

THE INTERVIEW

About the Author

Christopher Silvester (1959) was a student of history at Peterhouse, Cambridge. He was a reporter for *Private Eye* for ten years and has written features for *Vanity Fair*. Following is an excerpt taken from his introduction to the Penguin Book of Interviews, An Anthology from 1859 to the Present Day.

Part I

Since its invention a little over 130 years ago, the interview has become a commonplace of journalism. Today, almost everybody who is literate will have read an interview at some point in their lives, while from the other point of view, several thousand celebrities have been interviewed over the years, some of them repeatedly. So it is hardly surprising that opinions of the interview — of its functions, methods and merits — vary considerably.

Some might make quite extravagant claims for it as being, in its highest form, a source of truth, and, in its practice, an art. Others, usually celebrities who see themselves as its victims, might despise the interview as an unwarranted intrusion into their lives, or feel that it somehow diminishes them, just as in some primitive cultures it is believed that if one takes a photographic portrait of somebody then one is stealing that person's soul. V. S. Naipaul¹ 'feels that some people are wounded by interviews and lose a part of themselves,' Lewis Carroll, the creator of *Alice in Wonderland*, was said to have had 'a just horror of the interviewer' and he never consented to be interviewed — It was his horror of being lionized which made him thus repel would be acquaintances, interviewers, and the persistent petitioners for his autograph and he would afterwards relate the stories of his success in silencing all such people with much satisfaction and amusement.

Rudyard Kipling² expressed an even more condemnatory attitude towards the interviewer. His wife, Caroline, writes in her diary for 14 October 1892 that their day was 'wrecked by two reporters from Boston'. She reports her husband as saying to the reporters, "Why do I refuse to be interviewed? Because it is immoral! It is a crime, just as much of a crime as an offence against my person, as an assault, and just as much merits punishment. It is cowardly and vile. No respectable man would ask it, much less give it," Yet Kipling had himself perpetrated such an 'assault' on Mark Twain only a few years before.

H. G. Wells³ in an interview in 1894 referred to 'the interviewing ordeal', but was a fairly frequent interviewee and forty years later found himself interviewing Joseph Stalin⁴.

Saul Bellow⁵, who has consented to be interviewed on several occasions, nevertheless once described interviews as being like thumbprints on his windpipe. Yet despite the drawbacks of the interview, it is a supremely serviceable medium of communication. "These days, more than at any other time, our most vivid impressions of our contemporaries are through interviews," Denis Brian has written. "Almost everything of moment reaches us

through one man asking questions of another. Because of this, the interviewer holds a position of unprecedented power and influence.”

Part II

“I am a professor who writes novels on Sundays” – Umberto Eco

The following is an extract from an interview of Umberto Eco. The interviewer is Mukund Padmanabhan from The Hindu. Umberto Eco, a professor at the University of Bologna in Italy had already acquired a formidable reputation as a scholar for his ideas on semiotics (the study of signs), literary interpretation, and medieval aesthetics before he turned to writing fiction. Literary fiction, academic texts, essays, children's books, newspaper articles — his written output is staggeringly large and wide-ranging. In 1980, he acquired the equivalent of intellectual superstardom with the publication of *The Name of the Rose*, which sold more than 10 million copies.

Mukund: The English novelist and academic David Lodge once remarked, “I can’t understand how one man can do all the things he [Eco] does.”

Umberto Eco: Maybe I give the impression of doing many things. But in the end, I am convinced I am always doing the same thing.

Mukund: Which is?

Umberto Eco: Aah, now that is more difficult to explain. I have some philosophical interests and I pursue them through my academic work and my novels. Even my books for children are about non-violence and peace...you see, the same bunch of ethical, philosophical interests. And then I have a secret. Did you know what will happen if you eliminate the empty spaces from the universe, eliminate the empty spaces in all the atoms? The universe will become as big as my fist. Similarly, we have a lot of empty spaces in our lives. I call them interstices. Say you are coming over to my place. You are in an elevator and while you are coming up, I am waiting for you. This is an interstice, an empty space. I work in empty spaces. While waiting for your elevator to come up from the first to the third floor, I have already written an article! (Laughs).

Mukund: Not everyone can do that of course. Your non-fictional writing, your scholarly work has a certain playful and personal quality about it. It is a marked departure from a regular academic style — which is invariably depersonalised and often dry and boring. Have you consciously adopted an informal approach or is it something that just came naturally to you?

Umberto Eco: When I presented my first Doctoral dissertation in Italy, one of the Professors said, “Scholars learn a lot of a certain subject, then they make a lot of false hypotheses, then they correct them and at the end, they put the conclusions. You, on the contrary, told the story of your research. Even including your trials and errors.” At the same time, he recognised I was right and went on to publish my dissertation as a book, which meant he appreciated it. At that point, at the age of 22, I understood scholarly books should be written the way I had done — by telling the story of the research. This is why my essays always

have a narrative aspect. And this is why probably I started writing narratives [novels] so late — at the age of 50, more or less. I remember that my dear friend Roland Barthes was always frustrated that he was an essayist and not a novelist. He wanted to do creative writing one day or another but he died before he could do so. I never felt this kind of frustration. I started writing novels by accident. I had nothing to do one day and so I started. Novels probably satisfied my taste for narration.

Mukund: Talking about novels, from being a famous academic you went on to becoming spectacularly famous after the publication of *The Name of the Rose*. You've written five novels against many more scholarly works of non-fiction, at least more than 20 of them...

Umberto Eco: Over 40.

Mukund: Over 40! Among them a seminal piece of work on semiotics. But ask most people about Umberto Eco and they will say, "Oh, he's the novelist." Does that bother you?

Umberto Eco: Yes. Because I consider myself a university professor who writes novels on Sundays. It's not a joke. I participate in academic conferences and not meetings of Pen Clubs and writers. I identify myself with the academic community. But okay, if they [most people] have read only the novels... (laughs and shrugs). I know that by writing novels, I reach a larger audience. I cannot expect to have one million readers with stuff on semiotics.

Mukund: Which brings me to my next question. *The Name of the Rose* is a very serious novel. It's a detective yarn at one level but it also delves into metaphysics, theology, and medieval history. Yet it enjoyed a huge mass audience. Were you puzzled at all by this?

Umberto Eco: No. Journalists are puzzled. And sometimes publishers. And this is because journalists and publishers believe that people like trash and don't like difficult reading experiences. Consider there are six billion people on this planet. *The Name of the Rose* sold between 10 and 15 million copies. So in a way I reached only a small percentage of readers. But it is exactly these kinds of readers who don't want easy experiences. Or at least don't always want this. I myself, at 9 pm after dinner, watch television and want to see either 'Miami Vice' or 'Emergency Room'. I enjoy it and I need it. But not all day.

Mukund: Could the huge success of the novel have anything to do with the fact that it dealt with a period of medieval history that...

Umberto Eco: That's possible. But let me tell you another story, because I often tell stories like a Chinese wise man. My American publisher said while she loved my book, she didn't expect to sell more than 3,000 copies in a country where nobody has seen a cathedral or studies Latin. So I was given an advance for 3,000 copies, but in the end it sold two or three million in the U.S. A lot of books have been written about the medieval past far before mine. I think the success of the book is a mystery. Nobody can predict it. I think if I had written *The Name of the Rose* ten years earlier or ten years later, it wouldn't have been the same. Why it worked at that time is a mystery.

1. Known as a cosmopolitan writer. In his travel books and in his documentary works he presents his impressions of the country of his ancestors that is India. He received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2001.

2. A prolific writer who was known as the poet of the common soldier. Kipling's Jungle Book which is a story of Kimball O' Hara and his adventures in the Himalayas is considered as a children's classic all over the world.

3. An English novelist, journalist, sociologist and historian he is known for his works of science fiction. Wells best known books are The Time Machine, The Invisible Man and The War of the Worlds.

4. A great Russian revolutionary and an active political organiser .

5. A playwright as well as a novelist, Bellow's works were influenced widely by World War II. Among his most famous characters are Augie March and Moses. He published short stories translated from Yiddish. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976.

LISTEN TO THE STORY

Click on the link below to hear the story being read. Pay attention to the pronunciation of the words.

['The Interview' Class 12 - Chapter 7 NCERT English Audiobook](#)

UMBERTO ECO

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/nov/27/umberto-eco-people-tired-simple-things>



SUMMARY

“The Interview” is an extract from *The Penguin Book of Interviews*, by Christopher Sylvester, and is divided into **two** parts. It examines the role of interviews in modern journalism. The chapter, divided into two parts, explores the mixed perceptions of interviews as both a source of truth and an intrusive ordeal, featuring a conversation with novelist Umberto Eco.

The chapter explores the **history, and significance of interviews**.

□ Part I – Views on Interviews

Part I discussed how **interviews have been around since the 19th century and have become a common and powerful tool** in modern journalism. Almost everyone—celebrities, writers, politicians—has been interviewed at some point.

However, opinions about interviews are **divided**:

- Some people believe interviews are **useful and necessary**. They help us understand the lives, thoughts, and personalities of famous individuals.
- Others think interviews are **intrusive and uncomfortable**, as they invade a person's privacy.

For example:

- Saul Bellow felt suffocated by them.
- V. S. Naipaul saw them as wounding, and considered them an **unwanted interference**.
- Rudyard Kipling had a very strong dislike of interviews. He considered them an ‘assault,’ ‘Because it is immoral! It is a crime, just as much of a crime as an offence against my person, as an assault, and just as much merits punishment. It is cowardly and vile.’
- Lewis Carroll strongly disliked interviews and avoided them.

Despite criticisms, the interview is recognised as a valuable medium of communication that shapes public opinion, helping readers gain deeper insights into the opinions of influential figures. Others saw them as a high form that reveals the truth.

Part II – An Interview with Umberto Eco

Part II presents an actual interview with Umberto Eco, conducted by Mukund Padmanabhan.

About Umberto Eco

- A famous Italian writer, scholar, and philosopher
- Known for works like *The Name of the Rose*

Key Points from the Interview

1. Balance between writing and academics

Eco explained that he balanced his time effectively by using small, free moments productively. He called these moments “**interstices**” (gaps in time).

2. Writing style and success

- Eco started as an academic before becoming a novelist.
- His novel *The Name of the Rose* became hugely popular, even though it was complex and intellectual.

3. Use of narrative technique

Eco mixed **fiction, history, and philosophy**, making his novels rich and engaging.

4. Concept of “empty spaces”

- Eco believed that our lives , like the universe, have **gaps or empty spaces**. He believed that these spaces should be filled with productive thoughts.

Main Themes

- Power and influence of interviews
- Privacy vs public curiosity
- Different attitudes toward being interviewed
- Time management and productivity

□ Conclusion

The chapter showed that interviews are both valuable and controversial. While they help us understand people better, they can also feel intrusive. Through Umberto Eco’s interview, the chapter highlights the importance of creativity, and intellectual work in literature.

VOCABULARY

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| 1. Merits : to be good enough for something; to deserve.
suggestion merits further discussion. | This |
| 2. Despise : to hate somebody/something very much.
despise him for lying to me. | I |
| 3. Unwarranted : that is not deserved or for which there is no good reason.
received unwarranted criticism for my speech. | I |

4. **Intrusion** : the act of entering a place, situation, or someone's personal life without permission, where you are unwanted or unexpected. The press followed the Bollywood star's son to school. This **intrusion** is not acceptable.
5. **Consented** : to agree to something; to allow something to happen. She **consented** to the marriage proposal.
6. **Lionized** : to treat someone as a highly important, admired or celebrated person. Following her groundbreaking medical discovery , the scientist was **lionized** by the international community.
7. **Repel** : to send or push somebody/something back or away. We need a strong spray to **repel** the mosquitoes.
8. **Persistent** : determined to continue doing something even though people say that you are wrong or that you cannot do it. Some salesmen can be very **persistent** .
9. **Petitioners** : a group who formally submits a petition- a written, formal request to someone in authority. The **petitioners** argued that the Supreme Court should overrule the decision of the High Court.
10. **Condemnatory** : something that expresses strong criticism or disapproval . The opposition party issued a deeply **condemnatory** statement against the riots.
11. **Assault** : is a violent physical or verbal attack. He was charged with **assault** against a police officer.
12. **Vile** : very bad or unpleasant. She's in a **vile** mood.
13. **Perpetrated** : to commit a crime or do something wrong. The authorities are looking for the person who **perpetrated** the robbery.
14. **Contemporaries** : refers to people or things that exist, live, or occur during the same time, or who are of approximately the same age. She and I were **contemporaries** at college.
15. **Unprecedented** : never having happened or existed before. The city witnessed **unprecedented** rainfall, causing severe flooding.
16. **Acquired** : to obtain or buy something. The company has **acquired** shares in a rival business.
17. **Formidable** : inspiring fear. His mother is a **formidable** lady.

- 18. Medieval Aesthetics** : medieval refers to a 1000 years long period in European history starting in the 5th century. Aesthetics means beauty or artistic taste . Medieval Aesthetics refers to the way in which beauty was defined in Medieval times . **Medieval Aesthetics** were very different from today's standards of beauty.
- 19. Staggeringly large** : extremely massive , extensive or great in quantity that causes disbelief . The Himalayan mountain range is **staggeringly large**. It is the largest mountain range in the world!
- 20. Ethical** : morally correct. Some people think it's alright to tell small lies which do not harm anyone , but that is not **ethical** .
- 21. Eliminate** : to remove somebody/something that is not wanted or needed. We must try and **eliminate** the problem.
- 22. Invariably** : almost always. She **invariably** arrives late.
- 23. Doctoral dissertation** : a book - length document based on original research which is a requirement for getting a PhD. A **doctoral dissertation** is a compulsory requirement for earning a PhD.
- 24. Hypotheses** : an idea that is suggested as the possible explanation for something but has not been tested. A **hypothesis** often acts as a starting point for scientific research.
- 25. Spectacularly** : doing or describing something in an extremely impressive, dramatic or visually pleasing way. At night, the city skyline is **spectacularly** lit.
- 26. Seminal piece** : a work of literature, art, music, or science that is highly original, groundbreaking, and heavily influences everything that comes after it. Charles Darwin's 'Origin of Species' is a **seminal piece** that revolutionised biology.
- 27. Semiotics** : the study of signs, symbols, and how meaning is created and communicated. He is attending a seminar on **semiotics** .
- 28. Yarn** : a long story that somebody tells, especially one that is invented or exaggerated. The old man loves to tell a **yarn** about his life.
- 29. Delves** : to search inside something. She often **delves** into the past and feels sad.

Think As you Read

1. What are some of the positive views on interviews?
2. Why do most celebrity writers despise being interviewed?
3. What is the belief in some primitive cultures about being photographed?
4. What do you understand by the expression "thumbprints on his windpipe"?
5. Who, in today's world, is our chief source of information about personalities?

Understanding the Text

1. Do you think Umberto Eco likes being interviewed? Give reasons for your opinion.
2. How does Eco find the time to write so much?
3. What was distinctive about Eco's academic writing style?
4. Did Umberto Eco consider himself a novelist first or an academic scholar?
5. What is the reason for the huge success of the novel, The Name of the Rose?

EXTRA QUESTIONS

Read the passage and answer the questions:

Passage 1

"Some might make quite extravagant claims about interviewing as a source of truth, and in its practice, an art."

Questions:

1. What are "extravagant claims" about interviews?
2. Why is interviewing considered an art?
3. What does this statement suggest about the reliability of interviews?

Passage 2

“Lewis Carroll, the creator of Alice in Wonderland, was said to have had a horror of the interviewer...”

Questions:

1. Why did Lewis Carroll dislike interviews?
2. What does this tell us about some writers' attitudes toward interviews?
3. Name the famous work written by Lewis Carroll.

Passage 3

“The interviewer holds a position of unprecedented power and influence.”

Questions:

1. Why is the interviewer considered powerful?
2. How can interviews influence public opinion?
3. Do you think this power can be misused? How?

Passage 4

“Umberto Eco: ‘I am always doing many things at the same time.’”

Questions:

1. Who is Umberto Eco?
2. What does this statement reveal about Eco's personality?
3. How does Eco manage his time efficiently?

Passage 5

"I use the interstices... empty spaces."

Questions:

1. What does Eco mean by "interstices"?
2. How does he utilize his free time?
3. What lesson can students learn from this habit?

Passage 6

"The Penguin Book of Interviews... gives new direction to the understanding of interview."

Questions:

1. What is The Penguin Book of Interviews?
2. How has it contributed to the art of interviewing?
3. Why are interviews important in literature and journalism?

Passage 7

"Umberto Eco had already written over forty non-fiction works..."

Questions:

1. What does this tell us about Eco's career?
2. Name one famous novel written by him.
3. What qualities make him a prolific writer?

Passage 8

“Interview is supremely serviceable medium of communication.”

Questions:

1. Why is the interview called a “serviceable medium”?
2. Mention two advantages of interviews.
3. Are there any limitations? Explain briefly.