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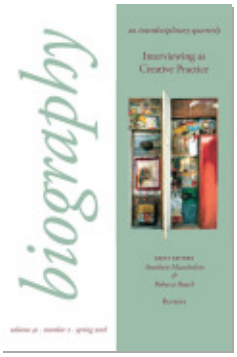

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"TO UNREEL A WHOLE STORY"
JULIA KERNINON ON WRITERS' INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEWED BY REBECCA ROACH

Julia Kerninon is a writer, born in Nantes, France, in 1987. Her first novel, *Buvard* (2014), is structured as a long author interview. Discussed by Galia Yanoshevsky in this issue, the novel won the Prix Françoise Sagan and propelled Julia to fame in the French literary sphere. She has followed up the novel with *Le Dernier Amour d'Attila Kiss* (2016), winner of the Prix de la Closerie des Lilas, and *Une Activité respectable* (2017), and this summer her new novel *Ma dévotion* will be published. Meanwhile, in 2016, Kerninon was awarded a doctorate in American studies at LERMA Aix-Marseille University with a thesis titled "Figures of the American Novelist: The Literary Interview According to *The Paris Review* (1953–1973)." Her creative, critical, and practical engagement with interviews positions her as an excellent subject for this special issue. This interview was conducted via email and has been edited for house style by the journal *Biography*.

RR: What came first, *Buvard* or the PhD?

JK: The first version of *Buvard* was written in 2007 when I was not yet involved in any PhD work and wasn't even sure I was ever going to do one. It was a different novel, though, because there was virtually only one character, Caroline, the writer, and it was a monologue, not a dialogue, nor an interview. I sent the novel to publishers, but none accepted it. Actes Sud, though, sent me a letter saying that they had liked it, but that something was missing. The main problem was that, because it read like a monologue from a young female writer, it was almost impossible for the reader to decide whether it was I, Julia, who was speaking, or the character, Caroline. More distance was needed. I had wanted Caroline to sound fierce and arrogant and strong, and it was too much in a way, she was *too* harsh, so that after a few pages the reader felt

exhausted and eventually hated her. Her speech was inaudible, unbearable; somehow, there was no air to breathe. I was about twenty years old then, and I put the novel in a drawer, thinking that maybe I wasn't yet capable, that maybe I should wait a bit until I found—learned—the right way to write it. So I worked on other novels for the next two or three years, and then, when I came across the *Paris Review* interviews, suddenly it all became clear: the novel would be an interview. That was what was missing, this structure, this movement.

RR: How then did you first come across the *Paris Review* interviews?

JK: I cannot remember exactly, but I suppose the very first time must have been while researching about Ted Hughes for my Master 1 dissertation, almost ten years ago. At that time, I knew nothing about little magazines or the *Review* itself. I just noticed the name, probably because it sounded French. Then, later, when writing my Master 2 dissertation, about Hemingway, I stumbled on the *Paris Review* once again, and I started to realize that most of the good quotes I had read from writers seemed to come from that same source. So I got more and more curious. The result was my thesis.

RR: Yes, which uses a lot of archival research to trace the development of the *Paris Review* "model" of author interviews. Do you enjoy archival research?

JK: My first memory of the *Paris Review* archives is that it was freezing cold. Because of the AC. It was July and August in New York City, and I was frozen all day long in the special rooms of the Pierpont Morgan Library.

I had come to NYC naively thinking I would find every draft of every interview, and then proceed to some deep genetic study in order to determine precisely how the interviews had been composed and edited. But this did not happen. First, because although the archives are huge, they are uneven—so it's difficult to make comparisons across interviews or even identify all the different hands that edited an interview—and I, for one, am not specialized in genetic study. Plus, although the people at the Morgan Library did an amazing job in sorting out the archives, the material itself is quite disorderly—notes and letters unsigned or undated, mistakes with the date. . . . I remember opening box after box, never knowing exactly what I was going to find, and how stressful it was, because I was in NYC for only two months, and I had no idea how to efficiently organize my time, because every new box was a surprise.

I was disappointed when I found out I wouldn't be able to analyze the drafts in the way I had planned, but then it was breathtaking to touch letters signed by Hemingway or Kerouac, to listen to old recordings of Maya Angelou, as well as reading the fine, funny prose of Plimpton. . . . I had never done such a thing in my life, and I enjoyed it.

RR: How has your understanding of the *Paris Review* interview changed since then?

JK: Tremendously. It took me about two years to accept the idea that the interviews are a construction, that the writers tell a legend more than a truth, and that Plimpton and his crew also manipulate the material. My first drafts for the PhD dissertation were mostly elegiac. I was too much in awe.

RR: What now do you think characterizes a *Paris Review* interview? How is that different from a "normal" author interview?

JK: It is well written. At the end of the day, I think that's the main characteristic of the *Paris Review* interview: whether we owe it to Plimpton or to his being a slave driver of writers, the *Paris Review* interview is, first of all, a very fine piece of writing.

RR: A slave driver?

JK: He demands so much from the writer. For him, interviews are not merely journalistic material but texts, which as such can be edited, perfected, rewritten, in the same way a piece of fiction can be. Plimpton does not respect the firsthand quality of the interviews; he wants them to be literature and considered it his mission to achieve the conversion at all costs.

While authors often see these interviews as the perfect place for self-representation, this position can sometimes get in the way of Plimpton's own conception of the interview as a literary piece. In 1961 George Wickes wrote to George Plimpton in a letter: "Henry Miller did make a lot of changes in the text, hell of a lot and most of them pedantic. I found myself undoing almost all his damage in order to make the interview read like something spoken. This should be a lesson to me, never to let an author meddle with his own words" (Wickes).

RR: From that description it seems like he demands at least as much of himself as editor.

JK: Plimpton seems to have been a natural when it came to editing. As Fiona Maazel has said, "He could turn utter schlock into something magnificent because he had just the right touch and such a good ear" (qtd. in Aldrich, *George, Being George* 283). He has a precise idea of the kind of interview he wanted to get to.

RR: What is the value of these interviews for a writer then? Do they offer an education in the writing craft?

JK: That is what I was hoping for in the first place, of course. Because I always wanted to be a novelist myself, I've been searching for years for information on how to improve my writing but also on what sort of person a writer should be: should one study, and if so, what? Should one work? Should one have loads of friends, or rather be a recluse? Is success desirable? And how about money? Is it possible to be married? Have kids? There is no school, really, to learn all that, so you have to investigate by yourself.

When I began my research, I thought I could actually overlap the materials in the Art of Fiction series in order to build a sort of manual to become a writer or else a portrait of the average writer, something like that. I wanted to get a formula, a quintessence, a philosopher's stone. Now I'm not sure it would have been interesting.

As much as you don't go to school to become a writer, once you are one, you don't really have colleagues either. You get to meet other writers, and sometimes you befriend them and you talk shop, but it is not the same as having colleagues you see every day and really work with. So I usually find it very comforting to read about writers—it somehow reminds me of my own motivation.

RR: You aren't alone—Orhan Pamuk and others have spoken about the solace they found in reading these interviews when they were young. Which implies that the *Paris Review* has been very successful in positioning its series as a resource for writers—but also at presenting the publication of a *Paris Review* interview as an act of literary consecration.

JK: It helped them that the editorial board early on made the decision to invite only well-known authors to interview: often the subjects were quite old, and, for some of them, the interview was their last media appearance or even their very last publication. John Berryman, Charles Olson, John Dos Passos all died shortly after the interview; as for John Steinbeck, he died even before he could answer the *Review*'s questions, having postponed the invitation for some time. Often there was a sense of the interview shaping a legacy: the literary last will and testament.

They have also been very good as self-mythologizing. The anecdotes are legion: the *Review*'s first office being on a barge on the Seine, which "compelled" the editors to shave with Perrier in the absence of tapwater. Or the tiny misprint that turned Norman Mailer into "Normal Mailer." Or the endless stories of Plimpton's parties.

RR: It is quite a particular myth: Plimpton is known for being a professional amateur (the novice training with the Detroit Lions for example in *Paper Lion*), and this was a magazine apparently started by a group of young privileged Americans abroad, speaking very little French and on the hunt for their modernist antecedents (a myth we might want to contest, of course, by noting that Harold Humes had been living in France since 1948 on the GI Bill, or the *Review*'s covert government funding).

JK: It was a magazine that consciously styled itself on transatlantic little magazines in the modernist tradition of *Broom*, *Transition*, *The Seven Arts*, and *Contact*. But it was also a publication that defined itself against a particular profession. It had the aim of being a "safe space for writers," as a reaction to the Age of Criticism. This is an opposition that has been made explicit across the years. John Train recalled,

> We wanted to get away from the style of most of the other American literary quarterlies, with *Partisan Review* in the lead, which were steeped in literary and political theory, as were our French counterparts. I doubt if there was a single French literary magazine at that time that didn't reflect some specific political orientation. You were not considered *serieux* [*sic*] unless you were politically *engagé*—no matter with what. I, on the contrary, after my post-graduate work in Comparative Literature, was convinced that theories, both literary and political, are the enemy of art. ("*The Paris Review* Sketchbook" 311)

There is also a wonderful unpublished letter from Harold Humes, one of the founding editors, to William Faulkner: "Not that all critics are camp-followers; we said we would be perfectly willing to publish a critical essay provided it qualified, by virtue of its force and style and honesty, as literature. So far no critic has submitted anything to us" (Humes).

RR: Less amateurism than anti-criticism?

JK: Well, maybe not entirely. Plimpton wasn't exactly the most up to date about contemporary literature, despite his day job. Someone had to explain to him who Toni Morrison was when the *Review* wanted to interview her in 1986. . . .

RR: Neither would you get much of a sense of the tumultuousness of the 1960s looking through the magazine's pages (despite some interesting behind the scenes ties); authors of color are not well represented in the early years.

JK: The *Review* also set itself against the profession of journalism. Most of the interviewers were not professionals but often writers themselves, which led to some notable errors: looking through the file for James Jones in the archive, you see evidence that Plimpton bungled the tape recorder, or that they all got drunk. The interviewers were also paid very badly. You can see that implied difference in status in the *Review*'s own treatment of interviewers during the editing process. They are often the tool to obtain the transcript, they do the initial write up—and then are often cast aside, with Plimpton completely rewriting the interview, adding questions, cutting and rearranging whole chunks. Usha Wilbers has talked about his perfectionism (214); it is Plimpton who authors these interviews.

RR: Did Plimpton's attitude influence your decision to turn to the interview format in your novel?

JK: I wrote *Buvard* (in its final version) during my first year as a doctoral student, so I was not yet writing the PhD dissertation, mostly reading. But I think that I was somehow balancing my frustration at discovering the dishonesty of the interviews as well as the flatness of reality. In my novel, I could make up the writer of my dreams: a woman becoming a genius by sheer work and in no time.

The initial idea came because of the PhD, but the more I wrote the more it seemed like I had found a magical narrative trick: the interview format brought suspense to the book, because Caroline could conceal certain information from Lou, the interviewer. The dialogic structure had a tension that the initial monologue had lacked. It had something dramatic that reminded me somehow of the ancient theater. It made the narrative very lively, and it also allowed me to show Caroline through the eyes of Lou, so that she wouldn't look so tough anymore.

RR: The difference between the professional journalist's approach to the writer and that of the fan seems an important distinction in *Buvard*. Is this a deliberate evocation of the *Review*'s stance?

JK: The relationship between writers and journalists has always been complex, hasn't it? It is a subject that often comes up when writers chat together: what journalists did or not. In *Buvard*, I allow myself to use some of the clichés or topoi about writers: the booze, the complicated love life, and yes, also the hatred of journalists. Caroline would never trust a journalist. But that is also because I wanted to write about fame and voyeurism. I wanted to write about what it is like living your life under the observation of a public.

RR: You have received a lot of attention since the publication of *Buvard*. Do you like, for example, being interviewed?

JK: I cannot say, really. It has been part of the job for four years now—but before I published *Buvard*, I made a living babysitting, waitressing, freelancing, and I never asked myself whether I liked the poor pay, the sore feet, or the late hours. Being interviewed is not my favorite part of the job, but it is okay, and sometimes it is *really* interesting. What comes out of the recurrence of it is interesting.

RR: The recurrence? Or maybe the residue—on the blotting paper?

JK: *Buvard*! Actually, that title really was the first word I put on the page when I started writing the novel, and then I had no idea how the novel, because it was my first, would become my business card from then on.

RR: Have your views on the process changed over time then?

JK: I think it was a very peculiar situation to be interviewed for writing a novel about an interview, while writing a PhD about interviews with writers. Although I did not discuss my experiences in the dissertation, there certainly were connections, insights, lessons to pick up on the way. It really was unhoped for to have the luck to study the mechanisms of interviewing from the inside. Unlike with *Paris Review* interviews, most often I would not get editorial approval on interviews, and I discovered it was a major problem, because as much as the journalist is justified in wanting to write in her own words, it was extremely problematic to see sentences put in your mouth that you didn't say. Like many writers, I choose my words very carefully, and I don't believe in synonyms. I am not saying journalists are in error—I also realized that an interview could last for two hours, but newspapers have size limits, so the journalists *need* to cut and edit and rewrite. But it can be extremely embarrassing.

I gave an interview last year to *Libération*, and I made this joke about my lack of adventurousness, saying that I certainly didn't want to end up at Paris doors with a goat and a pineapple, not knowing how I had ended up there—this was the conclusion of a quite long story about how a friend of my little sister once got drunk and woke up with a pineapple in his bed, and how on another occasion, my sister's friends kidnapped a sheep in a field and took it to a party, dressed it up, shaved it a bit, made it drink Bénédictine, before driving it back to where it belonged the next day (I'm still wondering how the rest of the herd reacted to the sheep's account of the party). Anyway, I spent maybe three hours at my place with the interviewer, and, really, these two stories sounded quite OK when I told them—but then, when the article was published, it was a full page and somehow near the middle was this unexplained remark, "Oh, I would really *hate* to find myself outside Paris, alone, with a goat and a pineapple." It is just an example.

RR: Is that the worst interview experience you have had?

JK: Worst is really when the questions are so stupid you can barely answer them ("What is your source of inspiration?" or "Can you pitch me your books?"). I know I wouldn't be a good interviewer. I think it is an art that is hard to master, but, really, some questions are impossible. Like when they are at the same time too precise and too generic, such as "What is your favorite book?" I think it is a really weird question to ask a writer.

RR: Surely that is a question about your influences?

JK: Yes. But see: you just said "influences," plural, not "influence," singular. A list of favorite books is very a precious clue about someone, especially if one is a writer—but having to name only one seems meaningless.

As to interviews, best is when the questions open a whole new field of thinking for me. For example, I did an interview for *Le Matricule des Anges*, which is probably the best literary publication in French (so it truly was a dream coming true) and what they did was to send me those very subtle questions that I answered by email, and then they decided which they would print—I think they suppressed one out of ten. This interview was quite important to me, because it was the only one where I could say things with my own words, my own sentences. At least I knew there was one place where my true answers got printed, and it was comforting.

RR: Do you then prefer written interviews?

JK: Answering by mail is the easiest, but then it's not really interviewing in a way. Real conversation is always a bit stressful, but I like the risk. I dislike when you get interviewed with one or several other writers, because even if you know them or you know and like their work, there will be discordances in the interview, because you all defend your own position. It gets really uncomfortable. It is very nice to meet other writers, but group interviews feel neurotic.

RR: Is there a difference between conversation and an interview? Is it one of process?

JK: There are distinctions between interviews and conversation that seem important. About fifteen years ago, I knew this man who was a writer, and, once, I told him shyly that I would like to interview him, for an obscure website, and his answer was "If you interview me, I'll talk to you as I talk to journalists. I will treat you badly because this is the only way to treat journalists." Looking back, I think he was pretending, but still there is some wisdom here. The first distinction between a conversation and an interview is that a conversation is supposed to be private, while an interview is meant to be public. Also, in a conversation, all speakers theoretically have the same status. They are supposed to listen to each other and be attentive to share the mike. An interview, on the other hand, has a subject, and his or her interlocutor is mainly a tool.

RR: How big an influence do the questions have on the interaction? The *Paris Review* prides itself on the "modesty" of its questions.

JK: James Linville, one of the editors, has spoken about the effectiveness of simple, mechanical questions—"Do you write with a pen?" "Where do you write?"—it fuels conversation.

RR: Has this worked for you? Does being asked about your start fuel talk?

JK: I talk about this in my most recent book, *Une activité respectable*. It is a short autobiographical narrative or memoir about the role books played in my life—how my mother taught me to be a reader and a writer, how I ended up doing research on writers and also being one; how I worked like a dog during the last ten years, not knowing exactly if I was making the right choices, to become a novelist. I said before that what interests me in interviews is what comes out of their recurrence: as a writer, I got interviewed in the media but also in bookstores. (We do not do many public readings, in France, but booksellers

invite writers to answer questions in front of a public). So when *Buvard* was published, I sort of went on tour for a year and a half—not *really* a tour, but for that whole time I think I took a train to a different place to do something literary about every two weeks. I've been to the countryside, but also abroad, I've been to bookstores, libraries, schools, salons, kindergarten fairs. . . .

And because *Buvard* was my first novel, people knew nothing about me, of course, so their very first questions would always be something like "Why did you become a writer?" And that was actually something about which I had never thought. *Why* was I writing? This very simple question seemed to unreel a whole story. I would say: "Well, I can't remember a time when I did not want to be a writer. As soon as I could write, I did. And before that, I was waiting to learn."

I heard myself say that, and it brought other memories, tons of them. How my mother swore to me, a hundred times, before I was even five years old, how my life would be amazing as soon as I could read. How she piled books in my bedroom the weeks before I entered primary school. How everything I did in my life pointed at that same direction, how my personality was entirely shaped, structured, by my practice of literature.

It was quite fun, because most writers have a story of rupture: they became writers to break from their family, while my story was one of obedience. My mother was not a writer, nor was my father or anyone in the family—ours is mostly a lineage of peasants, grocers, shoemakers, teachers, as far as I know. I had been pretty embarrassed with my lack of rebellion when I was younger—when I was sixteen or eighteen and I thought I'd never be a writer because I had no problems, I grew up in a peaceful home in an average town, tend to obey grownups and crave security. . . . Well, this interview tour became a kind of psychoanalysis, and I got to accept my quiet path for what it was. There was more than a conversation behind those questions about my start—there was a book.

RR: Do you have a different attitude toward reading the *Paris Review* or interviews when you have your novelist hat on and when you have your PhD hat on?

JK: Yes, of course. Although it was not so easy in the beginning—I've had to learn to adjust. That is, writing novels could be described as the art of making things up the way you wish they were—in my case, I tend to create a reality that is much more intense, swift, passionate. But working on a PhD implies seriousness, intellectual honesty. So the novelist in me is the one who wiggles with excitement when reading interviews, while the PhD student searches the text line by line to detect lies and meanings. And I really have to keep them separate if I want to do my job(s) correctly.

RR: The *Paris Review* has historically been quite conservative in its depiction of the literary canon. When you are interviewed, do you think being female makes a difference?

JK: It *always* makes a difference, doesn't it? I found out that being a writer certainly did not protect one from sexism. I get to meet a lot of people every year, in many different contexts, settings. And men, whoever they are and wherever they come from, often tend to address me first as a young woman, which means mostly that they get patronizing. I had thought, naively, that writing would sort of erase my gender, that my being female would disappear behind the words, but it certainly didn't. It is just the same as it is in any other field. One of the trendy question echoing through the French literary world currently is "Do you prefer to be labeled *écrivain* or *écrivaine* (the feminine form of the word), or *auteur* or *autrice* (feminine also)?" I'm all for feminism, but I really feel that this point is a lure. In French, the masculine is neutral, so *écrivain* seems to be the correct grammatical term—what I notice, on the other hand, is that very often, when I get interviewed or one of my books gets reviewed, the color of my hair will be mentioned or something else about my physique. It is not terrible, but it is noticeable. Then, if you read the *Paris Review* interviews, at least the first two decades, you'll find that female writers get asked whether being female has an impact on their work, while male writers, of course, are never asked to comment about their gender.

RR: You are writing this in English, not your native French—does this shape what you say and how?

JK: I thought it would, but so far it seems not to, except that my English is not as good as my French. When I was writing my dissertation, I discovered that the interview was born from a sort of table-tennis between the French and the American contexts. In France we even have two distinct words. There is *interview* and *entretien*. We use the English word to describe something shorter, less in depth, less literary, promotional, while the French one will refer to a long conversation on more serious topics.

RR: So has this been an *interview* or an *entretien*?

JK: Well, I do hope we did a serious enough job for this to qualify as an *entretien*!

Acknowledgments: *Biography* has reprinted quotations from Harold Humes's letter to William Faulkner with permission from the H. L. Humes Estate, and from George Wickes's letter to George Plimpton with permission from George Wickes.

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