LYNN BARBER

A Curious Career

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CHAPTER THREE

On Interviewing

There's a wonderful scene in Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* in which an experienced hack called Jules Jones is sent to interview a nineteen-year-old film star called Kitty Jackson over lunch. He has been allotted forty minutes with her of which she spends the first six on her mobile. 'Then she starts to apologise . . . Kitty is sorry for the twelve flaming hoops I've had to jump through and the several miles of piping hot coals I've sprinted across for the privilege of spending forty minutes in her company. She's sorry for having just spent the first six of those minutes talking to somebody else. Her welter of apologies reminds me of why I prefer difficult stars, the ones who barricade themselves inside their stardom and spit through the cracks. There is something out of control about a star who cannot be nice, and the erosion of a subject's self-control is the sine qua non of celebrity reporting.'

That phrase – 'the erosion of a subject's self-control' – pretty much sums up the whole celebrity-interviewing game. But what makes the Jennifer Egan scene so delicious is that it's the reporter who loses his self-control. He gets so irritated by the film star's bland boring niceness that he suggests they go for a walk in Central Park, in the course of which he jumps her, and tries to rape her. He ends up in prison (of course Kitty

writes him a sweet letter) charged with attempted rape, kidnapping and aggravated assault. A bit extreme, you might say, but the feelings he goes through while 'trying to wrest readable material from a nineteen-year-old girl who is very, very nice' are ones that I entirely recognise. I have never wanted to rape an interviewee but I have occasionally fantasised that someone else comes in and shoots them. At least then I'd have something to write about.

People often say, 'Oh it must be great for you meeting all these famous people,' and I have to resist the temptation to bang my head on the wall and howl. I dare say it's nice *meeting* famous people but the trouble is I have to interview them which is a completely different kettle of fish. In fact the interview is the part of my job I enjoy least, so fraught is it with anxiety, impatience, frustration, and often disappointment. It's like sitting an exam with not enough time – the clock in my head is ticking so loudly I'm surprised the interviewee can't hear it. I love preparing for an interview, and then writing it up afterwards, but the hour or two I spend with my subject is pretty much pure hell.

The best bit is definitely the research beforehand, especially reading cuttings. It's the perfect combination of limitless displacement activity with what one can tell oneself is work – 'I'm sorry I have to lie on the sofa all day but I have to read all these cuttings.' Nowadays I have to read them on my laptop which is not nearly so much fun, but I used to love getting real yellowing cuttings in real dusty brown files from the Tasiemka Archive in Golders Green. Edda Tasiemka, a German émigré, used to help her journalist husband by cutting out articles she thought might be useful for him.

When he died she went on cutting out articles till her entire house was crammed floor to ceiling – not just the sitting room and bedrooms but hall, bathroom, kitchen, landing, garage – with bulging brown files. She's still doing it, aged ninety, but alas now editors balk at paying her fees and say you can find it all on the internet. You can't, actually. You can't hold in your hands the actual *Sun* front page that screamed 'Freddie Starr ate my hamster' whereas you can at Mrs Tasiemka's. I still sometimes go round to her house just for the joy of riffling through old cuttings.

The point of background research is that you don't waste precious interview minutes asking for information you could have found out beforehand, such as where they grew up or went to school. But it's also useful to read previous interviews because they give you a clue as to what you're in for – if your subject has *never* produced a good quote, you know you'll be ploughing stony ground. And if you find the same anecdotes recurring in interview after interview you know these are the ones to avoid.

But the most valuable part of reading the cuttings is looking for the lacunae – the things that *haven't* been talked about. Researching the actor Dan Stevens, I was struck by how little he'd said about being adopted. He had a short standard answer to the effect that he didn't want to know about his 'real' parents, he was not interested, because his adoptive parents had been so wonderful. In fact he resented the suggestion that they were less 'real' than his genetic parents. But, now that he is a father himself, I felt he *must* want to know about his genetic parents, and asked if he'd found out anything more. He said no – he'd been too busy to

do any research – but then admitted that he knew more than he was ever willing to divulge. Fair enough. To say yes, I know the facts but I'm not telling is an honest answer whereas I'm not interested is not.

Again, doing background research for an interview with Piers Morgan, I wondered why he'd never talked about his real father. He was a dentist, name of O'Meara (Piers switched to his stepfather's name), who died when Piers was a baby. But why did he die so young? Piers said it was 'nothing sinister' but flatly refused to tell me the cause of death. I suppose you could say that this was an interviewing failure – I drew a blank – but I certainly felt it was worth including in the article. On occasions like this, I often feel that I'm marking the spot for future interviewers to dig.

Reading cuttings is such a pleasure I can easily do it for days. There might also be a biography or autobiography I have to read, or films I have to watch, or records I have to listen to, not to mention YouTube and Twitter and a million other distractions that I can tell myself are necessary for my research. I like to feel I am thoroughly prepared – it gives me confidence on the day. But, come the day, I wake with a racing heart and a feeling of doom. I always try to arrange interviews for the morning so I have less time to worry. I do all the routine stuff – checking my tape recorder, checking the batteries, rereading my notes, rereading my questions, checking the address, but then there is nothing to do except panic and wonder whether I will screw up.

There are a million ways of screwing up and I must have done them all at one time or another. Arriving late is the most obvious one though I'm such a punctuality freak it has very

rarely happened. Having a tape recorder break down is another horror but nowadays I always take two recorders just in case. The worst breakdown ever was with Sir David Attenborough – I saw the light flickering and realised my batteries were fading, but he was NOT sympathetic. Consequently while everyone else reveres him as a national treasure, I can only remember the cold glint in his eye, the drumming fingers, while I fiddled cack-handedly with my batteries.

Of course, I always fear a physical crisis and it's happened a couple of times – once with Oliver Stone, when my front tooth (crown) fell out, but actually he was very kind and sympathetic, and another time with Robert Redford when I had a coughing fit so bad it sounded like retching. He sat there with a bottle of water beside him, failing to offer me any – his stony face indicated that he was furious I might be giving him germs. I remember sweating hideously in a conservatory with the actor William Hurt and him passing me ice cubes to cool my bright red face. He meant it kindly, I'm sure, but I wouldn't have known my face was bright red unless he'd drawn my attention to it.

But even without any physical crisis, or tape-recorder crisis, there are still a million things that can go wrong – often just pacing things badly, or failing to follow up an interesting lead, or forgetting to ask a crucial question. My problem always is impatience. I'm prone to rush the early stages, desperate to get on to the meat of the interview. But it is vital to let the interviewee settle down and relax before asking anything that might alarm them. Which means that you must let them do the plug – and nowadays there always IS a plug – for their

film or book or record, before you get on to the interesting stuff about why they've just split from their fifth wife. I tell myself I mustn't push for *anything* in the first fifteen minutes; I must let them fulfil their agenda and say the things they have probably been reciting in the bathroom mirror before I make any attempt to steer the interview.

I used to devote a lot of thought to what to wear to the interview because I wanted to 'blend in'. If I was interviewing an Establishment figure, I wore a Sloaney suit; if I was interviewing an actor, I aimed for something more bohemian; if I was interviewing a footballer – ah, there was the rub, because how do you dress to fit in with a footballer? I think it was probably wasted effort anyway, and nowadays my clothes are so much of a muchness I don't have the wardrobe to dress like a Sloane. Anyway, how on earth would I dress to 'blend in' with, say, Shane MacGowan or Lady Gaga? Shane MacGowan had vomit encrusted all down his trousers, Lady Gaga was wearing a black silk wrap that kept falling open to show her bare boobs.

My only rule is not to wear anything that looks too expensive because I don't want to seem to be showing off. I remember the first time I interviewed Sir Alan Sugar (at his hideous house in Boca Raton) he pointed to my emerald ring and asked, 'How much did that cost?' I said rather snottily that it was my engagement ring so I had no idea, but he said, 'Go on – guess.' 'Five grand?' I ventured. 'They wouldn't give you five hundred for it down Hatton Garden,' he told me in my first full blast of the famous Sugar charm. *He* obviously thought I wore it to show off.

Actually my engagement ring had drawn attention once before, when I interviewed Ronnie Biggs the Great Train

Robber in Rio de Janeiro in 1984. I was waiting for him at his flat and talking to his girlfriend Ulla when she suddenly seized my hand and said, 'My dear, I must tell you: you must never ever wear a ring like that in Rio. The thieves here are terrible. They would cut off your finger to get it. And there are thieves everywhere here in Rio.' Just as she said it, Ronnie Biggs, the most famous thief in Rio, walked through the door!

Ideally, you should always interview people at home because you can learn so much about them. Are they super-neat or chaotic? Do they have more photographs of their family or of themselves? A trip to the loo is often instructive – it's where people put their awards and cartoons – things they're proud of and want visitors to see but without too obviously showing off. Of course if you can go to their own bathroom, rather than the guest cloakroom, better still – look for the pills! Liz Jones, the *Mail* columnist, told me that she always headed for the bathroom – she also went through David Cassidy's wheelie bin when she interviewed him in Los Angeles but then she is a far more committed journalist than me.

Nowadays, of course, the question of smoking looms large. Even before the smoking ban, I made it a rule not to smoke in people's houses unless they were smokers themselves, but at least in those days you could smoke in restaurants. But now my preparation for any interview includes donning the hated nicotine patch – and then great whoops of delight if the person turns out to be a fellow smoker. I remember interviewing Simon Cowell at his headquarters and thinking even *he* won't be allowed to smoke in this immaculate building, but he immediately produced cigs, lighter, ashtray from his desk drawer and we both merrily puffed away. Some of

my friendliest interviews have been done on the smoking pavement outside restaurants – I did one with Rhys Ifans supposedly over lunch where we spent maybe twenty minutes in the restaurant and two hours outside.

An interview is an odd transaction – just two people alone in a room, with a tape recorder. It looks like an intimate tête-à-tête but you both know that it's 'on the record', intended for publication. On the other hand, you don't *speak* as if to an audience. It feels – or should do – as if you are having a rather intense private conversation. That's one reason why I think it's so important to maintain eye contact at all times. I'm baffled by interviewers (invariably men) who ask questions while flicking through their notebook, or glancing round the room.

Outsiders inevitably derive their idea of what interviews are like from watching them on television without realising that press interviews are completely different. Broadcast interviews have to include lots of information in the questions, because there is no other place to put it, therefore the questions have to be to some extent pre-planned. But press interviews aren't like that because the questions don't need to carry any information. They just have to be as effective as possible at getting the subject to talk. Hopefully, the questions will always be much shorter than the answer – my absolute favourite question is always: Why? If an interviewee says that he decided to move away from London a couple of years ago, this is not of any great interest until you interject 'Why?' and it all comes tumbling out – 'Oh you know, because I was spending too much time getting pissed in the Groucho and ending up in bed with people whose names I couldn't remember in the morning.' So that's a cue to ask: What was the worst occasion?

And then, with any luck, the interview has moved from mildly interesting into riveting.

People sometimes claim that doing an interview is almost like psychotherapy. That's obvious nonsense because there is no therapeutic intent. But I have sometimes been accused of coming on 'like a therapist' – most memorably by Anne Robinson who was very contemptuous of the vagueness of my questions. She would have rattled them out rat-a-tat-tat, each one spikier than the last. But then would she have got such a good interview? By slowing things down, refusing to engage in the sort of verbal sparring Robinson wanted, I think I got more out of her than she meant to give. She was more rattled by soft questions than by tough ones.

I want my questions to be as open-ended as possible. The aim is not to produce tick-box answers – Happy childhood? Yes. Good relations with mother? Yes. Father? Yes. Siblings? Yes. The open-ended version would be: Who were you closest to during your childhood? The answer is usually mother or father, but if it's not – if it's sister or granny or auntie, it is worth probing a bit more. And of course I *am* like a therapist in that I always ask about childhood. I feel if I can picture what my interviewee was like at seven, at fourteen, I am much closer to understanding who they are today.

It goes without saying that I am entirely reliant on tape recorders – having no memory and having long forgotten my shorthand, I couldn't have been an interviewer if they hadn't been invented. Some people argue that recorders make interviewees nervous, but I think that only lasts for the first five minutes provided you maintain eye contact. And I like the formality of producing my recorder at the beginning of an

interview, choosing the right place to put it, testing it, all as a way of demonstrating, 'Right. This is an interview. We are now on the record.' And then, at the end, a sign-off whereby, hand hovering above the recorder, I say, 'Well thank you for that. But is there anything you would like to raise that I haven't given you a chance to talk about?' Usually the answer is no and then I ostentatiously click the recorder off and put it in my bag. If it's yes, then obviously I carry on recording till they've said whatever they wanted to say. But the whole business of displaying the tape recorder is for me an important way of reminding the subject that we are not having a chat, we are doing an interview, for publication.

Even so, people sometimes want to say something off the record and this is a dilemma. I really hate being told things off the record – it makes life difficult when it comes to writing the piece. Jeffrey Archer, who I interviewed back in the 1980s when he was Conservative Party chairman, kept issuing instructions – 'This is off the record'; 'You can say this in your own words but not in mine'; 'You can say "friends of Jeffrey Archer told me" '. All these supposedly off-the-record revelations were entirely self-serving, designed to convey what a wonderful chap he was without too obviously boasting – though I must say boasting was not normally a problem for him. Journalists who feel flattered by being told things off the record are wet behind the ears. Nobody ever tells you anything that would harm them. They never say, 'By the way, I *did* murder my wife'; they say, 'Off the record, my wife was mad as a snake and a complete lush. I nursed her devotedly for many years until she had that unfortunate fall down the stairs.' I often say at the beginning of an interview that

everything is on the record – by which I mean including anything they try to tell me off the record. I would simply rather not know – or find it out myself by other means.

The great disadvantage of recording interviews is that you then have to listen to your own voice when you play them back, and oh, how agonising that is! You come to recognise, all too well, your own verbal tics and mannerisms and of course this is the moment when you think of all the questions you forgot to ask, or the points where you should have butted in and asked for more explication. Younger, cleverer journalists tend to save themselves this agony by using a transcription service or one of the wizard computer programmes that can convert speech into writing, but my attempts at both have been useless, and anyway I quite value the time spent transcribing the tape. It's when I really think about the subject and what I want to say about them. It's also when I identify the quotes I will definitely use in the piece, and others that are good but not essential.

Given my devotion to recorders, I am amazed when I encounter journalists who don't use them. However brilliant their shorthand, there must be one or two points where the shorthand is ambiguous, when it would be helpful to have a recording to check. Also I think editors should insist on recording – it's good insurance, if anyone ever claims they've been misquoted. Actually, I think *interviewees* should use recorders as well – why not? Michael Winner and Tony Benn always did, but I wish it were general practice. I get fed up with interviewees telling me they were misquoted, when I read them something from the cuttings. If they were really misquoted, then why didn't they complain at the time? And if

not, then why are they slandering a journalist by saying that they were?

The other great virtue of recorders is that they allow you to quote someone's words *exactly* and not just the gist. In fact this seems to me the whole joy of interviews – to capture people's way of speaking. Do they speak disjointedly, or do they form complete sentences? Do they repeat themselves? Do they have favourite words they use far too much? ('Basically' is a big offender here.) Do they use those giveaway phrases 'to be perfectly frank' or 'I must be honest with you' which always suggest they've been lying the rest of the time? Or, worst of all, do they say 'know what I mean' because if they say it at all, they will tend to say it in every sentence. The boxer Frank Bruno was a nightmare in that respect; ditto the musician Goldie. I usually cut most of the 'know what I mean's because they are too boring to read, but it's important to include a couple to convey their ubiquity.

'Fucking' is another problem. Actually it's a really acute problem for me now I work for the *Sunday Times* because they insist on following the antique practice of filling the word with asterisks. It didn't happen before, when I worked for the *Independent on Sunday* and the *Observer*, but the *Sunday Times* considers itself a 'family newspaper'. This is of course insane because if children ever scan the paper, it's the word with asterisks that will first catch their eye. When I interviewed Lady Gaga, she discussed, among other things, the size of her clitoris, but nevertheless it was her one use of the word 'fucking' that had to be bowdlerised.

How can you accurately quote people who use 'fucking' every other word? With Liam Gallagher I was able to make it

'fooking' because that was the way he pronounced it, but with David Bailey I had to cut nearly all his 'fucking's out, which I thought was a loss. I did an interview with Norman Mailer in 1998 (luckily, for the *Observer*, which had no silly rules about asterisks) which almost hinged on his use – no, *my* use – of the word 'fuck'. He'd been a bit torpid before, very deaf, very old, very arthritic, but he was *thrilled* when I asked him if he thought women should have babies as a souvenir of a great fuck. Obviously he got a kick out of hearing that word on the lips of (he thought) a genteel Englishwoman and from then on he kept using the word 'fuck' in almost every sentence – 'Great fucks are very rare! Great fucks are rare enough that they have to be respected!' And, yes, he did think that women should have babies as souvenirs of great fucks.

I go into interviews armed first and foremost with a recorder but also with a long list of prepared questions. I don't often refer to them but they are vital to cover those moments, which happen in every interview, when my mind goes blank. And I put an asterisk by the questions I absolutely *must* ask, because I will be a wimp if I don't. An interviewer can't afford to be shy about asking questions – it's what you're there for. I always tell my interviewees beforehand that they mustn't mind if I ask an intrusive question – they can always shake their head and say 'No comment'. I won't press it – I won't do a Paxman and repeat the question twelve times. But it's daft not to ask.

A question I am fond of is: What do you think is your worst fault? Nobody ever, of course, really admits what their worst fault is (nor would I) but there is a difference between people who say, for instance, unpunctuality or forgetting

names, i.e. they admit to *some* fault although not by any means a serious one, and people who turn it into a self-compliment by saying, 'Oh my worst fault is that I'm too giving!' Yeah? At this point I always want to ask: How much do you pay your cleaner (I always want to ask *everyone* how much they pay their cleaner) but I have to fight back the urge, and ask something more anodyne like: Could you give me an example?

Asking for examples is always fruitful. It's no good talking in generalisations when what you desperately need is detail. I do believe that detail is everything. Detail is evidence. When I interviewed the novelist Lionel Shriver, she obviously thought I was mad to keep asking about her central heating. But I was trying to nail my hunch that she was frugal and ascetic to the point of masochism, and I needed the evidence – which indeed she delivered. She told me that she prefers to wear a coat and gloves indoors rather than have the heating on, even though she suffers from Raynaud's disease which means her hands and feet are always cold, and she will only let her husband switch the heating on if it is actually freezing outside, but then not until 7 p.m. That surely should be enough to convince the reader. Shriver told me off afterwards for being so obsessed with her heating and emailed, 'The frequency with which I turn on the central heating may not loom large in the world of letters years hence!' True – but as an insight into her character, I think her central-heating habits are quite significant.

Some beginner journalists, especially men, I think, have difficulty with the 'stance' of interviews – they find it obscurely humiliating to be taking all this interest in someone else

without getting any reciprocal interest back. They hope that an interview will be a meeting of minds, or, alternatively, a debate. It should not be. An interview is not the time to show off, or to express your own opinions. You are there to draw someone out, to get *their* views, *their* memories, hopefully *their* confessions, and the less you talk yourself, the better. Outsiders often don't realise how constrained by time most interviews are. Nowadays you're lucky to get any more than an hour with your subject. So any minute spent talking about yourself is a minute wasted. I remember years ago Julie Andrews, being friendly, asked if I had children and I said no. I knew that if I said I had two daughters she'd start asking their names and ages and five minutes would have gone. But also I think you are more effective as an interviewer if you divulge as little of yourself as possible.

To be a good interviewer you have to know yourself pretty well, and obviously age is an advantage here. To some extent I use myself as a sounding-board. I know how I normally feel, so if I come out of an interview feeling atypically depressed, or humiliated, or elated, I know it must be something my interviewee has said or done to make me feel that way. So when I transcribe the tape, I try to identify the moment when my mood changed, and what triggered it. I believe that emotions are to some extent catching, so I know that a depressed person will make me feel depressed, and an angry person will make me angry. The reason my interview with Martin Clunes (see next chapter) ended so badly was, I think, because he was seething with repressed anger from the beginning, and increasingly his anger transferred itself to me.

You can never hope to do a 'definitive' interview because interviews, by their very nature, are of the moment, and at the mercy of happenstance. You can convey what someone was like on the day you met them, but they can be very different on different days. When I interviewed the actor Rhys Ifans in 2011 I found him amusing, pleasant, sharply intelligent, and willing to talk candidly about his love life and his hopes of fatherhood. But Janice Turner interviewed him for *The Times* two years later and found him boorish, foul-mouthed and unwilling to answer any questions at all. Her Rhys Ifans was the exact opposite of mine. So was I wrong and she right? Was he putting on an act for me? Or was he, as his publicist said, suffering from 'a bad reaction to antibiotics' on the day Janice Turner met him? I don't think there's any clear-cut explanation. Rhys Ifans no doubt has different moods on different days – as we all do, but perhaps actors more than most – and I caught one mood and Janice Turner another. But that's the joy of interviews – their infinite variety.