as a comfortable place to open up. The part of the interview where they suddenly discover something about themselves became known as the "Oprah moment." Actor Cruise famously jumped up on the sofa to proclaim his love for Katie Holmes.

Winfrey also took her show to the

Neverland Ranch for a 1993 interview with "King of Pop" Jackson which drew an audience of 100 million people. In other interviews, Sarah Ferguson told Winfrey in 2010 that mounting debts had led her to try to sell access to her ex-husband, Britain's Prince Andrew. During a 2013 chat, disgraced cyclist Armstrong admitted for the first time that he had used banned performance-enhancing drugs.

Winfrey's use of public confession as therapy is not reserved for guests: she has regularly spoken of her battles with fluctuating weight and of sexual abuse she suffered as a child. "I really understood that there was no difference between me and the audience," she said in 2014. Through her book club she popularized numerous works. A stamp of approval from Winfrey could turn a novel into an instant best-seller, a phenomenon known as the "Oprah Effect." Her endorsement of Obama was estimated by University of Maryland researchers to have brought in a million additional votes and helped him win both the Democratic nomination and the presidency. He awarded her the Presidential Media of Freedom in 2013.

Oscar nomination

"The Oprah Winfrey Show" also served as the foundation for an empire that spans books, radio, magazines and online publishing. Winfrey founded her own production company in 1986, naming it Harpo—her name backwards. She launched "O, The Oprah Magazine" in 2000. It enjoyed a circulation of more than 2.5 million in the mid-noughties before its print run ended last December. She struggled with the Oprah Winfrey Network though. The TV channel launched in 2011 but took years to build an audience and is now majority owned by Discovery.

In 2018, Winfrey signed a multi-year partnership with Apple to create programs for its streaming service. She also owns a seven percent stake in Weight Watchers. Winfrey is a noted philanthropist; last year her charity donated \$10 million to Covid-19 relief efforts. In 1993, former president Bill Clinton signed the "Oprah Bill" into law after she helped establish a national database of convicted child abusers. Winfrey was nominated for an Academy Award for her supporting actress role in Steven Spielberg's 1985 film "The Color Purple." She has never married and has kept her more than 30-year relationship with businessman Stedman Graham largely out of public view. — AFP



In this file photo Oprah Winfrey speaks on stage during Oprah's 2020 Vision: Your Life in Focus Tour presented by WW (Weight Watchers Reimagined) at American Airlines Center in Dallas, Texas. — AFP

Harry and Meghan offer glimpse of 'fairytale' new life

Prince Harry and his wife Meghan had scores to settle in their tell-all interview with Oprah Winfrey Sunday but they also offered a generous glimpse of their "fairytale" new family life far from the monarchy. In a bucolic segment of the interview, the couple invited Winfrey to their home in California's oceanside celebrity enclave of Montecito, where they showed off their chicken coop and its hens rescued from a factory farm. Filmed in rubber boots and a T-shirt, Harry opened up on life during the pandemic lockdown, and shared his joy at taking baby Archie—who will turn two in May—for long trips to the beach.

"I guess the highlight for me is sticking him on the back of a bicycle in his little baby seat and taking him on these bike rides, something which I was never able to do when I was young," Harry said. "And I can see him on the back and he's got his arms out and he's like



In this file photo Britain's Prince Harry and his then fiancée US actress Meghan Markle pose for a photograph in the Sunken Garden at Kensington Palace in west London.

'woahhh, chatty, chatty, chatty, palm tree, house' and all this sort of stuff, and I do, I think to myself 'wow.'" Asked to name Archie's favorite word, Meghan said he is "on a roll." "In the past couple of weeks it has been 'hydrate' which is

just hysterical," she said. Offering royal fans a treat, the couple revealed the gender of their second child, chiming in tandem "It's a girl!" and confirming the baby was due in "summertime." Asked if they were "done" with two children, Harry replied: "done." "To have a boy and then a girl, I mean what more can you ask for?" he said. "Two is it!" quipped Meghan.

Meghan wrapped up with a hopeful look to the future, saying that in deciding to exit from royal life, Harry made a decision that "saved my life." "And now because we're actually on the other side, we've actually not just survived but are thriving." To the question of whether her story "does have a happy ending," Meghan replied: "It does. Greater than any fairytale you've ever read." — AFP



Tennis superstar Serena Williams



In this file photo Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman speaks during the inauguration of US President Joe Biden on the West Front of the US Capitol in Washington, DC.

Williams, Gorman lead support for Markle over royal racism

Tennis superstar Serena Williams and poet Amanda Gorman led an outpouring of support for Meghan Markle following her explosive allegations of racism in the British royal family. In a two-hour interview with Oprah Winfrey, Markle, whose mother is Black, said her husband Prince Harry revealed his family's concerns over "how dark" her son Archie's skin would be. She also said no members of the royal family had spoken out to defend her against a torrent of what she said was racist coverage from British tabloids. "Her words illustrate the pain and cruelty she's experienced," Williams tweeted after the interview aired on Sunday.

"I know first hand the sexism and

racism institutions and the media use to vilify women and people of color to minimize us, to break us down and demonize us," said Williams, hailing her "selfless friend." "We must recognize our obligation to decry malicious, unfounded gossip and tabloid journalism. The mental health consequences of systemic oppression and victimization are devastating, isolating and all too often lethal." Markle told Winfrey she had contemplated taking her own life after joining the royal family and that she was denied help during her mental health crisis. "Royalty is not a shield from the devastation and despair of racism," Bernice King, daughter of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., tweeted in support. "We can know racism exists in an institution and still hurt for someone who was hurt by it," she wrote. "I'm grateful that Meghan Markle is still here."

'Missed opportunity'

African American poet Gorman, who became a star after her reading at President Joe Biden's inauguration, said the British royal family had missed an opportunity to change. "Meghan was the Crown's greatest opportunity for change, regeneration, and reconciliation in a new

era. They didn't just maltreat her light—they missed out on it," the 22-year-old Gorman tweeted, referencing Prince Harry's mother Diana, who was killed in a high-speed car crash in Paris in 1997 as she tried to escape paparazzi. "Meghan is living the life Diana should have, if only those around her had been as brave as she was. Meghan isn't living a life without pain, but a life without a prison.

"This isn't Meghan's princess 'happy' ending. But sometimes change, the decisions that bring us the most hurt, aren't about happiness, but healing," Gorman said it was unclear if it would change the royal family, but Markle would inspire women. "Think of the women who will be inspired to stand up for their lives, the partners who will be kinder & more courageous than the kin they were born into," she tweeted. Meena Harris, niece of Vice President Kamala Harris, also voiced support for Markle. "She was suicidal and begged for help," she said, adding a tweet with a quote from Markle after discussing her mental health struggles with Winfrey. "Meghan Markle: 'I'm still standing.'" — AFP

'Nomadland' picks up Critics' Choice wins on Hollywood awards trip

US road movie "Nomadland" swerved controversy in China and accelerated towards award season glory Sunday as it topped the prizes at the Critics Choice Awards, picking up best picture and best director for Chloe Zhao. The film about van dwellers living on America's spectacular open road also won cinematography and adapted screenplay, confirming its Oscars frontrunner status two days after the Academy voting window began. The movie—which also won big at last weekend's Golden Globes—has drawn a nationalist backlash in China, where its release was recently thrown in doubt after social media users and state media questioned Beijing-born Zhao's loyalty to her birth country.

Filmmakers did not directly address the controversy directly Sunday, with producer Mollye Asher thanking Zhao for "leading us with such heart." "In a year that has illuminated the crucial need for connection and empathy, we are so proud to have created a film that celebrates the compassion gained by simply listening to one another," Asher said. Zhao also paid tribute to the movie's sound mixer Michael Wolf Snyder, who died by suicide last week. "We'll see you down the road my friend," said Zhao, echoing a line from the film. The Critics Choice Awards—chosen by 400 members of North America's largest critics organization—took place remotely from a Los Angeles stage. US actor Taye Diggs hosted a mix-

ture of in-person guests, live video calls and pre-recorded messages from presenters, nominees and the widow of late "Black Panther" star Chadwick Boseman. "It is so hard to find a celebratory feeling in these moments," said Taylor Simone Ledward, accepting his latest best actor award for 1920s blues drama "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," following his death from cancer last August. "Societies grow great when old men plant trees in whose shade they know they may never sit," she said. "And our society may be a far cry from great, but I know that the seeds you planted will grow into forests."

The Crown' tops TV
"Ma Rainey" also won two technical

awards to finish the night in second with three awards, ahead of three other films on two. Carey Mulligan bolstered her Oscars hopes in a crowded field for best actress with her turn as a revenge-seeker who preys on misogynist men in "Promising Young Woman," which also won for original screenplay. "The Trial of the Chicago 7," a courtroom drama about anti-Vietnam War protesters in the 1960s, took the best acting ensemble award as well as co-winning best editing.

Co-star Sacha Baron Cohen warned that history will repeat itself "unless we learn from it by telling its most salient stories." And Alan Kim—the pint-sized, eight-year-old star of Korean-American immigrant drama

"Minari"—melted hearts by bursting into uncontrollable tears in his tiny tuxedo as he accepted best young actor. The film also won for best foreign-language film.

On a night overshadowed by CBS's explosive interview of Meghan Markle and Prince Harry by Oprah Winfrey, British royals drama "The Crown" topped the television categories, with four wins including best drama series. Oscars nominations will be announced March 15, with the season-crowning ceremony pushed back this year to April 25. — AFP