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English Core

I.A. & I.Com.

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THE INTERVIEW

-Christopher Silvester

About the Author

Christopher Silvester was born in 1959 and educated at Lancing College, Sussex, and Peterhouse, Cambridge, where he read history. From 1983 to 1994 he worked for *Private Eye*, initially writing the 'New Boys' column, a series of caustic profiles of newly elected MPs, and later specialising in political, legal and media affairs. He has written for several newspapers and magazines, including the *Evening Standard*, the *Guardian*, the *Observer*, the *Independent on Sunday*, *Esquire*, *GQ* and *Vanity Fair*. He is also the editor of the *Penguin Book of Interviews: An Anthology from 1859 to the Present Day* and the author of *The Pimlico Companion to Parliament*.

Introduction

The Interview by Christopher Silvester is an excerpt taken from his Penguin Book of interviews. In this, he talks about various opinions of the celebrities regarding an interview; its functions, methods and merits. It also consists of an excerpt from an interview with the infamous writer Umberto Eco.

FULL SUMMARY

‘The Interview’ written by Christopher Sylvester briefs the new invention – interview in the field of journalism. Interview that was invented over 130 years have become a commonplace journalism. Today, every literate or illiterate will have to experience interview at some point of the daily life.

However, opinions of interview- of its functions, methods and merits vary considerably. Some claim it as a source of truth and in its practice, an art. Others despise the interview as an ‘unwarranted intrusion into their lives’. They feel it diminishes them. Sylvester lists out well – known writers who are against interview – V.S. Naipaul, Lewis Carroll, Rudyard Kipling, H.G. Wells though he had interviewed many personalities. It is surprising to notice that as interviewer, each one is comfortable, whereas, as an interviewee, they feel it much disturbing and diminishing. Yet in the words of the writer, ‘it is a serviceable medium communication’.

Part II is an extract from an interview of Umberto Eco, author of the popular novel, ‘Name of the Rose’ by Mukund Padmanabhan from ‘The Hindu’ This interview helps us know many aspects of his writing style and ideas. Though he gives the impression of doing many things at a time, he says he is doing the same thing, pursuing his philosophical interests through his writings and his novels. Through his modest answers, he tells the secret of his success .He utilizes the interstices – empty spaces to his advantage.

Umberto eco pan academician refers himself to be called an academician. He has written 40 philosophical writings and just 5 novels. When Mukund Padmanabhan asks the reason behind the huge success of ‘The Name of the Rose’, he honestly replies that it is a mystery even to him. Perhaps the appropriateness of the time it was written could be the reason. He himself admits had the novel come 10 years later or earlier, the novel would not have got such success.

As we go through this extract, we can easily note that Umberto Eco does not think, interview is a crime or an offence. He interacts properly and modestly.

NOTES

PART I

- Interview has become a commonplace of journalism. Opinions on the functions, methods and merits of Interview vary considerably.
- Some claim it to be the highest form, a source of truth and in its practice an art.
- Some despise the interview as an unwarranted intrusion into lives, which diminishes their personality.
- S. Naipaul feels that ‘some people are wounded by interviews and lose a part of themselves.’
- Lewis Carroll never consented to be interviewed for he believed it to be ‘a just horror of the interviewer’.
- Rudyard Kipling considered it ‘immoral, a crime, an assault that merits punishment’.
- G. Wells referred interviewing to be an ‘ordeal’.
- Saul Bellow describes it ‘like thumbprints on his windpipe’.
- Despite the drawbacks interview is a supremely serviceable medium of communication. Interviews are the most vivid impression of our contemporaries and the interviewer holds a position of unprecedented power and influence.

PART II

- An extract from an interview of Umberto Eco interviewed by Mukund Padmanabhan.
- Umberto Eco was a professor with a formidable reputation as a scholar for his ideas on Semiotics, literary interpretation and medieval aesthetics before he turned into writing literary fiction. He attained intellectual superstardom with his publication “The Name of the Rose”.
- In the interview Eco shares his idea of empty spaces in our lives just as they exist in an atom, which he calls Interstices. He says that he makes use of these empty spaces to work.
- Eco’s essays were scholarly and narrative. He likes to be identified more as a university professor who writes novels.
- Eco’s “The Name of the Rose”, a serious novel, which delves into metaphysics, theology and medieval history, enjoyed a mass audience. It dealt with medieval past. He feels that the novel wouldn’t have been so well received had it been written ten years earlier or later

Main Theme

The writer in this piece discusses the merits and demerits of interviews, saying that in today's world anyone who is literate must have at some point or the other read or heard an interview. People have varying opinions on interviews as to some it appears to be the only and most credible source of truth, while some, especially celebrities, regard it as unnecessary intrusion. They feel that an interview somehow reduces their status and the fact that information concerning their lives becomes public makes them feel that they have lost a little part of themselves. Lewis Carroll who was the creator of, 'Alice in Wonderland, 'took pride in the fact that he spent time and energy in successfully warding off interviewers. Rudyard Kipling's wife went to the extent of saying that in her opinion interviewing was immoral. H.G. Wells kept interviewers away but ended up being an active interviewer himself on many an occasion. Notable among those he interviewed were Joseph Stalin (A Russian revolutionary) and Saul Bellow (Novelist and playwright) However, the writer opines that despite all the drawbacks, interviewing is a most valuable resource. He quotes Denis Brian who said that most of our information comes from one man asking questions of another and in this respect the interviewer is indeed powerful and influential.

Question-Answer

1. How does Eco find the time to write so much?

A. Eco is a university professor who attends academic conferences all week. He finds so much time to write in the empty spaces that we all have in our lives, just like the structure of atoms and Universe. He terms these empty spaces as 'interstices'. If he is waiting for someone coming to his house via the escalator, he would use that time to write an essay rather than sit idle. Therefore, he considers himself a scholar who writes novels on Sundays.

2. What was distinctive about Eco's academic writing style?

A. Generally, academic scholars write false hypothesis, rectify them and then give conclusions. On the other hand, Umberto takes the readers through the journey of his research, quoting all the trials and errors to reach the conclusion. His narrative style of writing made him distinctive.

3. Did Umberto Eco consider himself a novelist first or an academic scholar?

A. Umberto Eco identifies himself with the academic community. According to him, he is a university professor who attends academic conferences all week and writes novels on Sundays.

4. What is the reason for the huge success of the novel, The Name of the Rose?

A. The novel, The Name of the Rose is a hard-read, differentiating it from other novels. It is a detective narrative that contains metaphysics, theology and medieval history. Thus, it targeted the audience that is not interested in an easy reading experience, probably not all the time. However, the success of the novel still remains a mystery. According to Umberto, had the novel been written ten years earlier or later, it would have not attracted the same proportion of audience.

5. Why do celebrities despise interviews?

While common people are eager to read the interviews of the celebrities, the very celebrities have an aversion to being interviewed. Most of them find an interview intruding into their personal lives while some fear it, some hate it, some consider it immoral and assaulting.

6. What is V.S. Naipaul's attitude towards interview?

VS Naipaul feels that some people are wounded by interviews and lose a part of themselves.

7. What were Lewis Carroll's fears regarding interviews?

Lewis Carroll says interviews bring unparalleled heights to the person in the society and that they will be regarded more than what they are and consequently they will lose their friends and dear ones.

8. What make Rudyard Kipling condemn being interviewed?

Rudyard Kipling considered interviews to be immoral. He said it is a crime, just as much of a crime as an offence against the person interviewed, as an assault, and just as much merits punishment. He adds that it is cowardly and vile and therefore no respectable man would ask it, much less give it.

9. What does Saul Bellow mean by saying that 'interviews were thumbprints on his windpipe?'

Saul Bellow used to allow to be interviewed yet he used to comment that he used to have great trouble to be interviewed because it was an experience of his throat being thumbed by his interviewers.

10. How does interview serve a noble purpose in the modern world?

Even though most celebrities condemn interviews, it serves a noble purpose to the rest of the

world. The great thoughts and attitudes of the celebrities reach the common people through the medium of interview and make people's life more meaningful and enlightened.

11. What is the irony in Eco's statement, 'I am a professor who writes novels on Sundays?'

A novelist can never say that he keeps a day for writing novels. Writers are always writers. Yet Umberto Eco is an exception. Though he is a world famous novelist, he primarily considers himself as a professor and an academic writer and hardly gets time for writing novels except on Sundays.

12. What is Semiotics? How is Eco known in connection with Semiotics?

Semiotics is the study of signs. Eco is a professor of semiotics at the Bologna University, Italy, and writes academic books on this subject.

13. What enabled Eco to acquire the equivalent of intellectual superstardom?

Umberto Eco is famous for his books on semiotics and popular for his novel. Besides, he deals with literary interpretation, medieval aesthetics, literary fiction, academic texts, essays, children's books, newspaper articles, etc. This quality of being at the same time able to handle such a wide range of subjects as a writer enabled him to acquire the equivalent of intellectual superstardom.

14. Explain Eco's theory of interstices.

There is a lot of empty space between the nucleus and electrons in each atom and if that empty space is removed, the universe will be as small as a human fist. Even though this is a bit of exaggeration, Eco wants to say that similar empty spaces are in our lives too and if we remove them we can find out a lot of time to do more.

15. How does Umberto Eco manage time to write a wide range of books in his limited time?

Umberto Eco believes that there is a lot of empty space in everyone's life. If we efficiently make use of this wasted time, however short they are, we can find a lot of time in our lives. Eco finds his time to write during such times.

16. What is the marked departure from a regular academic style that is found in Eco's academic books?

Most of the academic books are uninteresting and dry. But Eco's books on any serious academic subject is different because his books have a story style where the student can find characters, incidents and stories that teach the subject of study.

17. How does Eco balance his botheration of being overshadowed by the fame of a novelist?

Though Umberto Eco feels that he could not make Semiotics famous or be famous as an academic writer, he balances that failure against the huge success that he achieved by his novel which in fact is all about semiotics and the rest of his favourite subjects.

18. What is the belief in some primitive cultures about being photographed?

Answer - Some primitive cultures believed that photographing a person is no less than stealing his/her soul out of the body and rendering him incomplete and slighted.

19. What do you understand by the expression “thumbprints on his windpipe”?

Answer-The expression means having been strangled. The interview is an assault on a person as it makes him/her so tense that he/she feels as good as being choked.

20. How does Eco find the time to write so much?

Answer- There are two factors that explain how Eco was able to write so much. In his own words, the life of every person has spaces- periods with no important jobs. He says that he did most of his writing during these free intervals. Second, he explains that people wondered that he (Eco) had written so much on various subjects. But the fact is that he was writing on the same lines and same interests-peace, non-violence, etc. All his works were linked with the thread of common interests. **It** saves his time and he could write a lot in a short period of time. That was the secret behind Eco’s prolific pen.

21. What was distinctive about Eco’s academic writing style?

Answer- Umberto Eco's academic writing style is quite distinctive. It has a certain playful and personal quality about it. It is a marked departure from a regular academic style, which is usually depersonalized and often dry and boring.