

# The Interview

Class 12 English Core - Flamingo Prose Ch 7

Part I by Christopher Silvester

Part II by Mukund Padmanabhan (with Eco)

## Quick Facts

\* Two-part chapter:

Part I = critical essay on the interview

Part II = interview with Umberto Eco

\* Silvester: editor of The Penguin Book of Interviews (1993)

\* Eco: Italian semiotician + novelist

famous for The Name of the Rose (1980)

which sold 10-15 million copies.

## Why the interview matters

Roughly 130 years old as a form (since 1859). Almost every literate adult has read one; ~~most~~ thousands of celebrities have been interviewed.

Brian: interviewer = unprecedented power \*

## Part I - Two Views

### Positive view

1. Source of truth (at its highest form)
2. An art when practised well
3. Most vivid medium of communication

(Denis Brian's claim)

### Negative view - celebrity hostility

- \* V.S. Naipaul: people are 'wounded' by interviews; 'lose a part of themselves'
- \* Lewis Carroll: had a 'just horror' of it.  
- Never gave one.
- \* Rudyard Kipling: called interviewing a 'crime', an 'assault', 'cowardly and vile'.  
~~but~~ (Yet he interviewed Mark Twain.)
- \* Saul Bellow: interviews =  
'thumbprints on his windpipe'  
even when willingly given.

### Silvester's own verdict

'Despite drawbacks, the interview is a supremely serviceable medium of communication.'

## Part II - Meet Umberto Eco

### Who is Umberto Eco?

- \* Professor at University of Bologna
- \* Semiotician (the study of signs)
- \* 40+ scholarly books + 5 novels + children's books + essays
- \* *The Name of the Rose*: 10-15 million copies

### How does Eco do it all?

Answer 1 (philosophical):

'I am always doing the same thing.'

All projects driven by the SAME bunch of ethical / philosophical interests.

Little energy lost in 'switching'.

Answer 2 (practical) - his SECRET:

INTERSTICES = empty spaces of daily life. The time between things.

'Waiting for your elevator come up,

I have already written an article!' - Eco

Atom analogy: kill empty space in atoms,  
universe shrinks to a fist. Same with life.

# Eco - Style + Identity

## Distinctive academic style

1. Tells the *STORY* of the research:  
    trials and errors included, not just polished hypothesis and proof.
2. Playful, personal voice - a marked departure from regular academic style  
    \* (depersonalised, dry, boring).

## Where the style came from

At his viva (age 22) a professor said:

'You told the story of your research, trials and errors included.'

Eco took the praise as a method; the habit became a deliberate choice.

## Scholar OR Novelist?

'I am a professor who writes novels on Sundays.'

- \* Identifies with the academic community
- \* Attends conferences, NOT Pen Club meets
- \* Started fiction at age 50 - 'by accident'
- \* Novels satisfy his 'taste for narration'

# The Name of the Rose

Padmanabhan called it 'a very serious novel':

- \* detective yarn on the surface
- \* metaphysics, theology, medieval history  
underneath \*

Yet sold 10-15 million copies. Why?

## Three reasons + one confession

1. Readers WANT difficult experiences

journalists ~~right~~ wrongly think readers want 'trash'

2. Small % of 6 billion = still millions:

'these kinds of readers' were enough

3. Medieval setting helped ('that's possible')

## The mystery

American publisher predicted 3,000 copies.

It sold 2-3 MILLION in the US alone.

'Nobody can predict it.' - Eco

Eco's honesty about the limits of his own analysis itself makes him memorable.

## Exam Hot-Spots

### FIVE quotes to memorise

1. 'Supremely serviceable medium of communication' - Silvester on interview
2. 'Unprecedented power and influence' - Denis Brian on the interviewer
3. 'Thumbprints on his windpipe' - Saul Bellow on being interviewed
4. 'A professor who writes novels on Sundays' - Eco on himself
5. 'Nobody can predict it' - Eco on The Name of the Rose's success

### Common board questions

- \* Define interstices (1 mark)
- \* Why do celebrity writers despise interviews? (3 marks)
- \* Explain 'thumbprints on his windpipe' (3 marks)
- \* Scholar or novelist? (3 marks)
- \* Why was The Name of the Rose so successful? (5 marks)

### Spelling traps

MUKUND (not Mukunda), SILVESTER (not