

UMBERTO ECO

selected quotes from the writer's 2008 Paris Review interview

Interviewer: In an essay on writing, you said "my poetry had the same functional origin and the same formal configuration as teenage acne."

Eco: ...later in life good poets burn their early poetry, and bad poets publish it. Thankfully I gave up rather quickly.

Interviewer: Do you think you might have actually enjoyed living in the Middle Ages [the time period Eco is most noted for writing about]

Eco: I suspect that if I lived in the Middle Ages my feelings about the period would be dramatically different. I'd rather just imagine it.

Interviewer: What draws you to [the Middle Ages?]

Eco: If I had to explain it, I would say that it's because the period is exactly the opposite of the way people imagine it. To me, they were not the Dark Ages. They were a luminous time, the fertile soil out of which would spring the Renaissance. A period of chaotic and effervescent transition...

Interviewer: In Foucault's Pendulum [Eco's renowned book - Dan Brown's The Davinci Code is said to be a dumbed down version of this] you write, "The more elusive and ambiguous a symbol is, the more it gains significance and power."

Eco: A secret is powerful when it is empty. People often mention the "Masonic secret." What on earth is the Masonic secret? No one can tell. As long as it remains empty it can be filled up with every possible notion, and it has power.

Interviewer: The idea of taking a fictional premise seriously seems to be present in many of your novels. Fictions somehow acquire substance and truth.

Eco: Yes, invention can produce reality...take Christopher Columbus. His vision of the earth was completely wrong. He knew, like everybody in antiquity, including his adversaries, that the earth was round. But he beli

eeded it was much smaller. Led by this false idea, he discovered America.

Interviewer: How do you begin researching your novels?

Eco: Foucault's Pendulum took me eight years to research and write...I went out on the street, I saw this car and that tree and I said to myself, Ah, this could be connected to my story. So my story grew day by day, and everything I did, every tiny scrap of life, every conversation, would give me ideas. Then I visited the actual places I [wrote] about...

Interviewer: But did writing novels change your idea of how much you could influence the reader as an author?

Eco: I always assume that a good book is more intelligent than its author. It can say things that the writer is not aware of.

Interviewer: Your library here in Milan is a legend in and of itself. What kind of books do you like to collect?

Eco: I own a total of about fifty thousand books. But as a rare books collector I am fascinated by the human propensity for deviating thought. So I collect books about subjects which I don't believe...Books that lie, albeit unwittingly.

Interviewer: You are one of the world's most famous public intellectuals. How would you define the term intellectual. Does it still have a particular meaning?

Eco: According to me, an intellectual is anyone who is creatively producing new knowledge...Critical creativity - criticizing what we are doing or inventing better ways of doing it - is the only mark of the intellectual function.

Interviewer: What benefits have knowledge and culture afforded you in your lifetime?

Eco: An illiterate person who dies, let us say at my age [79], has lived one life, whereas I have lived the lives of [many.] So I always encourage young people to read books, because it's an ideal way to develop a great memory and a ravenous multiple personality. And then at the end of you

r life you have lived countless lives, which is a fabulous privilege.

Interviewer: But an enormous memory can also be an enormous burden...

Eco: I like the notion of stubborn curiosity. To cultivate a stubborn curiosity, you have to limit yourself to certain areas of knowledge. You cannot be totally greedy. You have to oblige yourself not to learn everything. Or else you will learn nothing. Culture in this sense is about knowing how to forget...Discriminating what you want to learn and remember is critical from a cognitive standpoint.

The entire article, Umberto Eco, the Art of Fiction No.197 (21 pages), can be found at <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5856/the-art-of-fiction-no-197-pauleacute-baacutertoacuten>