



The Believer Book of Writers Talking to Writers

Vendela Vida (Editor) , Sarah Stone

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Believer Books has collected, in alphabetical order, twenty-three conversations and correspondences between much admired writers and the writers they admire. The interviews include favorites gleaned from the pages of the *Believer* magazine along with previously unpublished conversations. The book is rife with astonishing insights and profound quips. To wit:

George Saunders: ‘I see writing as part of an ongoing attempt to really, viscerally, believe that everything matters, suffering is real, and death is imminent.’

Ian McEwan: ‘The dream, surely, that we all have, is to write this beautiful paragraph that actually is describing something but at the same time in another voice is writing commentary on its own creation, without having to be a story about a writer.’

Jamaica Kincaid: ‘All of these declarations of what writing ought to be, which I had myself—though, thank god I had never committed them to paper—I think are nonsense.... You write what you write, and then either it holds up or it doesn't hold up. There are no rules or particular sensibilities. I don't believe in that all anymore.’

Janet Malcolm: ‘The narrator of my nonfiction pieces is not the same person I am—she is a lot more articulate and thinks of much cleverer things to say than I usually do.’

Paul Auster: ‘In my own case, I certainly don't walk into my room and sit down at my desk feeling like a boxer ready to go ten rounds with Joe Louis. I tiptoe in. I procrastinate. I delay. I come in sideways, kind of sliding through the door.... I don't burst into the saloon with my six-shooter ready. If I did, I'd probably shoot myself in the foot.’

Tobias Wolff: ‘Each time out should be a swing for the fences. Don't do base-running drills. You can do those on your own time.’

The Believer Book of Writers Talking to Writers Details

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From Reader Review The Believer Book of Writers Talking to Writers for online ebook

Jeff Bursey says

From *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Spring 2006, Vol. XXVI, No. 1, pp. 153-154

Donna Seaman. *Writers on the Air: Conversations about Books*. Paul Dry Books, 2005. 467 pp. \$24.95.
Vendela Vida. *The Believer Book of Writers Talking to Writers*. Believer Books, 2005. 485 pp. Paper: \$18.00.

When a writer is interviewed, there's often the risk that he or she will come off like an idiot or inadvertently gut their work of significance. Neither of those things is avoided in the books under review, but the self-embarrassment is minimal.

The first title collects thirty-two interviews ably conducted by Donna Seaman and drawn from her radio program Open Books. A gentle and skilled interrogator, she clearly does her own research. Margaret Atwood's self-congratulation leaps off the page, while Peter Carey takes the questions, broadens them, and courteously involves Seaman in the process. Philip Lopate preens, while Diane Ackerman infectiously enthuses. Aleksandar Hemon is unfettered: "Nonfiction is for cowards" puts things clearly, contrasting with Lee Gutkind making a case for creative nonfiction and Ward Just arguing that journalism is the best way to "get into the way of life." Such contrasts enrich the book. T.C. Boyle's views on the decline of the environment are counter-balanced by Wade Davis and Sy Montgomery. First-time novelists understandably speak on more narrow topics, but Seaman respects each guest's contribution. Such is the power of radio that it can throw a veil over all disfigurements, despite its apparent intimacy. Unfortunately, the editing methodology behind the transposition of the spoken word to the page so as to "conform to print conventions" and make the interviews easier reading is not revealed.

The mediums in Vendela Vida's Believer book include regular mail, e-mail, telephone, fax and in-person interviews. Each subject was chosen because someone said, "I'd like to have a conversation with ___." The results show that a national broadcast can cow those who are intrepid in print. Edward P. Jones opens up to Z.Z. Packer more than he did with Seaman. Since interrogator and subject know each other, the interplay between Zadie Smith and Ian McEwan, Adam Thirlwell and Tom Stoppard, Dave Eggers and Joan Didion, or, especially, Ben Marcus and George Saunders, display humour and a performance aspect which are often missing from pronouncements on what the role of the artist is in today's world. Jonathan Lethem and Thisbe Nisse ask questions that are more insightful than the answers Paul Auster and Siri Hustvedt supply. When Janet Malcolm gets "all huffy" over a vexing topic, she analyses her reaction for the benefit of Daphne Beal, and concludes: "even journalists are not immune to the vanity and self-deception that interviews bring out in their subjects and that journalists, like novelists, lie in wait for." Readers of these books will come to their own conclusions on how the subjects accidentally reveal or hide themselves. Vida and Seaman have compiled entertaining and valuable sources for further examination of new and familiar authors.

Michael says

A diverse, thought-provoking collection of conversations. They focus on the theory and craft of fiction writing, but there is so much more--culture, philosophy, history, psychology, aesthetics, love, death, and I could go on. Recommended for anyone interested in writing or literature. Some interviews are better than

others; I particularly like the one with George Saunders.

Ben Lainhart says

Excellent collection of interviews between writers.

Matt Slaybaugh says

I'm almost at a loss for word here. This book is codeine for a struggling artist. That's got its upsides and its not-so-upsides. But, if you're the type of person who cries when people say nice things about making art, or finds the intricacies of someone's art-making rituals extraordinarily intriguing, then this book is for you.

Antonia says

This is a WONDERFUL book for anyone interested in the creative process, literary theory, or just knowing that most authors are not infallible, but actually, usually scared shitless.

Patrick McCoy says

I really found The Believer Book Of Writers Talking To Writers edited by Vendela Vida useful, interesting, and entertaining. The main reason I picked up this collection is that it contained interviews with some of my favorite contemporary writers like Tobias Wolff, Joan Didion, Haruki Murakami, Ian McEwen, August Wilson, Marilynne Robinson, Marajane Satrapi, and Edward P. Jones. In fact, in Jones case I knew almost nothing about this writer with an underprivileged background who wrote the impressive American epic about blacks owning slaves in The Known World. There were other interviews with authors I had know and have read, but are not among my favorites like Paul Auster, Tom Stoppard, and George Saunders. Then there were writers who I knew by reputation but was interested to know more about what they are about in order to build interest to read their work with writers like Grace Paley, Orhan Pamuk, and Amy Hempel. Then there were authors that I discovered that weren't for me due to descriptions of their work in the interviews with writers like John Banville, Richard Powers, and Edmund White. Then there were some authors that were total revelations to me, writers I was completely unfamiliar with like Chris Abani, Shirley Hazzard, Jennifer Egan, and Janet Malcom.

Hol says

I haven't had time or space for my own writing in nearly two weeks and am meanwhile trying to feed that part of myself, somewhat desperately, by reading segments of this at bedtime. It helps. First I read the interviews with writers I know and admire (e.g. Tobias Wolff); now I'm reading the rest and find that they are equally interesting.

Laura says

I've read numerous books on writers and the writing process, but this one took that conversation a bit deeper. And, it was great to see that some of my favorite writers have their own literary-crushes on other writers! I have to admit, I haven't read every interview in the book, but of the ones I've covered, I was very fond of Zadie Smith interviewing Ian McEwan. Good stuff.

MJ Nicholls says

Despite the usual McSweeney's fondness for writers of lyrical soap operas, *New Yorker* fictions, or navelgazing American writers, and the predictable reference points—Hemingway, Carver, Updike—this bumper crop of writers talking to writers is pleasant train fare. The interviewers range from upcoming writers (at the time—this is from 2005) such as ZZ Packer and Adam Thirlwell to well-known names like Zadie Smith and Dave Eggers. The interviewees are eclectic, spanning generations and writing subcultures, from oldies like James Salter and Shirley Hazzard to punks like Felicia Luna and George Saunders. The content varies depending on one's personal opinion of the writer or reaction to their answers (or questions). The dreariest material in here is caused by the interviewer quizzing the writer on what MFA programme they attended and which part of LA or New York they relocated to. The most illuminating comes from direct questions about the oeuvre and method—highlights for me include Stoppard, McEwen, Didion (despite cringing Eggers moments), Edward P. Jones, and Banville. The absence of experimental writers or figures outside the mainstream can be blamed on McSweeney's tendency to grope for commercial populism while pretending to have a foot in the avant-cools. Alas, alas.

Karyn says

This is another one of those pick and choose books. I didn't read everything in it, only what interested me. Michelle Tea is amazing. Dave Eggers is amazing. Zadie Smith is amazing. I particularly loved Michelle Tea's interview with Felicia Luna Lemus. I've read all of the books by both these authors, they are among my top favorites and it was cool to read a dialog between these two influential ladies. Joan Didion is pretty crazy and awesome.

Ryan says

I was planning on giving this book a 3 leaning towards 3.5, but it finished strong. I think a thought from Tobias Wolff illustrates the book's strength: it provides some access to a community of writers. While often short on advice (though what is shared is quite good), the book provides access to what writers think and do and how they participate in the world, and I think that's valuable.

Favorites, in some sort of order, were

George Saunders
Tom Stoppard
Marilynne Robinson
Susan Straight

Haruki Marukami
and
Tobias Wolff

Also, enjoy the occasional deeper insight into how the world works.

Brent says

Zadie Smith talks to Ian McEwan, Dave Eggers with Joan Didion, Sean Wilsey and Haruki Murakami, Jonathan Lethem and Paul Auster...you can see where I'm going with this.

Meg says

if you're as obsessed about other writers' habits/processes as i am, this is an excellent place to start digging up great little idiosyncratic gems.

Dinesh Raghavendra says

Liked the Jonathan Lethem and Paul Auster interview. The word 'ekphrasis' is forever etched in my memory. Most of the other interviews were also good. I remember the ones with Jennifer Egan, A.L. Kennedy and George Saunders being insightful.

arose says

Well worth it just for the interview with marilynne robinson. I haven't even read any of the other interviews, but i could read m.r. all day long.
