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Comic spotlights 'Other Oprahs'

By **JIM SLOTEK**, QMI AGENCY

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A man whose life was changed by Oprah Winfrey gave comic Michael Gelbart the inspiration to write his first novel, *The Other Oprahs*.

"I was performing with (fellow comic) Greg Behrendt, who'd written *He's Just Not That Into You*, and the shows were sold out," the West Coast-based Canadian comic recalls.

"And he said it was a result of his book getting a glowing endorsement by Oprah. And that's when I started thinking just how powerful she was, and how much it would suck to have Oprah as a first name if you weren't her.

"She's always going to be the most famous Oprah, the most generous. 'Hey, Oprah Smith bought a new car.' -- 'That's nice. Oprah Winfrey bought a new car ... for every member of her studio audience."

Gelbart's ruminations on the life of other Oprahs turned into a quite funny book about four very different Oprahs who meet on a chat-room for women named Oprah. The prodigal comic is at the Manulife Chapters Indigo Thursday at 7 p.m. for a book signing and performance (the latter by local actresses, including Nikki Payne, Lauren Hammersly and Dina Damakos, each of whom will do a five-minute reading of their characters' 'Net posts).

While in town, Gelbart is also headlining through the weekend at Yuk Yuk's on Richmond.

"It's a tough thing, writing about four diverse women named Oprah and having them all tell their stories in first person," Gelbart says. "The dumb guy fear is if you explore those characters, you won't be able to come out of it and you'll end wearing a dress. Then I looked at some of the male writers I'd admired who are great at female voices. James L. Brooks. Tarantino wrote *Death Proof* and that was almost entirely female dialogue. *Shopgirl* by Steve Martin. Nick Hornby writes great women. I don't know that there was a better script in 2009 than *An Education*. Having said that, I tried not to approach the characters merely as women, but as people with wants and fears that are universal."

As for the real Oprah, she unfortunately no longer has her book club, and is soon to quit her long-running talk show.

"But with the (Oprah) magazine, her satellite radio channel and the launch of OWN (the Oprah Winfrey Network), I cannot see our paths, or least her path and my book, not crossing at some point sooner than later."