
I was so excited when Volume 3 of the world-famous *Paris Review Interviews* landed on my table that I began to devour it straight away. Here were the original interviews reproduced handsomely in a compact paperback. Margaret Atwood writes a brief but strong introduction:

By the time the fifties were over … the *Paris Review* had become an institution, and its collection of interviews with writers was already the gold standard for such things. … To read the entire collection is to be given an unequalled overview of the complex, multidimensional writing world during the last half century. … Insofar as words on a page can re-create the flavour of a personality, these interviews do it.

I agree. The volume under review contains interviews with such diverse writers as Evelyn Waugh, Harold Pinter, Salman Rushdie, Jean Rhys, and William Carlos Williams. To revisit these writers collected under one umbrella, as it were, is to realize just how prodigious the creative writing scene was in the twentieth century and perhaps to wonder if the greatness that these writers achieved can be paralleled by our less imaginative twenty-first century (judging, of course, by what has been produced in the opening decade).

One of the more engaging aspects of these *Paris Review* interviews is that they are frank, direct, robust and almost ‘no-holds barred’; I say ‘almost’ because, much as I am reluctant to say this, I still do detect that in more than a couple of interviews certain subjects, themes, predilections, still remain ‘sensitive’ and therefore out-of-bounds. But this is a very minor issue. These interviews are not obsequious, nor are they mere tributes: they are ‘real’ interviews, carried out by persons themselves passionate about their subject/s. Here is a slice from the interview with Norman Mailer:

**Interviewer:** The 1969 campaign for mayor marked the end of your political career.

**Mailer:** I realized a number of things afterward. One of them was I didn’t have enough stamina. I mean, I aged in the three or four months of the campaign, and I was tired all the time. We got very little press. And it really felt, a lot of the time, as if we were just beating our fists against the wall. What I said after it was all over is that a freshman can’t be elected president of the fraternity. And right after I made that remark, along came Jimmy Carter. He broke that rule, but he wasn’t a very successful president.

**I:** So it must interest you to imagine how Vaclav Havel managed to be a writer and be president, too?

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M: I don’t know much about his career. We met once and had an unhappy meeting because I’d been in Havana and I talked about meeting Castro, what an interesting man he was, which is undeniably true, but Havel just clammed up. Obviously I was not someone with whom he wished to have anything to do, so my feeling was, Hey, you tell me to get lost? I tell you to get lost! He brought out the old Brooklyn in me.

I: But at some level you must have understood?

M: I understood, but I also thought it was narrow-minded. Yes, he’d spent his life fighting the communists, and he hated them, but you’ve got to be able to make distinctions. There is such a thing as a relatively good communist, and if there’s one on earth, it was Fidel Castro. I mean there’s a huge difference – the average communist who oppressed Havel was a bureaucrat who had kept his nose clean and in the trough and was an oppressor because he was a mediocrity. And there was Castro, who was hated by every American president for a very simple reason, which is that he had become head of a nation by daring to win. And how had they become president? By shaking hands with people they despised for decades. And Havel should have been able to see that difference.

I have quoted at some length because I feel it is important to share the honesty, the directness and the candour which characterize most of these interviews. Of course, not all those interviewed are Norman Mailers, but in their own way, each is pretty blunt and frank about his or her views. And some of these views verge on the provocative, some on the verge of the sublime, some ridiculous – but they are all here. And so reading these interviews puts you in touch, literally nearly, with these great men and women of letters who made writing not just their vocation but a passion lived to the utmost. Each writer’s journey as presented, as witnessed here by the words and phrases used in the interviews, in first person narratives, invites both fascination and awe, and sometimes, perhaps, irritation – one wishes for more, only to realize that time must have been of the essence, even for the Paris Review interviews. Here is Chinua Achebe:

I: You have said that you wrote Things Fall Apart as a response to Joyce Cary’s Mr Johnson.

A: I wish I hadn’t said that.

I: You made Mr Johnson famous! But your most trenchant essay on the colonial novel is your subsequent essay on Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. I wonder what you think is the image of Africa today in the Western mind.

A: I think it’s changed a bit. But not very much in its essentials. When I think of the standing, the importance, and the erudition of all these people who see nothing about racism in Heart of Darkness, I am convinced that we must really be living in different worlds. Anyway, if you don’t like someone’s story, you write your own. If you don’t like what somebody says, you say

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what it is you don’t like. Some people imagine that what I mean is, Don’t read Conrad. Good heavens, no! I teach Conrad. I teach Heart of Darkness. I have a course on Heart of Darkness in which what I am saying is, Look at the way this man handles Africans. Do you recognize humanity there? People will tell you he was opposed to imperialism. But its not enough to say, I am opposed to imperialism. Or, I am opposed to these people – these poor people – being treated like this. Especially since he goes on straightaway to call them ‘dogs standing on their hind legs’. That kind of thing. Animal imagery throughout. He didn’t see anything wrong with it. So we must live in different worlds. Until these two worlds come together we will have a lot of trouble.

Wow! Rough. But true and to the point. Dare I say that not much seems to have changed since Achebe said that in 1994? In the English/Literature/Culture Studies Departments of numerous great universities of the world, Conrad is enthroned and Achebe, if he is present at all, is present under some rubric like ‘Modern African Writers’ or ‘The Post-colonial Novel’. This is one long, hard and sometimes frantic struggle – with the established pundits frequently refraining from entering the fray and in so doing continuing to maintain and sustain the divide. One of my own former teachers at the University here in Singapore – and one who is regarded as being among the more articulate of scholars in this arena, once chided me by saying ‘How can you expect me to give three lectures on Lloyd Fernando’s Scorpion Orchid? Now if you ask me to do three lectures on Heart of Darkness, that’ll be different.’ This mindset still flourishes, to the sad dismay of many who understand, value and appreciate Achebe’s frustrations.

Most of the interviews reproduced here were done in the last century – the exceptions being Rushdie’s and Mailer’s. So one small quarrel I do have with the editor of this volume is that it would have been good, nice, appropriate to have added some editorial notes/comments which would bring the interviews up-to-date as it were. The earliest dates from 1955 and between then and now, obviously, an appreciable time lapse has taken place and though it still is a pleasure to read, say, the interview with Ralph Ellison, so much has happened both in the world and in the world of Ellison scholarship that the pain/effort of bringing the interviews up-to-date would have been richly rewarded by our being made aware of what’s the latest with such and such a writer. (Of course many of those interviewed are now long gone). Also, it would have been good to have had the editor, Philip Gourevitch, give us some idea about the overall project of these volumes of collected interviews: what decides who goes into which volume? How many volumes can we expect? Will there be writers who will be interviewed twice (or more times)? – and will only one of these interviews (presumably the latest) be reproduced or all? (Mailer, for instance, was first interviewed by the PR in 1964, then again in 2007, the year he died, and the interview here is the 2007 one).

But I must reiterate that these complaints do not detract from the real worth of these volumes: the interviews still sparkle – they probably always will sparkle, for they transport us to a different era and with this transport we are changed, bringing us back, once again, to the time when so many of us eagerly sought these Paris Review interviews because our PhD supervisors insisted we lay our hands on them no matter where we were in the world. Thus I recall my own PhD thesis supervisor, the late Professor John Colmer of the University of Adelaide, insisting that I read the

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Huxley interview in *Paris Review* 23(1960) before reading anything/anyone else! And I am forever glad I did because through the interview I gleaned so much in less than an hour than I would have reading tomes of ponderous scholarship. I am certain readers will have their own memories of similar experiences.

Allow me to end with a brief quotation from one of the most memorable interviews in this current Volume – that with the late Ted Hughes. How can one not possess a volume of collected interviews with the brightest and the best when one confronts, for example, the following:

I: Why do you choose to speak through animals so often?

H: I suppose because they were there at the beginning. Like parents. I spent my first seventeen or eighteen years constantly thinking about them more or less, they became a language – a symbolic language which is also the language of my whole life. It was not something I began to learn about at university or something that happened to me when I was thirty, but part of the machinery of my mind from the beginning. They are a way of connecting all my deepest feelings together. So when I look for, or get hold of a feeling of that kind, it tends to bring up the image of an animal, or animals simply because that’s the deepest, earliest language that my imagination learned. Or one of the deepest, earliest languages. People were there, too.

People were there, too: Yes.

*Kirpal Singh*