



All I Did Was Ask: Conversations with Writers, Actors, Musicians, and Artists

Terry Gross

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"I'm Terry Gross and this is *Fresh Air* . . ."

Now available in paperback--a selection of revealing interviews from the award-winning National Public Radio show

Originating from WHYY-FM in Philadelphia and heard on more than 450 NPR stations, *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross has become a daily habit with millions of listeners nationwide--a must for anyone hoping to keep up with what's happening in the arts. Over the last twenty years, Terry's guests have included our most significant writers, actors, musicians, comics, and visual artists.

For her first collection, Terry has chosen more than three dozen timeless interviews that prove to be as lively on the page as they were on the radio. Her questions--probing yet sensitive--encourage revelations from figures as diverse as John Updike, Isabella Rossellini, Conan O'Brien, Samuel L. Jackson, Johnny Cash, and Nicolas Cage. And in her introduction, the generally self-effacing host of *Fresh Air* does something she wouldn't dream of doing on the air--she reveals a thing or two about herself.

All I Did Was Ask: Conversations with Writers, Actors, Musicians, and Artists Details

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Elaine says

The title of this book suggested to me that I'd be able to learn a bit about Terry Gross, the unflappable host of "Fresh Air" said in that unique voice that suggested that the interview would indeed, welcome in a breathe of scent-laden, spring-fresh air. However, the book tells very little about her and is instead an edited version of highly curated interviews. We can't really blame her for NOT creating a memoir, but many of the reviews suggest that we'd really be interested in more information about her, and less revisiting of prior interviews, no matter how interesting they might be. Hint, hint publishers.

My other challenge with this book is that I simply could not shake hearing her voice as I read it. This is not an issue, but her voice is so unique, and is so perfectly nonplussed and interested at the same time that you simply can't shake it, even when you are reading. Thus, if I wanted to "hear" Terry Gross I'd go and listen to any of her podcasts that are floating out there.

On the positive side, many of the interviews are interesting as she teases out facts that are little known. I enjoyed reading several interviews where people pushed back at her. The Gene Simmons interview continues his 15 minutes of debauched fame while casting all men as boors. The snippets about her personally provide color commentary (although very little). The book is super easy to read as you can simply pick a person you like and ignore the ones you are not interested in.

It seems wrong somehow to vote a book down because I preferred to read something else, which she chose not to write, and where plenty of information was available to show that the book is not a memoir. But, there is a reason that her radio show has continued for decades upon decades. No, Mr. Mean spirited reviewer back in 2005 who used his review as a chance to bash liberals, dump on NPR and take a swing at the Prius all at the same time. It is because she is dang good at what she does. Therefore if she wants to jump channels over to print she has to be prepared for the rest of us to simply ask "and why did you decide to do this when you had experienced such success interviewing on the radio"?

Tara Bloom says

I have to interview someone and write an article this week, so I was excited to immerse myself in "Fresh Air" interviews. A little peek into Terry Gross's mind about the interviews, how she preps for them, and what she's trying to tease out of someone stuck me as a helpful--and pleasurable--undertaking in advance of my own guest interview.

I was not disappointed.

I agree with other reviewers who point out how dated much of this book is. It contains interviews over a 20-year period, though, it's not surprising that it feels much more past tense than the 13 years since it was published.

The bigger letdown for me was that many of the interviews I was most looking forward to reading--Jodie Foster, Aerosmith, James Baldwin--were hugely disappointing.

Alternatively, there were surprising delights in insights taken from authors and artists I'd never even heard of.

And there were plenty of timeless, fascinating nuggets tucked inside many of the interviews, along with some fascinating trivia about celebrities and informative revelations about artists, musicians, writers, actors, DJs, and comedians.

There were several laugh-out-loud moments and even a few discoveries that I mused over for days on end and which will, I think, stick with me forever.

Jj says

I'm barely half of this book and yet I would say that this is totally what I wanted to read. This kind of conversations are the kind that I want to listen to.

More of my review after I'm done with this.

Kristina says

Terry Gross's *All I Did Was Ask: Conversations with Writers, Actors, Musicians, and Artists* is not as interesting as I thought it would be. In the Introduction, she discusses why none of the interviews she included in the book are political; she didn't think the topics covered would still be current. The problem, of course, is that some of the artists are not current either. Maybe when the book was published in 2004, Grandmaster Flash and Divine were still hot topics but they certainly aren't more than a decade later. That's not Terry's fault. But I think that some of her more dynamic interviews (Bill O'Reilly) could have still been interesting reading, even if she considered them "topical." I also don't think politics is topical at all; we're still fighting over basic the same thing: one group of people wanting to disenfranchise and rule over another group. Dress it up all you like, but the wealthy are fighting to not only stay wealthy, but to become emperors, and they'll do anything they need to to win.

I've been listening to *Fresh Air* for a decade or so. I'm not a loyal fan; I catch the interviews mostly when I'm in my car. I'm usually more interested in the interviewee, not Terry's interviewing style. I guess if I had to interview people for a living I'd appreciate her skill more, but if I'm listening to an interview that bores me, I'm bored no matter how well she asks the questions. The problem I have with the transcripts of these interviews is that she's edited them for content and length. So when you're reading, the conversation doesn't naturally flow from one idea to another and I'm guessing that's where she took out a chunk of dialogue. I also found a number of the interviews boring because they did seem to be dated to me and I wasn't interested. I don't like jazz, so automatically any conversation about the technicalities of jazz lulls me to sleep.

The most dramatic interview is of course the famous Gene Simmons interview. Gene Simmons is, of course, the lead singer of the craptastic rock band Kiss. Listening to their music is like eating really shitty food because you're hungry and it's right there and it looks sorta good but later you want to throw up. That's Kiss. Gene Simmons is a narcissist. Not on the scale of Trump, but comparisons can be made. What's interesting about this interview (and Terry does say this to him) is that you don't know if his sexism and rudeness are

genuine or if he's playing a role. I suspect with Gene Simmons that the two are very close. He's also extremely defensive about being perceived as an uneducated idiot and sneers at NPR and Terry. Which of course just displays his own weaknesses. When Terry asks him if all he cares about is money (vs. creating music for artistic purposes, ha ha ha ha ha) he says that in order to survive we all need air and money. Then he says that Terry, as a woman, has the option of selling her body for money, an option he doesn't have. Now, we can have a discussion that we all use our bodies to make money (writers' hands type the words that create books that sell, Terry's voice conducts interviews, etc.) but he says this just after describing all the makeup he wears, the weird costumes he puts on, the high-heeled boots he wears. Why does he do all this? Because his physical presence—his body—is a large part of the band's appeal. Fans talking about the band don't rhapsodize over the band harmonies—they discuss the costumes and the extraordinarily long tongue of Gene Simmons. He, much more than Terry, sells his body to make money. The correlations between Gene Simmons the narcissist and Donald Trump the narcissist are interesting: they are both extremely defensive, care about material goods and their image to the exclusion of everything else and claim not to drink, smoke or use drugs of any kind. That actually makes sense to me. If you're a narcissist with psychopathic tendencies, why would you need to drink/use drugs? You have a limited inner life and don't have the worries and anxieties of normal people. People imbibe in mind or mood-altering drugs to relax, to take their mind off their troubles, etc. I don't think Gene Simmons or Donald Trump have the same doubts, anxieties, guilt, worries, concerns that normal people have so why would they need to drink? Perhaps Gene should drink so he could maybe find a sense of humor because he comes across as douche bag spouting crudeness just for the sake of being crude. He's not witty and he's not intriguing. He's shallow and asinine (like his music).

I enjoyed some of the interviews much more than others but overall would recommend listening to them rather than reading. Something is lost in the translation.

Joe Valdez says

"My name is Laszlo* and I'm a liberal who can't stand listening to NPR."

"Hi, Laszlo. Aren't liberals supposed to listen to NPR in their Prius?"

"I'm not much of a car guy but the Prius just isn't me. So I don't drive one, no."

"You might not be a liberal. Do you eat at Whole Foods?"

"I do my grocery shopping at Trader Joe's."

"Never mind, you do sound like a liberal. Let's get back to your liberal listening habits. Don't you get all your news from NPR?"

"I follow current events and enjoy having my intelligence leveraged with deeper reporting on a wide range of issues, but listening to NPR is like listening to my assistant principal in 8th grade. Smug, self-satisfied, square."

"What about *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross?"

"Terry Gross is like Marcy from the *Peanuts* gang, which is all right, but not if Marcy thought she could

relate to Schroeder because she's read about Schroeder's childhood or Schroeder's musical influences. Smug."

"Sounds like a talk show host. Isn't that her job?"

"Give me Marc Maron any day of the week. Maron might not have the diction of Terry Gross, but he's creative. He knows how to place his guests at ease and let a natural conversation flow. Howard Stern too, by the way. These guys don't do ambush questions or pretend to relate to people. You can judge by the length of the answers how uncomfortable a lot of her guests are."

"All right, so you don't like her radio broadcast. You're a liberal and you read a lot of books. What about this Terry Gross book *All I Did Was Ask: Conversations With Writers, Actors, Musicians and Artists*?"

"First of all, if I had to guess, I'd say it was published in 1998. Let me check. 2004, but a lot of the interviews were conducted in the '90s sometime. It's dated and feels like it."

"Who's interviewed?"

"Nicolas Cage. Chris Rock. John Updike. Johnny Cash. Charlie Haden (jazz bassist). Those are the first five interviews."

"I hate rap music and jazz but those others sound interesting."

"They're short interviews, in the book. Very pocketed. If you can't get Chris Rock to open up and give you something original, you're doing something wrong as a journalist."

"It could mean Gross wants to steer her show away from current events that might give the broadcast an expiration date."

"Or it could mean Chris Rock doesn't feel like talking to you."

"Was there anything you liked about this book?"

"Mary Karr had some interesting stories to tell about her childhood and emerging feminine sexuality. I'd never heard of her work but am interested in reading her memoirs now. A lot of the guests here are no longer with us: Johnny Cash, Dennis Hopper, Mario Puzo, Maurice Sendak, James Baldwin. Their wisdom is timeless, but the short, pocketed interviews undercut that."

"Sorry you didn't enjoy it, Laszlo. We can't make sense out of you liberals."

"Rachel Maddow. If she has a book out, I'll read it."

* Name changed protect anonymity of subject

Christine Kenney says

I turned to this because several others suggested that a good way to improve interview skills was to observe

great interviewers, like Gross. Typically, a few sentences later they would emphasize the importance of asking open-ended non-leading questions. I was surprised that the many of the questions included were not open ended, sometimes not even questions but statements. They showed that Gross's team had done a lot of research about the guest, but I wasn't sure how much of this would transfer to developing skills in a day to day situation where you want to establish rapport, put someone at ease, or draw someone out who doesn't have an extensive publicly available backstory or you don't have the time to research it upon meeting. I don't know, maybe listening to the show might offer more insight than heavily edited, often combined interviews. But my reasons for reading this were possibly unusual and if the interviewees themselves intrigue you, you may enjoy this more.

Daniel says

What a fantastic collection.

I listen to Public Radio. I'm not addicted to it, I contribute financially only occasionally, but I do listen if I'm in the car. When I happen to be listening and Terry Gross' 'Fresh Aire' comes on, I am usually interested. Now that I have had the chance to read through these interviews, I can understand why. Terry Gross asks intelligent questions.

Not a lot of interviewers ask intelligent questions. Usually it's only leading questions about a new movie or a new book or a new political campaign. Gross asks questions that we all want to ask.

Perhaps it's because this collection is with people who are artists (musicians, actors, writers, etc) -- people with whom I am familiar, interested, and can relate -- but I truly enjoyed the insight offered in these brief interviews.

Some of those that I enjoyed surprised me. I never would have expected to enjoy the Steven Tyler interview -- especially considering how blunt he was regarding his drug use -- but I did enjoy it.

Nicolas Cage is not one of my more favored actors, but I enjoyed his interview as well. In fact, hardly a bad one in the bunch.

Highly recommended.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

This book came along right around when I was talking to other people about wishing I was a better interviewer. I showed up at a booksale, and there it was, for \$1. Terry Gross is a spectacular interviewer who I rarely listen to, but still her name has seeped into my brain. She asks insightful questions that are based on solid research and the ability to make connections others may not have made.

The book is almost entirely transcribed interviews from between 1976 and 2004. Anyone looking to learn more about interviewing will have to learn by observation rather than direct information. The introduction has a few tidbits in it, but almost all of it ended up repeated in the Marc Maron WTF Podcast interview with her. (I wonder if he knows she presented him with so little new material?)

The best moments, to me, are moments of resistance. An actress (Uta Hagen) who refuses to discuss her craft until Terry Gross can explain how it connects directly to her own. A musician who can't answer a question without sexual innuendo or dismissing her because she is female and can't understand the male psyche (Gene Simmons at his most obnoxious.) But what do you *do* when you lose control of an interview? This is more informative than everything going right.

Fresh Air is heavily, heavily edited. I sometimes chop chunks out of podcast episodes too, and knowing this about her reputable program made me feel better. As she says,

"I violate many rules of polite conversation in my interviews... You know what it's like when you're cornered by someone who can't stop talking? There's just no polite way of telling them to stop.... That kind of graceful getaway isn't an option for me in the studio - in addition to which, the problem isn't really that I'm bored, but that my listeners are going to be... I risk momentarily embarrassing someone I regard highly enough to have on the show, because I trust that this little bit of advice will help him or her keep the attention of our listeners."

Preach, Terry. I need to get better at knowing when to do this and when to just edit later. She had some other practical advice in that paragraph that I just cut for the sake of my readers. Ha!

One little tidbit I loved comes from an early interview with Jodie Foster:

"Everything that you do as an actor is about reading. Everything you do as a direction is about reading. It's about reading deeper, and reading between the lines, and perceiving more than just what's on the surface. The study of literature is just about looking deeper."

Kristen says

Over the past few years I've come to think of Terry Gross as a kind of companion...someone I hear from regularly, whose voice has become as familiar as a good friend's. I love hearing her say "This is Fresh Air" with the same relish each time; I admire how well-prepared she is for every interview, and how incisive her questions tend to be. This book is mainly transcripts of previously-aired interviews with people involved in the arts-- many of which I enjoyed, writers like Carol Shields being highlights for me--with a bit of extra insight and commentary mixed in. Gene Simmons is intolerably obnoxious to her in his interview, for example, and we get TG's comments about that and the rationale behind the decision to air what could have just been buried. Enjoyable if you are a fan of this intelligent lady, her show, or the arts in general.

Dean Moberly says

Transcripts from several of Terry Gross' interviews on NPR's Fresh Air. Books like this are great for short attention spans, in that one can go to bed with Nicolas Cage and Chris Rock, then read Gross' talks with Mario Puzo and Bootsy Collins while waiting for the bathroom to open up the next morning (the queue to the shower backs up fast in our house). As an added bonus, Gross and Gene Simmons from KISS get all screwed up in verbal fisticuffs right off the bat. For the record: if it weren't for the KISS Alive album that my parents purchased for me when I was six, I would not be who I am today... there's a whiff of shame involved, but I accept that. Gene Simmons, however, is the biggest ass alive, and I don't believe for one moment that he is capable of shame. That one interview alone is worth the price of the book (or in this case, the sixty-cents I

owe the library for returning it late).

Suzanne says

I really wanted to give this 3.5 stars. It was interesting but I wish there would have been more conversations with authors. It was a very easy read, I would read one chapter a night right before going to sleep. I learned some things about Jodie Foster and her education, Dennis Hopper and his interest in art, Isabella Rossellini and the illness she had as a child. The conversations were exactly that, conversations not deep reveals which was refreshing.

Todd N says

This was another birthday book from my mom. (I'm the kind of guy who gets books for his birthday.)

I've been aware of Fresh Air for a long time, though I've only been a fan relatively recently. At first I found it boring, then I denounced it (a la Chris White) for being so relentlessly middlebrow, then I happened to catch a few interviews about Iraq and Afghanistan and finally became a fan.

My wife has always been a fan of Fresh Air, and I even took her to see Terry Gross give a talk at De Anza College. I think the seeds of liking her were planted that night when she played a tape of an abortive interview with Lou Reed. Afterwards we stood in line to have her sign some Fresh Air cassettes. She rolled her eyes at me when I asked her to sign both of them. (*I said please, Terry. I wasn't trying to oppress the sisterhood. Honest.*)

But like I was saying, I am a fan now. I always have Fresh Air podcasts on my iPhone to listen to in the car when I'm not in the mood for the beeps and clicks from my local college radio stations.

Most of the interviews in this book are with pop culture figures, which are usually my least favorite interviews of hers. But each interview was riveting and helped me gain more insight into the subject as an artist. Her ability to get straight answers out of George Clinton and her interview with a surprisingly down to earth Bootsy Collins is worth the price of the book alone. The Conan O'Brien interview made me laugh out loud and sent me to YouTube to rewatch Triumph the Insult Comic Dog interview people in line for Star Wars.

The infamous interview with Gene Simmons is also included. I first heard it as a podcast on my iPhone last year (though I had heard that rebroadcast rights weren't granted by Mr. Simmons). I don't know if this interview was edited or broadcast raw, but it gives a lot of insight into how well Terry Gross thinks on her feet and what her hot buttons are. As obnoxious as Mr. Simmons was the whole interview, I think he really set her off by (hilariously) caricaturizing her as sitting in a quiet room counting motes of dust.

Another great aspect of this book is the introduction in which she gives an overview of the show and shares some insight into why she seems so uncomfortable talking about herself. The fact that she seems vaguely ashamed of her behavior reveals a lot about how hard she is on herself and why the interviews in the book are so excellent.

Dariane says

I love Terry Gross's work on Fresh Air. I was surprised at how different hearing an interview is from reading one; you gain insight both ways. What keeps this book from a five whole stars is that although I found the compilation of interviews interesting, I wished the book had more on the process of the interview. How are guests chosen on the show? How do you prepare for the interview? How is the research conducted? How do you decide what kinds of questions to ask?

I guess I was hoping for the book to be more about Terry Gross.

Heidi says

Writing a full review on my blog, but my notes:

- * She does a lot of research and asks really specific questions rather than broad ones. Googling the interviewee isn't enough; you need to find interesting personal tidbits about his/her life to make the interview more personal.
- * She asks about ideas and connections, what motivated the interviewee, did he/she understand, how did XXX event affect/inform him/her
- * She brings up controversy while acknowledging that it is controversial
- * "Do you think your experience/background as XXX contributed to your being YYY now?"
- * She finds writers' themes, not just the history and asks about what they like to explore
- * She's not afraid to comment instead of question, to add her own insights to the conversation
- * "Do people misinterpret you"--what a great question!
- * Instead of asking "how" or "what," she'll ask "Would you speak about... ?"

There is more, but these are some first notes.

Nan says

Fresh Air is my go-to podcast while walking my dog. No matter who Terry Gross interviews the result is always enlightening and entertaining. This collection of interviews dives way back into the archives, providing conversations with celebrated individuals rarely heard from in this way. A few of my favorites: John Updike, James Baldwin, Sonny Rollins, Mary Karr. A great book to dip into.
