Chapter 7: The Interview

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Exercise 7.1 — Understanding the Text

Q1 Do you think Umberto Eco likes being interviewed? Give reasons for your opinion.

SOLUTION

Based on the extract, Umberto Eco appears to be a willing and engaged interviewee. He responds to Mukund Padmanabhan's questions with openness, elaborating on his ideas with anecdotes, humour, and philosophical reflections. He laughs and shrugs naturally, and uses storytelling freely — telling the story of his American publisher's low expectations or likening himself to a Chinese wise man — which suggests he is comfortable in the conversation.

He does not evade or deflect any question. When asked about being labelled a novelist rather than a scholar, he answers candidly that it bothers him, adding self-awareness and lightness: 'But okay, if they have read only the novels… (laughs and shrugs).' This willingness to share personal preferences and professional identity shows that he does not regard the interview as an intrusion.

Unlike the celebrities mentioned in Part I — such as Lewis Carroll, who had 'a just horror of the interviewer', or Kipling, who called it 'immoral' — Eco participates enthusiastically and seems to enjoy the intellectual exchange. His anecdote about 'interstices' (empty spaces) is offered voluntarily, not prompted, suggesting genuine pleasure in the conversation. The overall impression is that Umberto Eco likes being interviewed.

Answer: Yes — Eco responds openly, uses humour and anecdotes freely, volunteers personal insights, and shows none of the hostility towards interviewers that Part I attributes to other celebrities.

Q2 How does Eco find the time to write so much?

SOLUTION

Eco explains that his secret lies in using what he calls 'interstices' — the empty spaces or gaps in daily life that most people overlook. He illustrates this with a concrete example: when a visitor is coming to his place and is in the elevator travelling from the first to the third floor, Eco is waiting — and that brief interval is an interstice. In that short empty space, he says he has already written an article.

He draws an analogy from physics: just as eliminating all the empty spaces in the atoms of the

universe would compress it to the size of a fist, similarly, our lives are full of such empty spaces. Eco fills these interstices with productive work — writing, thinking, composing articles — instead of letting them pass idly.

He also notes that he perceives himself as always doing essentially the same thing — pursuing his philosophical and ethical interests — whether through academic writing, novels, or children's books. This unified purpose means he does not waste mental energy switching between entirely different modes of thought, making his enormous output possible.

Answer: Eco works in 'interstices' — the brief empty gaps in daily life (waiting for an elevator, for instance) — filling these moments with writing, which cumulatively produces his vast output.

Q3 What was distinctive about Eco's academic writing style?

SOLUTION

Eco's academic writing style was distinctively narrative and personal — a marked departure from conventional scholarly writing, which is typically depersonalised, dry, and boring. Instead of following the standard academic method of presenting a subject, marshalling hypotheses, correcting them, and then stating conclusions, Eco told the story of his research: he included his trials and errors, his hesitations, and the process of inquiry itself.

This approach was evident as early as his first doctoral dissertation in Italy, when a professor noted that unlike other scholars, Eco had narrated the journey of discovery rather than just reporting findings. Crucially, that same professor recognised Eco was right, published the dissertation as a book, and thus validated the approach. This experience, at age twenty-two, convinced Eco that scholarly books should be written as stories of research.

Mukund Padmanabhan describes this quality as 'a certain playful and personal quality' that distinguishes Eco's non-fictional writing. Eco himself says this narrative tendency in his essays is also the reason he eventually moved into writing novels — because his essays already had a narrative aspect, fiction was a natural extension.

Answer: Eco's academic writing was narrative and personal: he told the story of his research — including trials and errors — rather than presenting only polished conclusions, giving his scholarly work a playful, readable quality unusual in academic prose.

Q4 Did Umberto Eco consider himself a novelist first or an academic scholar?

SOLUTION

Umberto Eco unequivocally considered himself an academic scholar first, not a novelist. He states this directly and emphatically: 'I consider myself a university professor who writes novels on Sundays. It's not a joke.' He stresses that he identifies with the academic community — he participates in academic conferences, not in meetings of Pen Clubs or writers' gatherings.

He is bothered by the fact that most people identify him primarily as a novelist, because this misrepresents his self-image. He has written over forty scholarly works against only five novels,

and semiotics — not fiction — is the field with which he professionally identifies.

Eco also explains that he came to novel-writing late, at the age of fifty, and almost by accident: 'I had nothing to do one day and so I started.' He notes that his friend Roland Barthes was frustrated his whole life at being an essayist rather than a novelist, but Eco never felt that frustration — suggesting fiction was never his primary ambition. Novels, for him, satisfied a taste for narration that was already present in his academic essays, but they did not define his professional identity.

Answer: Eco considered himself an academic scholar first. He called himself 'a university professor who writes novels on Sundays', identified with the academic community, and came to novel-writing late and by accident.

Q5 What is the reason for the huge success of the novel, The Name of the Rose?

SOLUTION

Eco himself does not offer a definitive explanation for the novel's enormous success — he considers it a mystery. He says plainly: 'I think the success of the book is a mystery. Nobody can predict it.' He even speculates that had he written the novel ten years earlier or ten years later, it would not have had the same impact, suggesting that timing played a role — but he cannot say precisely why it worked at that particular moment.

He dismisses the assumption that the novel succeeded because it was easy reading. He points out that journalists and publishers mistakenly believe people only want 'trash' or easy experiences. The Name of the Rose — a detective story that also delves into metaphysics, theology, and medieval history — sold between ten and fifteen million copies, reaching readers who specifically sought challenging, serious fiction.

He also notes, through the anecdote of his American publisher, that even industry experts were wrong: she expected to sell only three thousand copies in a country 'where nobody has seen a cathedral or studies Latin', yet it sold two or three million copies in the US alone. Eco suggests that the subject matter (medieval history) may have played a part, but ultimately, the scale of the success remains inexplicable — a mystery even to its author.

Answer: Eco says the success of The Name of the Rose is a mystery that even he cannot explain. Timing, the serious readership that seeks challenging fiction, and possibly the medieval setting all played a role, but no single factor accounts for it fully.

Exercise 7.2 — Talking about the Text

Q1 Talk about any interview that you have watched on television or read in a newspaper. How did it add to your understanding of the celebrity, the interviewer and the field of the celebrity?

SOLUTION

The interview of Umberto Eco by Mukund Padmanabhan, published in The Hindu, is itself an excellent example to discuss. Through it, readers gain a much richer understanding of Eco than they could from reading his novels alone. The interview reveals that he is primarily an academic who considers novel-writing secondary — something his published fiction never communicates directly.

The celebrity: The conversation shows Eco to be intellectually playful, self-aware, and comfortable with his own contradictions. His concept of 'interstices', his anecdote about his doctoral dissertation, and his candid admission that the success of The Name of the Rose is 'a mystery' reveal a personality that is honest, philosophical, and unhurried — qualities a novel cannot openly display.

The interviewer: Mukund Padmanabhan demonstrates careful preparation and confident follow-up — he flags Eco's count ('at least more than 20'), prompts Eco to expand on his writing process, and raises the question of the novel's mass appeal. His skill at linking questions (using phrases like 'which brings me to my next question') keeps the conversation fluid and substantive.

The field: The interview introduces readers to semiotics, medieval aesthetics, and the idea of interstices — concepts that belong to Eco's scholarly world but are explained accessibly. It shows that serious academic ideas and popular fiction can coexist, and that literary success is far less predictable than publishers assume. A good interview, as Denis Brian writes, brings 'the most vivid impressions of our contemporaries' — and this one does precisely that.

Answer: A well-conducted interview adds dimension beyond published work — revealing personality, professional identity, and field context that writing alone cannot communicate, as the Eco–Mukund interview itself demonstrates.

Q2 The medium you like best for an interview, print, radio, or television.

SOLUTION

Each medium has distinct advantages, and the preference depends on what an interview is meant to achieve. Print interviews, like the Eco–Mukund conversation reproduced in this chapter, allow for depth, precision, and permanence. The interviewee can develop ideas at length, the interviewer can ask layered questions, and the reader can pause, reread, and reflect. There is no pressure from broadcast time limits, and complex ideas — such as Eco's explanation of interstices or the history of the interview form — can be conveyed fully.

Radio interviews add the human voice — tone, hesitation, laughter — without visual distraction, which can make them feel intimate and revealing. They are accessible to those who cannot

read or who are engaged in other tasks, extending the reach of the interview.

Television interviews are the most immediate and multi-layered: facial expressions, body language, and the interplay between interviewer and guest are visible, making it harder for either party to conceal discomfort or enthusiasm. This is why celebrities are most careful — and sometimes most guarded — on camera.

Print remains the preferred medium for serious intellectual exchange because it preserves the complete exchange without editing for time, allows the interviewer to link ideas carefully (as Mukund does), and gives readers agency. However, for capturing personality and spontaneity, television or radio complement what print cannot fully convey.

Answer: Print is best for depth and precision; radio adds voice and intimacy; television adds body language and immediacy. For serious intellectual content, print is preferable; for personality and spontaneity, audio-visual media are more revealing.

Q3 Every famous person has a right to his or her privacy. Interviewers sometimes embarrass celebrities with very personal questions.

SOLUTION

The tension between a public figure's right to privacy and the public's legitimate interest in knowing about them is at the heart of the interview debate that Part I of this chapter explores. Celebrities who feel that interviews intrude on their lives are not wrong — V. S. Naipaul 'feels that some people are wounded by interviews and lose a part of themselves', and Saul Bellow described interviews as being 'like thumbprints on his windpipe', suggesting a sense of violation.

Kipling went furthest, calling it 'immoral' and 'a crime', comparing it to an assault on his person. Yet the text also notes the irony: Kipling himself had 'perpetrated such an assault on Mark Twain only a few years before'. This double standard suggests that the objection is often to being on the receiving end, not to the form itself.

A responsible interviewer should respect boundaries: questions relevant to a person's public role — their work, ideas, and professional decisions — are fair. Questions about family life, health, or private relationships cross into territory that the subject has not made public. The interview format works best when both parties treat it as a collaborative exchange rather than an interrogation.

The Eco–Mukund interview is a model of this balance: all questions are about Eco's intellectual life and writing, and none are intrusive. The result is an interview that is rich without being invasive — demonstrating that depth and respect are not in conflict.

Answer: Famous people retain the right to privacy in personal matters; interviewers should restrict questions to the public role — professional work, ideas, public conduct. Intrusive personal questions are ethically unjustifiable, even if the subject is a public figure.

Exercise 7.3 — Noticing discourse linkers and signallers

Q1 Notice how the utterances of the interviewer and the interviewee are linked to one another through reference pronouns and repetition of words (linkers). Study the italicised linkers in the given exchanges and explain how each one links back to a previous utterance.

SOLUTION

The text illustrates two types of discourse linkers: reference pronouns (that, this, which) and repetition of key words from a preceding turn.

Exchange 1 — 'I am convinced I am always doing the same thing. / Which is? / Aah, now that is more difficult to explain.' Here, 'Which' picks up 'the same thing' from Eco's sentence; Mukund's question is entirely constituted by this reference pronoun. Eco then uses 'that' to refer back to the very question just posed, signalling that he is about to address it. Both pronouns create a tight chain: each turn grows directly out of the previous one.

Exchange 2 — 'I have already written an article! (Laughs). / Not everyone can do that of course.' Mukund's 'that' refers back to Eco's entire claim — writing an article in the time an elevator travels one floor. The pronoun condenses a complex act into a single word, maintaining continuity without repeating the whole description.

Exchange 3 — 'Novels probably satisfied my taste for narration. / Talking about novels…' Mukund repeats the word 'novels' to pivot from Eco's remark to his next question. This word-repetition is a classic linking device: it shows the new question grows from what was just said rather than introducing an unrelated topic.

Exchange 4 — 'at least more than 20 of them... / Over 40.' Then: 'Over 40!' Mukund echoes Eco's correction verbatim, using repetition both as a linker and as an expression of surprise, before continuing with his question. This keeps the exchange cohesive and shows that Mukund is listening closely.

Exchange 5 — 'I cannot expect to have one million readers with stuff on semiotics. / Which brings me to my next question.' 'Which' here refers back to the entire preceding thought — the contrast between Eco's academic and popular audiences — using it as the logical bridge to the question about The Name of the Rose's mass appeal.

Exchange 6 — 'Were you puzzled at all by this? / No. Journalists are puzzled.' Eco's repetition of 'puzzled' directly echoes Mukund's word, but flips the subject — deflecting the attribution of puzzlement from himself to journalists. The repeated word links the turns while simultaneously reversing the argument.

Exchange 7 — 'Could the huge success of the novel have anything to do with the fact that it dealt with a period of medieval history that... / That's possible.' Eco's 'That's' picks up the entire embedded clause beginning with 'the fact that…', acknowledging it with a single pronoun before redirecting to his own explanation. The reference pronoun condenses Mukund's unfinished sentence into one word.

Answer: Linkers work by using reference pronouns (that, which, this) to point back to a previous utterance, or by repeating key words from the preceding turn. Both strategies keep adjacent turns tightly connected, making conversation feel continuous and cohesive rather than a series of unrelated statements.

Q2 The text mentions 'signallers' — phrases that prepare the listener for a shift in topic. Identify the two examples given in the text and explain how they function.

SOLUTION

The two examples of topic-shift signallers identified in the text are: 'Which brings me to another question…' and 'But let me tell you another story…'

'Which brings me to another question' (used by Mukund as 'Which brings me to my next question') functions as an explicit transition. The word 'which' links backwards to what has just been said, while 'brings me to my next question' signals forward that a new topic is coming. It tells the listener: the previous exchange is now complete, a new question is about to be introduced, and the shift is prepared rather than abrupt. This phrase is a courtesy device — it gives the interviewee a moment to mentally close one topic before the next opens.

'But let me tell you another story' (used by Eco) signals an anecdotal digression coming. 'But' marks a contrast or pivot from the direction the conversation was taking, while 'let me tell you' is a speaker-management phrase that invites the listener's attention. 'Another story' signals that what follows will be illustrative narrative rather than direct argument. Eco uses this kind of signaller because, as he explains, he thinks like a storyteller — he often tells stories 'like a Chinese wise man' to make a point rather than arguing it directly.

Both signallers serve the same function: they prevent abrupt shifts that would leave the listener disoriented, preserving the flow and coherence of the conversation. Without them, a topic change can feel like an interruption; with them, it feels like a natural progression.

Answer: The two signallers are 'Which brings me to my next question' (Mukund's explicit pivot to a new topic) and 'But let me tell you another story' (Eco's signal for an anecdotal digression). Both prepare the listener for a shift so the conversation stays smooth and coherent.