

QUESTIONS FOR DEBORAH SOLOMON

## Interviewing the Interviewer

*For the last two years, Deborah Solomon has conducted the concise and incisive interviews that run in the front of The New York Times Magazine every week. NYRM spent an afternoon with the interviewer at her Manhattan apartment. As it turns out, editing a 5,000-word transcript is even harder than mimicking Solomon's edgy interviewing style.*

**Q** **How did you get your job?** Totally by accident. A terrible mistake. Just kidding. I did an interview with Frank Gehry, the architect, in which he totally disgraced himself by confessing that he didn't submit a design to the reconstruction of the Trade Center because they weren't paying anything. *The Times* got a lot of mail from people who were appalled at his lack of civic largesse, and they started giving me other interviews, and I just sort of fell into it.

**Does interviewing require talent?** That's funny. It requires no special talent. It requires probably the same talent that any friendship requires. Attentiveness is important. You should be listening and not just frantically jotting down notes.

**You have said that editing is an underrated art form.** I do think a good Q-and-A depends more on good editing than on talented interviewing because the shaping of the piece is important. The Q-and-A should have a narrative arc.

**So your editing requires talent?** You have to be mentally alert.

**That doesn't sound like talent.** A lot of people go through life half asleep.

**Have you ever had hostile feelings toward the person you're interviewing?** All the time. Most of the people in the world are pretty irritating, and I think it's important to call them on it. When I interviewed David Frost on why he was leaving CNN for Al-Jazeera International, he was evading my questions, and I got really angry.

**That was a harsh interview.** It was? I didn't think it was that harsh. If I say, "Why are you going?" and he says, "Al-Jazeera's no different than CNN," I'm amazed that a fellow journalist, which he is, would patronize me that way. So I do get incensed over those sorts of things. That's probably what sets me apart from other interviewers. I'm easily incensed. I expect when I talk to people that they will try their best to be intelligent.

**And honest?** If you can't answer a question, then people should say, "I can't answer that." That's fine. I hate when they give you a fake answer. It's very patronizing to the reporter, and it turns the whole process into a game. I don't see it as a game.

**Aside from David Frost, who has given you fake answers?** There are so many big evaders out there. A lot of people in public life think it is OK when the press asks you a question to make up an answer. Only one person hung up the phone on me—Bill Weld, who is the former governor of Massachusetts, now running for governor of New York. He just made up things. He said, "I don't have time for this," and hung up. I called him back. I said, "We're not done with this interview. I have some more questions."

**What wouldn't he answer, for example?** It's not a matter of not answering. It's just that everything he said sounded like some prettified version of the truth. Why is he running in New York? Because he thinks "New York is the most beautiful state in the country." So then you have to say something like, "It's not more beautiful than Colorado." And he said, "I think it is." And that is what I would call a meaningless and unacceptable exchange. It's not why a man decides to run for office.

**How did you decide to ask Noam Chomsky if he's ever been psychoanalyzed?** I ask almost everyone that.

**Have you ever been psychoanalyzed?** No. I actually don't believe in analysis. I believe in self-analysis and I try to conduct myself in the spirit of self-criticism. I'm thinking of something Julian Schnabel once told me: "Why should I pay someone to entertain them?"

**Do you ask salary questions often?** I almost always do. They rarely go into the piece because the answers usually aren't that interesting.

**Are you salaried?** I'm paid per piece.

**How much?** I would never say.

**Is your job satisfying?** It's very satisfying, mostly because I've finally found a way to write without having to write.

BREE NORDENSON

