Ben Naparstek, *In Conversation: Encounters with 39 Great Writers* (Scribe, 2009)

The author profile, published in a newspaper or magazine, usually coincides with a writer doing the publicity rounds for a new book. Presumably, the arts journalist is looking for something that meets more than just the requirements of a book tour, but what is produced is usually quite familiar. The typical profile will contain something about the author’s background, something about the critical reception of their work, description of their environment and surroundings, plot summaries and perhaps a little literary gossip. This is all fairly standard when published in the weekend newspaper, but placing a collection of them between book covers will tend to raise the reader’s expectations somewhat.

Scribe has now published a selection of profiles of prominent writers by Ben Naparstek, written for different publications since 2005. This follows closely on the appointment last year of the then 23-year old as editor for *The Monthly* after the acrimonious departure of the previous editor over issues of independence and control. The age of the new editor and the circumstances of his appointment caused some inevitable storms in literary teacups, with questions asked about his experience and qualifications for this post. It’s difficult to say whether this book will demonstrate why he was chosen for the role, or whether it will raise the suspicion that it’s only because of his new role that the book was published.

According to my count, there are 40 profiles included in the book, rather than the 39 mentioned in the subtitle, so unless one of these authors has not quite made it into the ranks of the ‘great writers’ this is a major editorial error. Each chapter is based on an interview by phone, email or in person with some of the most prominent writers of fiction and non-fiction internationally. The subjects are uniformly cosmopolitan (but curiously don’t include any Australians), ranging from Russell Banks to Ben Okri, from Umberto Eco to James Wood. The articles don’t stray too far from the conventions of the genre, although they do take a noticeable interest in the cultural politics of the writers and their work.

Most well-known writers have some standard anecdotes that can be told about them; these are given a fair airing in this collection. Those familiar with these writers will probably find themselves ticking them off: Rick Moody called the worst writer of his generation by critic Dale Peck; the Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, refusing to be anthologised in the *The Penguin Anthology of British Verse*; the political reporter, Robert Fisk, being set upon by a mob near the Afghan border; Haruki Murakami writing his first novel each evening in the hours after closing the jazz club that he and his wife managed.

When the focus moves a little closer to the subjects, many of the articles revolve around the standard identification of resonances between the life and the work. Thus, Paul Auster’s work is characterised by the blurring of reality and the imagination; the conventionality of David Guterson’s life and work make up for the instability of his upbringing; the author checks Rick Moody for signs of his manic prose. He argues that Tony Judt’s political positions derive from a personal tendency to passion and subsequent disillusion, notably towards Israel, France, and now the US. Occasionally the pairing of life and work seems quite forced, such as occurs when Catherine Millett’s sexual autobiography is linked with her Salvador Dalí book.
Naparstek obviously prepares well for each interview, reading through the authors’ works and familiarising himself with their life and context. His descriptions of the writers, summations of controversies, observations and reflections are executed competently. His noting how Irish poet Paul Muldoon looks like ‘a cross between professor and ageing rock star’ seems an accurate description of both his appearance and his disposition. His observation that Noam Chomsky is prone to ‘deliver a barrage of historical statistics and examples’ captures something of the US radical’s style of argument and thought. His tracking of John Gray’s movement through various ideological camps to his present-day anti-enlightenment stance highlights well the inconsistency of someone energetically proselytising for political passivity.

In one of the more interesting asides, Naparstek broaches the question of the untrustworthiness of the interviewer in relation to their ‘quarry’. These questions are discussed further in the interview with Janet Malcolm, who, of course, has written of the interviewer’s betrayal and fictionalisation of the subject. Opposing agendas are evident when Thomas Friedman wants to discuss his latest work, while Naparstek wants to ask about the Iraq war, which, as he points out, Friedman ‘cheered on with breathless enthusiasm’. Hendrik Hertzberg is seen enjoying the sound of his own voice just prior to Naparstek girding himself ‘to remove the baby’s bottle’. The writer of the profile has the last word, of course, and some of the subjects come off second best: Jay McInerney is depicted as superficial and self-absorbed; Peter Handke appears just a little mad.

Naparstek’s interest in the cultural politics of these writers has him discuss Michel Houellebecq’s anti-1968 polemics along with Elfriede Jelinek’s dogged critique of Austria’s historical blindness. He explores the strained relations between Kate Roiphe and feminism and looks at where a neocon like Robert Kagan now situates himself. Naparstek sometimes brings a certain gaucherie to the political discussion, often employed in making a criticism just to see what the reaction is: ‘So, does Chomsky feel guilty about his comfortable lifestyle?’ This is made with better critical effect when he quizzes Chomsky about whether the media is really so all controlling as he suggests: ‘So media consumers and journalists are mere dupes with no faculty for independent thought?’

Sometimes the encounter is badly handled, however, and the result is discomforting for the subject and reader without the payoff of critical insight. Toni Morrison is confused when he raises the issue of ‘attacks’ on her by black writers. When Morrison denies that she called Bill Clinton America’s first black president (claiming instead that she said he was treated like one), Naparstek can’t resist telling us in parentheses: ‘For the record, she did.’ Naparstek 1, Nobel laureate 0, apparently. Bernard-Henri Lévy makes an easy target and it is difficult to feel sympathy for the figure portrayed here, except when Naparstek spends several questions cajoling him into admitting that his son is a business lawyer.

Naparstek is not afraid to insert his own point of view into the encounter, such as when he says Robert Fisk has a Manichean vision of the world and is patronising to Arabs in an apparent belief that they can do no wrong. He makes sensible comments about Thomas Friedman’s overly optimistic views of globalisation, but then, in a rejoinder to Friedman’s idea that countries with economic security will no longer generate extremism, he has this to say: ‘The Palestinians have long perpetuated a conflict that impoverishes them. Atavistic sentiments run deeper than Friedman
allows.’ Some readers are going to bridle at the unsupported contentiousness of a statement like this.

The book’s more interesting chapters include the one on Ismail Kadare, which discusses the difficult movement between collusion and criticism when it comes to the totalitarian state. The Paul Muldoon interview ranges across his life and poetry, looking at rhyming, naming, poetry and the everyday. While I couldn’t help feeling ambivalent about this collection, many of the articles have something of interest even as they tread the well-worn conventions of the genre. As the title tells us, they are the result of a series of encounters, not intended to give a new perspective or overarching argument about contemporary writing. They remain competently written, occasionally engaging, examples of the form.

Gary Pearce