

Enough About Me #19: In Which the Author and Proud Owner of a New Website Gives a Mediocre Performance at an Interview, and Considers the Author's Responsibility for Creating a Good Interview

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Plus: Tip Sheet for **Assignment** Editors: The Best Author Interviews Out There

At the end of an eventful week, which included the launch of [my author website](#) (I have finally entered the 21st century at a highly cyber imaginative address), the announcement that the paperback of *Crossing California* has gone into its second printing, plus a weeklong visit from the in-laws, I ambled down to Café La Fortuna for an interview and photo session for a feature in the weekend edition of a daily metropolitan newspaper. Having spent enough time at the other end of the microphone conducting interviews with authors, artists and assorted crackpots from a wide variety of professions, I should be reasonably prepared for a fairly standard discussion of my forthcoming novel, but on this occasion, I spend so much time asking questions of the interviewer that the conversation ends with me wondering if I've managed to say anything substantive at all.

The conventional wisdom is that the responsibility for the quality of an interview falls squarely upon the journalist, but if this session hasn't gone as well as it could have, it's pretty much my fault; I have either rambled instead of responded or relied upon canned quotes that I could recite in my sleep. As much as the interviewer must ask questions or

provide discussion points that inspire or intrigue his or her subject, it is the subject's job to be open and generous enough for an original and unpredictable conversation. It's pretty obvious what an interviewer can do to screw up an interview: fail to read the book (or be unable to fake it), ask questions directly from the press materials, rely on a prepared list of topics and refuse to let a conversation take its natural course. But are there things that an interviewee can do to make sure that an interview goes smoothly, or dreadfully? Unfortunately for me, the answer seems to be yes.

Douglas Wolk, a journalist and critic who has written for the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, *Slate*, *Blender* and just about everywhere else, says that the best interviewees are those who are unscripted, who can digress, and who "have some kind of theoretical perspective on what they do, and can explain it."

"The worst are people who try to answer questions as briefly as possible," Wolk adds. "We're happy to sift through everything you say to find the interesting stuff. You don't have to give us a yes or no."

"The only good interview is a lively, unpremeditated conversation," says Robert Campbell, architecture critic for the *Boston Globe*. "The worst is a Q&A session with the interviewee measuring every word."

Misha Berson, author and theater critic for the *Seattle Times*, says that a good interviewee is not that hard to find—all she's looking for is a "pleasant human being who understands that interviews are part of [the] job and dispatches those duties cheerfully." Those who have qualified, in Berson's experience: Chita Rivera, Mel Brooks, Tony Kushner and Edward Albee. Those who haven't include actress and author Claire Bloom ("Who knows if she was just bummed out because of her break-up with novelist Philip Roth. . . . But she greeted every question I posed with derision or argument, including standard queries," Berson recalls) and Faye Dunaway, who, Berson says, "kept cutting me off and calling me back, screaming at her Hispanic maid, and who at one point let me know she had to take a call from her 'father.'" Turned out the father was her priest, who, Berson says, was aiding her in her conversion to Catholicism. "I hope she did some penance for the way she



treated her maid," Berson muses.

With the words of these fellow journalists in mind, I have compiled a list of the qualities that have characterized the best interview subjects I've met. Hopefully, authors, editors and publicists can learn from this list about what makes for a good interview. And if they don't, maybe I can learn to live up to their performances at my next opportunity. Assignment editors and radio producers, take note:

The Best of the Best (Among Writers I've Interviewed):

Category #1: The Freewheeling Improviser:

Just about everyone can answer the obvious questions (Why did you write the book? What inspired you? What authors do you admire? Is the book autobiographical? Updike or Roth? Beatles or Stones?), but that hardly makes for inspired or original copy. As a journalist, few experiences are more pleasurable than finding a well-rounded conversation partner who can dissertate on just about everything, from today's headlines to recipes for lemon meringue pie.

★ **Bronze Medalist: Paul Hoffman** (*The Man Who Loved Only Numbers* and *Wings of Madness*). If Hoffman isn't a genius (and, really, who can say whether anyone is or not), the former editor of *Discover* and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, certainly plays the role of one very well.

★ **Silver Medalist: Sy Montgomery** (*Search for the Golden Moon Bear*, *Journey of the Pink Dolphins*). A rare combination of intelligence, passion and humor.

★ **Gold Medalist: Umberto Eco** (too many books to mention). Anyone who can discuss Broadway musicals, comic-book superheroes, medieval history and mixed drinks in a single sentence without the slightest appearance of pretension exemplifies perfectly this category.

Category #2: He/She Who Does Not Suffer Fools Gladly:

One would tend to think that grumpiness would be a less-than-desirable quality in an interview subject. But too much friendliness, especially in the event of an unprepared journalist, can often mean that the individual being interviewed just isn't paying enough attention. Sometimes, a particularly prickly person is a

particularly honest one.

★ **Bronze Medalist: Nadine Gordimer** (who once told me, quite reasonably, that if I asked her a stupid question, I'd get "a nasty answer").

★ **Silver Medalist: Maurice Sendak**. (What can be better than finding a children's author and illustrator who can curse like a sailor?)

★ **Gold Medalist: Toni Morrison**. It's a daunting experience to have a Nobel Prize winner pissed off at you, but at the end of the day, Dr. Morrison's frankness was worth incurring her wrath for trying to research her background by interviewing too many of her friends and relatives. The first time I met her for an interview, I sat in her apartment with another editor from *Book Magazine*. Afterward, she remarked to her publicist that "the smarter one" asked more questions. I'm still not sure which one of us she meant.

Category #3: The Unself-conscious Subject:

In this age of media consultants, spin doctors and over-rehearsed questions and answers, it's wonderful to find someone honest and genuine enough to consider any question, no matter how bizarre or off-point.

★ **Bronze Medalist: George Singleton** (*Novel*, *The Half-Mammals of Dixie*). One of the only authors I've met who never seems to watch what he says, and who is as genuinely funny in person as in print.

★ **Silver Medalist: Michel Faber** (*The Crimson Petal and the White*). A man who will answer absolutely anything seriously, respectfully and at length. Really at length.

★ **Gold Medalist: Alex Garland** (*The Beach*, *The Tesseract*). I introduced Garland at an event last year when he was promoting his most recent work, *The Coma*. The simple fact that he was able to field with a straight face the most bizarre and inappropriate audience question I have ever heard ("Have you researched comas? And do you know if it is possible for someone in a coma to achieve and maintain an erection?") makes him an all-star in this category.

Category #4: The Consummate Storyteller:

One of the best qualities an author can have, of course, is the ability to captivate the reader with his or her own words, but it is the rare individual who can do this both in person and on the page.

★ **Bronze Medalist: Isabel Allende**.

Allende can answer a simple biographical question and make it sound like she is casting a spell.

★ **Silver Medalist: Salman Rushdie**. Before he wrote *The Satanic Verses* or *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie was an actor (although probably not a romantic lead). During interviews, his thespian past shows (in mostly a good way).

★ **Gold Medalist: Maxine Hong Kingston**. The author of *Tripmaster Monkey* and *The Fifth Book of Peace* can do much of what the previous two can and she can do it without sounding as if she's been rehearsing for all her adult life.

Category #5: The Genuinely Decent Human Being:

Even in the longest interviews, it's hard for journalists to get a read on their subjects, to look within their soul, as George W. Bush might say. For all I know, the people I am about to mention have deep, dark, horrible secrets, but for the space of an interview or conversation, they seemed like some of the most caring and generous people I have ever met. An interview that teaches or entertains is an admirable thing; one that restores one's faith in humanity is even more so. It hardly seems fair to rank this category, so let's just list them in alphabetical order and call it even.

Gold Medalists (five-way tie):

★ Richard Adams (*Watership Down*)
★ Stuart Dybek (*I Sailed With Magellan*)
★ Bel Kaufman (*Up the Down Staircase*)
★ William Lychack (*The Wasp Eater*)
★ John Murray (*A Few Short Notes on Tropical Butterflies*)

Had I compiled this list before my interview, no doubt I would have arrived at Café La Fortuna better prepared. I would have been confident without being pretentious, sympathetic without seeming phony, honest without being an ass. As it stands, however, it turns out that I have still lucked out, for today I have found that my interviewer (perhaps noting my bumbling responses while transcribing the tape of our conversation) has e-mailed me a series of questions. Now, thankfully I will have one more chance to appear somewhat articulate after all.