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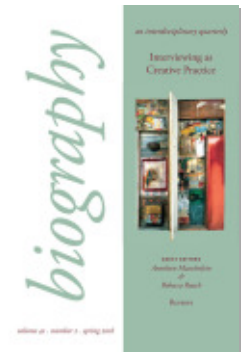
"Three words you must never say": Hermione Lee on  
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Rebecca Roach

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## **"THREE WORDS YOU MUST NEVER SAY"**

### **HERMIONE LEE ON INTERVIEWING**

INTERVIEWED BY REBECCA ROACH

Elegant and unobtrusive, Hermione Lee is, nevertheless, a British institution. She is the renowned biographer of Virginia Woolf, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, and, more recently, Penelope Fitzgerald. As a critic she has written widely on women writers, modern fiction, life writing, and American literature. Lee's academic career has spanned half a century: she has taught at the College of William and Mary, the University of Liverpool, and, from 1977 to 1998, the University of York. In 1998 she was appointed Goldsmiths' Professor of English Literature at Oxford University and the first female professorial fellow at New College, Oxford. From 2008 until her retirement in 2017, she was president of Wolfson College, Oxford, where she also founded the Oxford Centre for Life Writing.

In this time, Lee has clocked up a number of accolades and honors for her scholarship, including fellowships of the British Academy, the Royal Society of Literature, and foreign honorary membership of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In the United States, Lee has been a visiting fellow at Yale's Beinecke Library, at Princeton's Council for the Humanities, at the New York Public Library Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers, and at the Lilly Library at the University of Indiana at Bloomington. She has served on the literature advisory panels of both the British Council and the Arts Council. For services to literature and literary scholarship, she was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 2003 and Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 2013.

Hermione Lee is, however, best known as a public intellectual and specifically as an interviewer of writers. For over thirty years, she has appeared on British television, radio, and festival stages, as well as in print. In the 1980s she presented *Book Four* on British television's Channel Four, where she interviewed an array of writers, and she has been a regular contributor on BBC

arts and cultural programs, such as *Front Row* and *Night Waves*. In 2006, Lee was the Chair of Judges for the Man Booker Prize (the winner was Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*). In print, she has been a reviewer for the *New York Review of Books*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, and *The Guardian*, and she has edited and introduced numerous anthologies and editions. Her biographies are those fabled creatures, beloved of arts bodies and publishers alike: crossover books.

An ideal commentator on the creative practice of interviewing, Lee is able to talk about its function in life writing, broadcasting, and scholarship. The latter is what brought us together: Hermione was a nurturing and incisive mentor to an eager graduate student who was writing a thesis on the literary history of interviews. The conversation on which this interview is based took place in May 2015, in a sunny room in North Oxford; looking back from 2018, the political backdrop of the conversation feels a world away. The document presented here is an edited transcript of that conversation, supplemented with additional correspondence conducted via email and post, and it has been edited for house style by the journal *Biography*.

**RR:** Unusually, you've been both interviewer and subject for the *Paris Review's* celebrated interview series—and I think you might be the only one. Which role did you prefer?

**HL:** They were very far apart in time. The interview with Philip Roth was done in 1981, and the interview on biography was done in 2013. Undoubtedly I preferred doing the interview to being interviewed. I find this quite difficult. I'm more used to being in the other role and more at ease with it.

**RR:** Do you prepare ahead when being interviewed?

**HL:** It doesn't happen very often. But I leave it in the hands of the person who is doing the job. So if they decide to ask me questions which I wouldn't want to answer, then like most people, I just say, "no. I don't really want to answer that." Being interviewed is much more on the hoof than interviewing. You don't want to have pre-prepared answers to questions. We both know that the nightmare interviewees are the ones who, whatever you ask them, give you the same answer.

**RR:** Like Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello?

**HL:** Yes, that's a wonderful parody of the type.

**RR:** Who was your first interviewee?

**HL:** I can't remember. I'd done some radio interviews in the early 1980s, and then I started doing television interviews in 1982. The very first one I did for *Book Four* (which ran on Britain's Channel Four on and off through the eighties) with one of the Great Train Robbers, who was then running a flower stall under Waterloo Bridge. This was not what I had expected. I thought I was going to be interviewing only people like Nadine Gordimer (in fact, that came later). We all went down with one of those mikes with the big fluffy head on it to keep out the weather and we talked to—it wasn't Ronald Biggs—it was one of his associates. He was a crafty garrulous Cockney rascal and he chatted away. I asked some very straightlaced questions and I thought, "what am I doing?" That was my first television interview.

**RR:** Who are your interview role models?

**HL:** In print media, I'm terrifically impressed by Rachel Cooke at *The Observer*. She does features as well as interviews. I think she's got a wonderful way of eliciting the character of someone and making you feel what they might be like. In broadcasting media, Mark Lawson is the best interviewer around, by miles. His interviews with American writers like Albee, Mailer, and Updike are very, very good. He's extremely calm. He has an amazing range of knowledge. He's brilliant with authors. He gets them going, he's not afraid, and he's very well informed.

**RR:** Thinking for a moment about the relationship between subject and style: is there a difference between interviewing a politician or an author?

**HL:** Yes, they are different processes. You do want someone who is going to grab politicians by the throat. But often the interviewer who appears to be somewhat benign and quiet can elicit more from politicians than the Rottweiler model.

A mild-spoken, gentle interviewer can elicit quite a lot. There was a very interesting little piece, in the massive coverage of the election this weekend [May 2015], about ex-politicians; there's no such thing, it said, so thoroughly *ex* as an ex-politician. In this piece, Menzies Campbell said the interviewer you have to watch out for is not the John Humphrys, Jeremy Paxman type, but some little whipper-snapper on a local newspaper who has decided he's going to make his mark, and you get irritated by them because they're twenty-two years old, and you think, why is this person yapping 'round my heels? So

you say something incredibly intemperate—you lose your rag—and then it's all over the nationals. I thought that was an interesting point about political interviewing.

**RR:** In our digital moment, literary scholars are increasingly occupied with questions around the role of media, of information-processing technologies, of data. You have interviewed across broadcast media and for print; when it comes to interviews, is the medium the message?

**HL:** I've done some print interviews, though I've done more live platform interviews, which don't get saved, with people like Nadine Gordimer and Doris Lessing. I did radio interviewing quite a lot in the 1990s, when I was presenting what used to be called *Night Waves*, and television interviewing in the 1980s for *Book Four*.

Of them all, I like the live event best. I like the danger and the unpredictability of the live event. I did a big South Bank interview with Orhan Pamuk a few years ago which was very interesting to me, because he was so anxious about the kind of opposition he was likely to get from the audience. Very nervous, very anxious, which you have to not be infected by. It was for his novel *The Museum of Innocence*. It was quite a while after he'd had so much opposition in Turkey. But he was still very anxious.

I remember a similar thing many years ago interviewing Milan Kundera not long after he'd left Czechoslovakia and taken up residence in Paris. The interview was in French, which was quite taxing for me. And he treated the team—the interviewing team, the production team—as if they were going to be like the secret police. He insisted that he would see the script, he insisted that we weren't to make any cuts without his knowledge, and so on. He had the kind of wariness which came out of living in a surveillance culture. And he was right to be nervous, because a literary interview *can* be a political event, and can be very revealing about the author's beliefs and actions. A good interview should have that red meat in it.

I like the live event, but I love radio. I find TV cumbersome and conventional in its procedures. Very formulaic, and it's very expensive, just for two people to sit in a room and talk to each other. I think radio, by contrast, is a most wonderfully flexible and seductive medium.

**RR:** Do you think there is something about the visual versus the aural?

**HL:** Yes. You can concentrate more, and you don't have to be so clodhoppingly explanatory on the radio. You don't have to top and tail everything. When

I was doing *Book Four* in the 1980s, I was involved at every stage and was often in the editing process. And you would see the authors thinking about the questions. So quite often there'd be a pause while they were thinking—as we might pause now! The instantaneous editorial tendency was to cut that. To edit that out to save a bit more speaking space. And I remember over and over again saying, “no, please keep that shot of them thinking. It's really interesting that they didn't have a readymade answer to a question.” Of course on radio there are silences, but to be able to see the thinking face, that's great. That to me is the one great advantage of the television interview.

**RR:** You have been interviewing authors now—on and off—for thirty years. In the same period we have witnessed significant transformations in the structures and strategies of global publishing: have you noticed any changes in the role of interviews in the literary marketplace over this period?

**HL:** I think one of the things that has changed is the absolute assumption that when you publish a book, there will be interviews. It is pretty much written into the contract that if you write a book which is in any way successful, you then go on the road: you are then marketable property. If you are a young woman writer it helps tremendously if you're good looking—all that objectionable stuff. You are expected to be loquacious and eloquent and good at answering questions and good at performing. You're expected to do repetitive interviews which are almost all autobiographical: “how did you grow up?” Things have changed in the literary marketplace in the sense that the interview has become a built-in part of writing and publishing and succeeding with a book.

Platform, print, and broadcasting interviews are part of the same process. If an author wins or is shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, or has got a shortlisted book, or is a well-known writer and their next book's come out, they do the radio interviews first or the television interviews. On the BBC they have to choose, they can't do *Woman's Hour* and *Front Row* and *Start the Week*.

There aren't many bookshop readings. I think Blackwell's [in Oxford] is one of the last remaining. Then there are all the festivals, then there are print interviews. It's all happening as part of the package.

If the author gets a big print interview in a major broadsheet, the paper won't review it in the same week: often there's a toss-up. This is the stuff that the publicity people are deciding. They have a campaign. It is like a politician's campaign if it's a big-name author. They decide whether it's better to have an extract from the book in *The Guardian*, say, which means they won't review it for another two weeks, or whether it's better to have a print interview, which

means the paper that runs the interview then won't review the book immediately. Then there can be a whole problem about features and interviews coming out before the book is in the shop. Authors get grumpy about that, as then the momentum is gone.

**RR:** Back in 1961, the historian Daniel Boorstin notoriously described the interview as a "pseudo-event," characterizing it as mere promotional material. As an alternative, do you conceive of interviews as a form of life writing?

**HL:** Yes, it can be very revealing in the same way. But it's very much of the moment. You are going to get something of the person's past but you are also going to get what's in the middle of their head at that moment. One of the big differences is that your biographical subject is often dead. Though not always. With an interview, you are right there in the room with them. You are not writing about them when they are not there. So you're more limited in some ways. There are certain formulaic limitations around an interview. It's likely to be more local in what it is asking for. This interview, ours, is unusual because it's general. Mostly an author interview is going to be about a particular book, though not always. That's why the *Paris Review* interview is so interesting, because it's the exception to that.

The kinds of concerns of an interview are very different from the sorts of concerns that a biographer would have about their subject. The interview is much more of the moment. But the end product can function as a form of life writing and is often used in life writing. People constantly go back to things that the subject said in interviews. If a biography's written about someone who has appeared in the *Paris Review*, you can bet your bottom dollar that that interview will be quoted at some point.

**RR:** Thinking about narrative form, is it useful to compare interviews to memoir, to letters, to diary, to autobiography? Or is this restrictive?

**HL:** I think most interviewers are going to try to keep themselves back. Sometimes when you're interviewing witnesses of a life, for a biography, which I am doing a lot of at the moment, with the new book I'm doing—

**RR:** —Who is the subject?

**HL:** Tom Stoppard—and this raises interesting issues about writing a life of a live person whose friends are being talked to and are worried about being treacherous. And it is, of course, very fascinating to be able to *talk* to the subject of your biography.



I think what an interviewee says in relation to their autobiography is very suggestive. It may be quite misleading. People conceal things, massively. One can think of writers like Ford Madox Ford, congenital fantasists who will say one thing to one person, another thing to another. Hemingway is another good example of a misleading narrator of his own life. But that very unreliableness can be revealing.

An interview is a two-way thing. It's more like a conversation, an artificial conversation, than it is like writing a diary, because the interviewee is very conscious of what is being asked and how to respond to specific questions. The interviewee is also often—as Kundera was—anxious about the next stage of editing. That's very different from writing a diary, a letter, or a memoir. But if somebody says to you in an interview, "what's your first memory?" or "what can you tell me about your childhood?," you might well be recycling or repeating material that you are putting in your memoir, so the material of the interview and the memoir is likely to overlap. But the shape and structure of an interview is likely to be different from that of a letter or a diary or a memoir.

**RR:** While letters, biography, and diaries have received a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years, interviews as a genre have been comparatively neglected, even in spite of the development of celebrity studies. Why do you think that is?

**HL:** It's not in their content. The content of interviews gets used. But genre, why is that? I suppose it's an academic distrust of what looks like journalism and ephemera and will change when so much more is going online and so many more sources are going to be online. I suppose there's a suspicion that the interview of the writer about a particular book is likely to be about that particular book and may not be useful in a more general account of the writer. I think there are critics who use interview material but they tend to use it for "what can we find out about the writer?" not as in: "how did they behave?" or "how did they act in the interview?"—unless they threw the book at someone or tore off their microphone and stormed out, in which case, yes, it would have a place as an anecdote of the person.

When I was on the literary festival circuit in the nineties (with a book on Virginia Woolf), there was some sniffiness from some academics about literary festivals. You hear much less of that now. The Oxford Literary Festival is a good example of something that has completely taken Oxford by storm. All the academics take part. Still, I've heard some scornful remarks from academics about the kind of "middlebrow" audience that you get in a literary festival. That's all a bit silly, I think.

**RR:** In his book *Conversation: A History of a Declining Art*, Stephen Miller states, "conversation is not instrumental" (13). Is there any difference between conversation and interview talk?

**HL:** You shouldn't kid yourself when you're doing an interview that it is just like a conversation. You want it to *feel* like a conversation. When the audience is listening or when reading it, you want it to feel as though a certain natural relationship is set up, as in a conversation. But it *isn't* like an ordinary conversation, because the chase has an end in view. Unless we are talking about a conversation which is diplomatic, or to get money out of someone, or for political ends, or to persuade someone to do something. In an interview you want to get particular answers, or answers around particular topics, and so yes, of course it has to be artificial.

**RR:** Communications scholar Michael Schudson describes the journalistic interview as "a novel form of communication between interview and interviewee, in which the most important auditor, the public, was present only in the imagination (49). Is the difference between a conversation and an interview that there is an implied listener in the latter?

**HL:** There is an implied listener in a print or media interview; there isn't an implied listener in an interview between a biographer and people who knew their subject or know their subject. That's a different kind of contract. You're looking for information which you're going to deploy in another format.

In a live situation on a platform, like at a literary festival, the audience is reacting, and both the interviewer and the interviewee are playing off that all the time. If your interviewee is being particularly recalcitrant, you will try to get the audience on your side and make a little bit of a joke about it. If the interviewer is being put down by the subject, that quite often turns the audience against the subject. All kinds of things are going on there, which are very dramatic and very rapid: it's a feedback loop. And then you'll get to the Q&A and sometimes the person asking the question from the audience will ask exactly the same question that's just been asked twenty minutes ago. That often happens: the audience member's been thinking of their question and they haven't quite listened to what's going on. And then you can judge the author by how polite and patient they are in responses! You will also tend to get personal, political kinds of questions from the audience. The audience questions can be more difficult for the interviewee. Sometimes.

**RR:** You mentioned a contract, which reminds me of Philippe Lejeune's famous "autobiographical pact." This is a slightly different contract, but is the interviewer a representative of the absent reader and are there, consequently, any questions that you feel in a specific situation that you can't ask, or you don't?

**HL:** I think if you tell the interviewee that you are going to be talking about a particular thing and then you start talking about something completely different, that breaks the pact. Or if the interviewee has agreed with their publisher and their agent that they are going to do an interview for the sake of the book and the publishing company and so on, they shouldn't then act like a complete thug. That's happened to me, occasionally. Someone is on the circuit, and they are just fed up that day, and they just won't give you the time of day. You work away and work away with your list of questions, and you end up thinking, "well, that was a complete waste of time." The famous interviewee has got nothing to lose because they've got a huge audience anyway, and this is just one gig among hundreds. It is maddening for the person who has done the homework.

**RR:** Most academic citation systems record interviews under the name of the subject rather than the interviewer; yet copyright (a murky area, depending on circumstances and jurisdiction) is often invested with the interviewer. Who is the author of an interview?

**HL:** It is both, surely. But in terms of copyright, I don't know who an interview belongs to. I don't know who a *Paris Review* interview belongs to. I think it belongs to the interviewee, doesn't it? I don't know, I've never thought about it actually. Would the interviewer own the copyright of the questions and the interviewee own the copyright of the answers?

**RR:** Actually yes, I believe—but only if the statements have been fixed by taking notes or recording the conversation. You cannot copyright ideas, only their expression. . . . Anyway, while in the social sciences interviewing is an attempt to elicit data and thus the order of the transcript is key, in literary studies interview transcripts are often shaped and edited into new aesthetic objects. Do you think the shape of the transcribed conversation should be retained?

**HL:** Some of the *Paris Review* interviews have been edited out of all recognition from the original exchanges. When I did a *Paris Review* interview in 1982 with Philip Roth, it was hugely changed and rewritten over a long period of time. He rewrote massively and then I came back and he came back and so on. I'm sure that happens a lot, perhaps not as much with others as with him. The original rhythm will have been much changed.

When you're doing an interview, especially if it's a platform interview or a radio interview which isn't going to be published, for example with someone for a biography, I will quite often hear myself say, "can we just go back to that point you just made?" because you're thinking on your feet. You're trying to think, "yes, this is ok, but I need her to say a bit more about that." So quite often the rhythm will be recapitulatory; it doesn't always come out in the end product, because the editor may say, "oh, that's a bit repetitive. Let's not have that bit again." Certainly, the original shape won't come out in a biography, because you'll be just taking what you needed from that person. You might not even hear their voice. On a live radio interview, you're going to get repetition. You see that with Mark Lawson in his television interviews with actors, you quite often see him saying, "can we go back to what you were saying about x."

**RR:** In your writing on biography, you have spoken of the two common tropes of the practice: as an autopsy and as a portrait. What trope(s) do you find compelling for the interview?

**HL:** I don't think either of those would be quite right for an interview. I think a bit more in terms of a quest; trying to get somewhere, trying to go as close as you can. Yes, it's more like a dance, or a quest, or a searching journey. Or even a seduction at times, when you're really trying to make someone do something you want them to do—which they might not particularly have wanted to do—which is to talk. So it has more of a pursuit quality to it, rather than the autopsy, or a painting which is static in front of you. Though portrait-painting can be a form of interview. There are quite a lot of comparisons of the two forms, including a wonderful book [*Man with a Blue Scarf*] by Martin Gayford about being painted by Lucian Freud, which took a hundred days, almost literally I think, where there was a lot of talking going on as well as painting.

**RR:** Shifting from the interview as a form to interviewing as a methodology, how do you go about interviewing people when you are writing a biography?

**HL:** Just like you, I have exactly this kind of machine. I put it on the table. I always have a notebook so that I can easily scribble a few notes. I'm quite often in a restaurant, or a club, or some kind of public space, and the machine picks up a lot of extra noise, which I don't want. I am lucky if I'm in the person's home because then I can say "have you got photographs?"

I always begin at the beginning: "Can you tell me when you first met the person?," or "can you remember your first memory of the person?" and go on from there. I can't think of another way to start.

**RR:** In your recent biography of Penelope Fitzgerald, her "elusive" public persona is a recurrent theme, and you speak several times of her self-concealment in interviews. How did you approach these documents as a biographer?

**HL:** I did several platform interviews with her and about three radio interviews. With her, it was about silences. You learned to wait. When I watch interviews sometimes, or listen to interviews, I think, just wait. Very often the pressure of waiting was useful. In talks I give, there's a tape I play from an interview with her in the 1980s. I am asking her about failure and her ideas of failure and disappointment and I say something like, "there's a lot of failure in your book, a lot of disappointment or missed chances, isn't there? And then there is this *gigantic* pause. I time it and I watch the audience listening to this silence, and they think something's gone wrong with the equipment and then they realize it's still running. It is a minute. Then she says, "Yes, there is." I don't know how tactical that was on her part, or whether she didn't want to answer, or she was really thinking about the question, but the effect of the pause is immense, as if a whole life's experience is being relived in this pause. She was elusive. There were certain things she wouldn't answer and absolutely wouldn't talk about—and also she told lies. She lied, but often you would get somewhere by waiting.

Reading other interviews she gave, I noticed you will often find her—and defensive people do this—using precisely the same tropes, precisely the same stories. They will just put on their armor. So you see her starting on one of these stories, and you think, "oh here she goes. . . ." You see her going into her "number." I read and listened to lots and lots of her interviews—I'm doing the same thing now with Stoppard—and you see the same things repeated. For the biographer, the interesting thing is to spot the ways in which these stories change or don't change and why these particular ones keep being trotted out. It's a way of saying, "this is all you're going to get from me" and it's a terrific anecdote or a terrific performance, maybe, but you don't get further than that.

**RR:** You've told lots of anecdotes, something I was also struck with when reading your work. Is the role of anecdote different in biography and in interviews?

**HL:** I think anecdote is incredibly important in biography; I am always reminded of the quotations that my great friend Jenny Uglow has in her biography of Elizabeth Gaskell, which I think is a wonderful book. Gaskell is going to write the life of Charlotte Brontë and she says to herself, "if you love your reader, get anecdotes." And she does. Charlotte going in at night and taking the black eyes out of the potatoes because she doesn't want to shame her old servant who is so blind she can't see: and so on. It gives you the life. So, yes, I think I have a novelistic approach to biography in the sense that I want to tell a good story, and I want to make the person come alive. I think you do that by telling stories, if you can do so without making things up.

I like—I love stories. I love people telling me stories. I'm not very good at abstract issues and theoretical ideas. I am much more at ease being interviewed about a specific book that I've written, rather than a whole general set of ideas. I tend to collapse into anecdote and story, so, yes, I'm a great believer in storytelling. Aren't we all, don't we all want stories?

**RR:** Janet Malcolm controversially likened the journalist to a con artist, and, since its creation in the nineteenth century, interviewing has been depicted as a seduction or an invasion of privacy (spying through keyholes or listening through walls). Do you agree that interviewing is an ethically dubious activity?

**HL:** Janet Malcolm is extremely interesting on the process of journalism and interviewing. She is a fantastically defensive interviewee—which I have had the experience of. For someone who writes about and believes in the power of the interlocutor, she is herself extremely on guard. Not surprisingly, I suppose. If you're catching someone in a scam, if you are pretending to be somebody wanting political access or offer to go to bed with someone and actually you are a journalist from the *Sun*, such encounters are discreditable and dubious. Journalism has lent itself to those kinds of wicked maneuvers for exposés very often. That's why I think the press should be to a degree regulated.

If you are a political interviewer and you call someone into the studio to talk to them about the deficit and you suddenly start talking to them about the royal baby, then I think the interviewee has a right, as you often hear on the radio, to say, "I didn't come here to talk about that." I think if you have arranged the contract—which is never just one-to-one but is always through the agent, the publicity people, the publisher, the venue owners, never just a

private thing—then you have a duty, a responsibility, to do your homework and also not to go wildly off piste and start asking someone about their love life when you’ve actually said you’re going to be talking to them about their books.

On the other hand, I don’t think it’s unethical to say to someone who is promoting their scandalous novel about a three-way affair, or something, “is it anything to do with you?” They can either say “go to hell,” or “yes! It is about the years I spent with *x* and *y*.” It is up to them, then. So I think the ethics are situational, actually. There is a certain ruthlessness in it. I think that you can allow yourself to, for instance, flatter people a bit in order to get them to talk. I wouldn’t be above that.

**RR:** Any notable occasions?

**HL:** No. The really big-name people I interviewed in the long distant past were such big egos anyway, people like Umberto Eco and Norman Mailer and Gore Vidal, that they would just do it. In the television studio, there was a monitor where you could see what was going on, and I would always ask for the monitor to be turned away so that I couldn’t see it in my eyeline. I found it—it is like hearing yourself down the phone—incredibly self-conscious-making. The stage manager used to move the monitor, and I remember Gore Vidal coming on and I’m saying, “could you possibly move the monitor?” and he said, “oh I always do my hair in mine,” and I thought: perfect, that’s what he’s like.

You are at the mercy of those kinds of egos, but with someone who is a little shyer or less forthcoming, or more anxious, I think you can do a bit of luring and patting. Then there are the people who flatly refuse to do any of this stuff, like Coetzee. He just won’t do it. And writes about the whole business. And sees absolutely what’s going on.

**RR:** Are the ethical concerns different when interviewing people for a biography?

**HL:** Yes. Especially if you are writing about a living person. People are anxious about what you are going to put; they are anxious about how you are going to distort what they’ve said; they’re anxious they might say too much. It is different if you’re talking about the famous long-dead, so, for instance, when I was talking to people about Woolf in the early 1990s, there were still a lot of people alive who had known her. They’ve all died now—Olivier Bell is about the last remaining. Quentin Bell, Frances Partridge, Stephen Spender,



Noel Annan, the Anreps: lots of people were still there. It was the last ten years when one could find them. They'd been telling their Virginia Woolf stories for fifty years by then. They're all in print anyway. But there was something about going to see them and getting the tone that was very important. In any interview about a subject—not just Virginia Woolf!—sometimes the person has an agenda, which you don't know about, which has to do with revenge or settling scores in some way. Wanting to get their own back, at long last, on this person. I'm always rather surprised by that, but you recognize it when you see it and have to be careful of it. How do you know they're telling you the truth and they're not making this up? You often can't check.

There is a great desire to be an important person in the story. And I think people don't know they're doing it. They want to give you the impression that they've played a more central role in this person's life than actually was the case. That's again something you have to be wary of. Or watchful for.

**RR:** When you are interviewing someone—say for a platform interview—how do you compose the questions?

**HL:** As simply as possible. I will have got ten sub-questions and lots of ammunition for my question, lots of quotations if it's about a book. I'll have three pages of notes in front of me. And sometimes you just have to throw that away; sometimes it's not going to work. With Edward St. Aubyn, whom I recently interviewed, I just had to throw it away, just go with what he was doing. Nevertheless, that stuff will help. It is underneath the tip of the iceberg. I am a neurotic preparer; I can't just wing it. I have to go into things well prepped. But I will try to keep the question as simple as possible and not say, "oh and another part of this question is this," because then it gets muddled. This is different depending on whether it's a platform interview, radio interview, television, or an interview for a biography, but if it's an interview for a biography I will try to appear to be as innocent as possible. You must never make it seem that you know too much. Otherwise, they won't tell you anything. There were these wonderful old ladies I used to go and see about Virginia Woolf, and they would say, "you know she killed herself, my dear?" The three words you must never say in an interview are "Yes, I know," because it puts them off. They think, well, why has she bothered to come here?

This even applies to the way you say "mm." When you are doing an interview on the radio, down the line, and are in a separate studio and listening like a hawk, you are making a little bit of noise so that they know you are still there. You will quite often be saying "mm," "oh," "mm" like that. Sometimes even the way you say that will be a cause of stoppage in a personal interview.



The person will say, “oh, you mean you already know that?” because I’ve said “mm.” I have to say, “no, no, just tell me more.” So you have to be very careful with all that. Essentially, for questions, simple is good.

I also like phone interviews. Very often people say no, they want to see you face-to-face, they want to have the encounter. Then you spend ages fixing it up and traveling. Phone interviews are wonderful for me, because I can just fit them in and, quite often, people, even when you haven’t met them, are outspoken on the phone.

**RR:** The roots of the form and method are often traced back to Socratic dialogue, yet the modern interview is not usually categorized primarily as instructional. Do you think teaching has helped you to ask simple questions?

**HL:** Yes. I do think they’re related. Trying to get people to feel they can answer something, or that they might be able to talk about something. It is not quite Q&A exactly, teaching is more about providing the space where people don’t feel intimidated to respond. If you are in a class with someone who has written a book about Virginia Woolf, which took them five years to write, and you’re writing your first essay on Woolf, you’re likely to not say anything. So there is an art to trying to get people to feel that it’s OK to say something, which I suppose is not dissimilar to the interviewing technique.

**RR:** From its inception, but especially with the advent of McCarthyism and mass surveillance in 1950s, cultural commentators have expressed frequent anxiety about the power dynamics in the interview. What is the ideal relationship between the interviewer and the subject?

**HL:** I’m not sure that I know the answer to that because obviously there’s a difference across types. With the relationship between a biographer and their subject, you’ve got to be pretty ruthless, write as if everybody’s dead, and try to tell the truth and not be too involved. With the author interview, you are hoping you won’t put the person off, that they are not going to get huffy with you and start being monosyllabic, and that you’re not going to say completely the wrong thing, which stops the whole thing in its tracks. So you are more tentative, more respectful. With political interviews, it ought to be the other way—you want to put their back up, you want them to lose their temper. That is not terribly helpful for an author or artist interview. The worst interview I ever had on telly was with Roald Dahl, who was utterly scornful of me and the whole production team. He wouldn’t answer the questions. I think he wanted to frighten me. There was bullying going on.

**RR:** Focusing for a moment on the interviewee role: who has been your favorite person to interview?

**HL:** Some people were extraordinary to meet and put me on my metal. Interviewing Philip Roth for the *Paris Review* and reading for him after that has been a bracing life experience. Interviewing Nadine Gordimer was very rewarding because she absolutely did not suffer fools, and you were passing tests as you went along; then, if she talked to you, it was great, you really felt you'd earned it. Interviewing Iris Murdoch was a very strange and wonderful experience, moving into this strange brilliant other mind. The person I interviewed a lot and is now, I am afraid, all but forgotten, but who became a dear friend, was a novelist called Brian Moore, spelled Brian but pronounced "Bree-an." He was from Belfast, went to live in Canada, then California, and wrote some scripts for Hitchcock, and then he lived in Nova Scotia. He always went to the edges of continents and he wouldn't be owned by any nation. He wrote a novel every two years for about thirty, forty years; many, many novels, wonderful novels, shortlisted for the Booker endlessly. He died in 1999. I interviewed him a lot. Very funny, very wicked, very garrulous, eloquent. Very funny about literary critics versus writers. I would say, "do you think this book resembles that book in what you're doing there and what you come to do later?" and he would twinkle at me and say, "that's for you to decide, ma'am."

I've worked with Julian Barnes, who is a friend, and we've done radio programs together and some platform interviews, which are extremely taxing because he's listening meticulously to your questions and letting nothing go past him. It's a humorous game between us, but it's also a severe and challenging test. I enjoy that.

**RR:** What about the people you interviewed for your biographies, any favorites?

**HL:** Some older ladies, ladies in their nineties, who had known Penelope Fitzgerald from way back and who would talk quite often on the phone—phone interviews are quite good with very elderly people because they don't have to make you a cup of tea or get out of their chair and they are completely un-self-censoring on the phone; they just talk as if you're in the room. I had some wonderful conversations with a very old lady I met—I did go and see her in Winchester—who'd been working at the BBC during the Blitz at the same time as Fitzgerald and remembered her as rather stuck up. But all her memories came out, of what it was like to be in the Blitz at the BBC. Oral history. Gripping.

**RR:** Is there anything you wish you had known when you started out interviewing?

**HL:** That people will lie. That people will boast. That people will misremember their own pasts and their own writing. But that most people—people of talent, imagination, and intelligence, because those are the kinds of people you are mostly talking to for literary interviews and literary biographies—are profoundly interesting and exciting, and in the end mysterious. You will never understand or know everything.

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