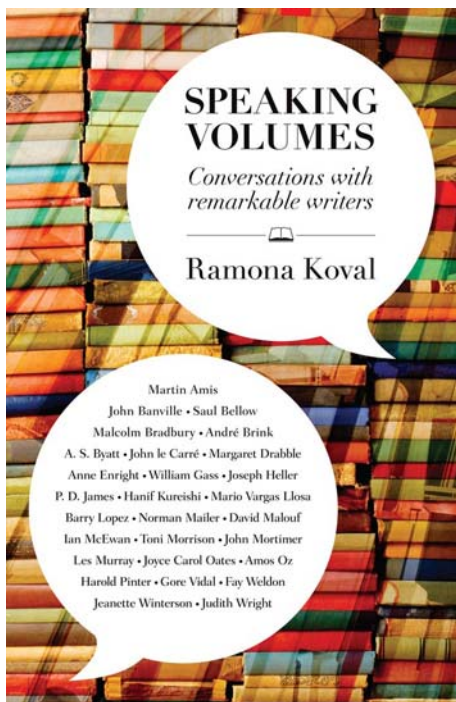


Speaking Volumes



Speaking Volumes: Conversations with remarkable writers

Ramona Koval

ISBN: 9781921640612

\$35

417 pp

[Scribe](#) 2010

The name and voice of Ramona Koval are well known to many Australians as the presenter of the long-running ABC Radio National program *The Book Show*, where she interviews many writers and talks about their work and about writing generally. She is passionate about what she does and adds to this an intelligence and compassion that makes listening to her and her guests a pleasure. She is so good at what she does that she is frequently invited to moderate discussions and conduct interviews with writers around the world.

Speaking Volumes is not a work of literature, but it is a book that gives us an insight into the world of literature. The transcripts of Ramona's interviews with twenty-eight writers make wonderful reading. Ramona seems always so well prepared for each interview she embarks on, appearing familiar with the writer's work and quite

a bit of his/her life. One suspects that she *has* read most of what each has written.

There have been other books based on interviews with writers – reportages of those interviews where the interviewer's opinions, likes and dislikes become an important part of the work. These can be almost like reviews of the writers and their work, based on the interviews and the interviewer's own reading. This book is very different.

In *Speaking Volumes* the transcriptions of the interviews are produced verbatim and there is no extra comment (apart from a brief introduction to each interview to set the scene and context) which produces a wonderful immediacy; one can savour the interaction of the interviewer and the interviewee with all its interplays. Ramona Koval asks many searching, often insightful questions. They are not always answered.

Those familiar with her voice will be able to hear the smile in many of Ramona's questions: "Are you irresponsible?" (to John Mortimer); "Perhaps he was on top of too much." (about Bill Clinton to Saul Bellow); "Well, it's a peaceful place to be dead, isn't it?" (to Les Murray).

The interviews presented in this book range over a relatively long period (1996 to early 2010), with most of them having taken place in the last ten years. Some of the interviewees have since died, such as Judith Wright and Joseph Heller. Some interviews were conducted over a distance (e.g., by phone with William Gass), one 'on the road' (Les Murray). The interview with Judith Wright was a *tour de force* for both women, as Judith was deaf and almost blind. John Mortimer was in his wheelchair, on stage, with a glass of champagne ("Do you think I'll last till the end of the program?"; "I think so. Do you want me to take your pulse?")

We gain insight into some of what makes Ramona Koval tick when we read her 8½-page introduction. She describes some of the pitfalls to be encountered in interviewing people who may have tickets on themselves and who have probably been interviewed more often than they would like. She points out the importance of preparation, familiarity with a writer's work and how vital the first question can be.

Most of the interviews were conducted on stage – many of them in Edinburgh – and a few took place in the author's home. Whether in front of an audience or in the privacy of a New York apartment, each interview is masterfully conducted, allowing us a glimpse into the minds and lives of people we may otherwise only know through what they write or what others may (often erroneously or mischievously) write about them. Ramona Koval engages with each writer and gives us the sense that we're right there with her. She has that rare gift of the masterful interviewer: remaining almost invisible in order to let the subject shine.