Philip Gourevitch (ed.), *The Paris Review Interviews Volume IV* (Canongate Books Ltd., 2009)

The *Paris Review Interviews* is a fount of invaluable conversations with some of the greatest writers of our age, including vivid self-portraits that are themselves works of finely crafted literature. These interviews with many of the world’s leading playwrights, poets and novelists spanning over half a century are a delight to read and may be viewed as classic works of literature in their own right. They address some of the deep inquisitiveness that most of us have about the creative process, what fuels the imagination and why a particular writer writes in a particular manner.

Beginning with the interview with William Styron which was recorded in 1954, and ending with Marilynne Robinson who was interviewed in 2008, they take the reader on a long journey during the course of which several intriguing details of these writers’ lives and their special qualities and peculiarities come to the fore. For instance, Ted Berrigan who interviewed Jack Kerouac tells us that the ‘most amazing thing about Jack Kerouac is his magic voice, which sounds exactly like his works. It is capable of the most astounding and disconcerting changes in no time flat.’ And during the course of the interview, Jack Kerouac comes across exactly as he should, at once vivid and muddy. And the interview with Maya Angelou tells us why she writes with a Bible and a bottle of sherry at her side and that according to her ‘English remains the most beautiful of languages. It will do anything.’ Philip Roth tells us what novels do to the ordinary reader. ‘At their best writers change the way readers read … Reading novels is a deep and singular pleasure, a gripping and mysterious human activity that does not require any more moral or political justification than sex.’ These interviews reveal to us more about the artists than they themselves perhaps know. Paul Auster talks about ‘reading with his fingers’ and how valuable he finds it. We also have David Grossman’s paean to Hebrew and its flexibility which echoes Maya Angelou’s tribute to the English language, and best of all Orhan Pamuk’s manuscript pages wonderfully illustrated by him. John Ashbery tells us that he tries ‘to avoid the well known cliché that you learn from your students’. Joyce Carol Oates reveals to us that when writers ask each other about their work habits they are trying to find out ‘Is he as crazy as I am? I don’t need that question answered.’ Stephen Sondheim admits that he uses the Clement Wood rhyming dictionary and Roget’s Thesaurus, and E.B White informs us that ‘Anyone who writes down to children is simply wasting his time. You have to write up, not down.’ Marilynne Robinson confesses that *Housekeeping* grew out of a ‘stack of metaphors’ and Haruki Murakami reveals to us what inspires his surrealist imagination and recounts the incident when he feared having lunch with Toni Morrison and Joyce Carol Oates.

These interviews have not only been conducted with immeasurable skill, but they have been later edited with equal proficiency, a process in which the interviewees were actively involved. Consequently, the writers come across sounding honestly and undefensively like themselves. The book is not only a pleasure to read; it is a treasure chest.

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