Ramona Koval, Speaking Volumes: Conversations with Remarkable Writers (Scribe, 2010)

Ramona Koval appeared at this year’s Brisbane Writers Festival, being interviewed, along with Anna Krien, by Stephen Romei. She discussed a number of interviews included in Speaking Volumes, making mention, amongst others, of Harold Pinter and Joyce Carol Oates, for quite different reasons. She makes a fascinating interviewee, so open to whatever is asked her, and willing to sing as well – in Yiddish! Although there is no singing mentioned in the book, Koval notes that she and Saul Bellow spoke some Yiddish after their interview ended.

This collection of her interviews with writers contains a large proportion of the ones included in an earlier book, Tasting Life Twice: Conversations with Remarkable Writers, with some updates. The difference is that six of the writers in the 2005 book are not included in the later one, but are replaced by interviews with Margaret Drabble, André Brink, John Banville, Jeanette Winterson, Hanif Kureishi, Anne Enright, John le Carré and Barry Lopez.

There are countless books featuring interviews with famous writers, including of course the well-known Paris Review ‘Writers at Work’ series that began in 1953, but also the ‘Yacker’ series by Candida Baker and the one-off titles such as Making Stories: How Ten Australian Novels Were Written (1993) by Kate Grenville and Sue Woolfe. Koval’s aim is different: she doesn’t ask questions about the mechanics of being a writer, or ‘how to write’, but focuses more on the larger questions of the writer in the world.

In ‘Introduction’, Ramona Koval does not set out rules as such for literary interviewing, but she mentions the following: preparation; the understanding that ‘people are interested in the writer and not the interviewer’ (8); the skill of listening carefully. She wants ‘to show … who the person in front of me is, and what they think’ by means of ‘intelligent, sensitive and probing conversation’ (4).

In Koval’s interview with Joyce Carol Oates, for example, I think the reader can see these qualities in abundance. Koval notes in her introduction that the talk did not start well, with Oates giving mainly short, somewhat sullen answers and seeming uninterested or sarcastic about the whole process. The turning point is here:

Q: Another of your themes has been female vulnerability, and I know you’re a really funny person and you’ve got a sense of humour, but you have written a lot about innocence and young womanhood. ‘For the Kellies’, for example, the dedication in Black Water, and ‘For the Kathleens’ is the dedication in The Rise of Life on Earth.
A: You’ve read those?
Q: I have. You’ve written a lot; I’ve read a lot of your books.
A: Well, I’m going to give you a medal.
Q: Good.
A: Nobody has read those books. The editor and I had read it, and that was it.
Q: Well, I wanted to talk about them… Two very different young women from very different places… (33)

After this, Oates’ responses open up and she enters into a full and generous discussion with Koval, shedding the reluctance and ennui of her previous answers. She had no doubt, then, that her interviewer was serious, knew her material, and wanted to discuss it. A little praise from the interviewer probably didn’t go astray, either.

The interview with Harold Pinter, which includes a second meeting in 2006, is rather poignant as he is suffering from cancer of the oesophagus, but contains not a gram of self-pity. He seems full of political fervour and creativity, if not for writing then for the stage and for performance. Part of his rage (and it really comes across that strongly) is in the misuse of language by politicians and other public figures: ‘collateral damage’, ‘humanitarian intervention’, and ‘freedom-loving people’, for example. It is recorded in the paragraph introducing the 2006 interview that Pinter, before speaking with Koval, performed a scene from The Birthday Party at the lectern, despite being frail. The interviewer gives us details like this about each writer that brings them to life on the page.

In a strong collection of 28 interviews, including Gore Vidal, Ian McEwan, Mario Vargas Llosa and Toni Morrison, there are three other interviews I found particularly remarkable, all for different reasons, but all springing from Ramona Koval’s ability to adapt to the situation, take the

writer’s concerns seriously, and ask searching questions without fear. William Gass, the American novelist, teacher and essayist, argues that morality has nothing to do with art, that ‘people who read or appreciate art from a political–moral point of view are simply wrong’ (217). In his view, ‘you’re not supposed to look through the book at the world – unless you’re looking through the book at the world’s language, as well. You’re looking at what the writer has constructed, not at what the writer has described’ (218). Koval challenges him with notions of characters as human beings and the moral responsibility of art, referring specifically to his 1995 novel *The Tunnel*, which features a repugnant Nazi sympathiser as the protagonist. What results is a serious and involving interview centred around an important argument about art and its function.

I remember listening to Koval’s talk with poet Les Murray on her book show, and reading it here reminded me of how comfortable they both were in each other’s company. Murray doesn’t need much encouragement to talk, with his interviewer only occasionally asking a question or making a comment or an observation. It is an unconventional literary conversation to match the unconventional poet, a big man who loves the country in which he’s grown up and still lives. It is very clear from this transcript how his poetry springs from the landscape and from his life.

When Ramona Koval spoke with Judith Wright in 1999, she actually had to write her questions in large letters on a whiteboard, as the poet was deaf and her vision impaired. Referring back to her introduction about an interview showing what sort of person the writer is, this particular exchange does that well, as Wright is patient and generous and wise, and has a sense of humour. She ranges over poetry and the environment, love and communication, talking about why she stopped writing poetry when she was 70 (she’s 84 at the time of the interview), and what she feels about death.

Not all of the interviews are as strong as the ones discussed above, but that may have more to do with the reader’s own predilections than the quality of the interview, or with the responses of the particular writer. Fay Weldon’s explanations for her points of view on feminism and birth control are not well argued, and maybe Koval could have challenged her more, but this is a minor point in an outstanding collection of interviews.

*Sue Bond*