

Subj: Brian Lamb
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From: [REDACTED]
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Hi Sallie, Mike and Tack -- It was such a treat to sit with you at the Hoot. I certainly know how to pick a group of tablemates! Here's my Brian Lamb interview, which ran in Feb. There's a bio box at the end.

Best,
[REDACTED]

feb 2 03 with photos and a sort of bio box

By Sylvia A. Smith
Washington editor

WASHINGTON -- He asked what S&M sex is. He asked who Abraham Lincoln was. He asked Jimmy Carter to analyze his role as a father. He asks why authors dedicate their books to the people they did; where they write; what their parents think of the book.

When Brian Lamb sits down with an author for an hour on C-SPAN's Booknotes, as he has weekly since 1989, the conversation has one point:

To teach someone something. On the best of days, that someone is Lamb.

``This is not a show done for intellectuals," the Hoosier native said. ``A lot of people thought it was in the beginning. They started to hear me ask some very basic questions, and they'd say: Oh, my goodness, why is he asking those stupid questions?"

So: Why is he asking those questions?

``I want to know the answer."

There's no way to tell how many people tune in to Booknotes at 8 p.m. Sundays because the C-SPAN, unlike commercial television, doesn't compile ratings. But Lamb has a sense that his questions strike a chord with viewers.

``People say to me: These are the same questions I want to ask. It's because they're so basic," he said. ``In this crazy television business, people think they have to ask the intellectual, erudite question that's going to make them look so bright. I don't care whether people think I'm bright or not. I really don't. I just don't care. I don't know how to describe it. I just don't care."

Thus, the questions that give viewers a peek inside the book and inside the author's psyche.

``He gets to the core of things in the simplest, least contrived sort of way," said Morton Kondracke, whose book about his wife, ``Saving Milly: Love, Politics and Parkinson's Disease," was the subject of a June 2001 Booknotes.

Caryle Murphy, a Washington Post reporter whose book on Islam was featured Nov. 2, said Lamb's interviewing technique appears chaotic, ``but it lends a surprise factor that a lot of people find interesting. ... You just wish there were more interviewers like him."

But there aren't. Lamb stands out among author interviewer on two counts. He reads the book, and he asks short questions that allow the author to talk -- often at length. On one typical show this month, in

fact, the Booknotes guest spoke 8,026 words. Lamb uttered 1,251.

“One of the things about interviewers in television is they abhor a vacuum,” Lamb said. “Commercial television doesn’t allow them to have a pause. Interviewers are almost trained putting words in people’s mouths. They ask closed questions. They say to the guest: You think that George Bush is a great president, don’t you? Well, we have just the opposite approach: What kind of president do you think George Bush is?”

“That person can take that anywhere they want to. You’re not prejudicing their answer. You’re not forcing them to say, No, I don’t think he’s a great president. It flows. They’re not used to that.”

Lamb readily acknowledges that C-SPAN’s Joe Friday approach doesn’t appeal to everyone. But its fans are die-hards.

Fort Wayne real estate executive Albert Zacher watches Booknotes every Sunday night. If he’s not going to be home, he tapes it.

Zacher’s enthusiasm started years before he was offered a slot on Booknotes, making him a rarity in the book world. Of the nearly 110,000 non-fiction books published this year, only 50 will be discussed on Booknotes. Zacher’s status is even more unusual because his book, a 329-pager on two-term presidents, was self-published, so he didn’t have a public relations machine hawking it.

But when then-President Clinton referred to the book as one he was reading right after his own re-election in 1996, C-SPAN was on the phone to invite Zacher to talk about “Trial and Triumph: Presidential Power in the Second Term.”

“There’s nothing to compare to it,” Zacher said of his hour-long interview. “It’s the premier opportunity for an author.”

In addition to the program being an oasis for authors who want to talk about themselves and their books -- rather than robotically repeating soundbites -- it’s an almost guaranteed income booster.

Zacher’s book sold out after his Booknotes appearance. So did “Carnegie,” a biography by Peter Krass that was aired Nov. 24.

“There was a huge spike in sales,” Krass said, noting that before his Booknotes interview, “Carnegie” was ranked about 2,000th on Amazon.com, where rankings are based on sales. After the program, he said, “it skyrocketed to 300.”

Connie Doebele, senior executive producer of Booknotes, said books on a president’s nightstand often end up on the show because “people like to know what a president is reading.”

Lamb makes the final decisions about which authors will be invited; “After all, he has to read the book,” Doebele said.

It starts with the list of books that will be published in coming months -- hundreds of biographies, historical accounts and books on public policy issues. Distributed by Publishers Weekly, a book industry publication, it’s Booknotes’ soup stock, but plenty of other ingredients make up the stew ladled out to viewers each week.

Lamb and the rest of the Booknotes team read book reviews, visit bookstores, listen to what their friends say, note the prize-nominated books, flip through the books that arrive in the mail. And of course, Doebele said, there’s the lobbying from publishing houses and authors’ press agents.

The culling process has some rules -- only non-fiction, no self-help, no repeat authors, what’s in the news.

“I don’t read any books in advance,” Lamb said. “We choose the books without reading them. I go to bookstores all the time. I read

reviews all the time. It's just a way of life. I'm constantly looking for things I've never read and don't know anything about.

“For instance,” he said of John McWhorter, whose interview will air Feb. 23, “we didn’t do his big book (‘Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in the Black America’) back in 2000. I don’t remember why. But he’s a player now, and let’s find out what he thinks. This book (‘Authentically Black: Essays for the Black Silent Majority’) allows us to do that.”

Lamb flippantly said the books are chosen on whim but immediately corrected himself.

“That’s not fair. Based on: I’ve never interviewed the author before, and he or she is well known. I’ve never done that biography before, and that sounds like it’s a good one. And who published it, who’s the author?” he said.

As for topics, “You’ve seen the threads: Civil rights, Vietnam, Lincoln, the Revolutionary War, Civil War, a bunch on World War II. Wars make good books. I have changed some over the years. I don’t do as many public policy books as I used to because you can’t get your teeth into them. I often don’t do sitting politicians because (their books are) nothing more than campaign vehicles to get on television shows,” he said.

The interview with McWhorter fits a Booknotes niche in two ways: The book explores race issues, one of the key themes of Booknotes books, and the conversation probed past McWhorter’s theories and into his personal background.

Lamb deliberately picks books about race issues “because we don’t deal with it very well in this society. It’s a great, low-key way to deal with it. People who are interested in it can listen to somebody complete a thought without being shouted at. ... This is a chance to talk about it. Then if you don’t like it, fine, throw something at the TV. But at least you get to hear the completed sentence.”

Lamb’s on-camera demeanor has a just-the-facts-ma’am quality. It has nothing of the uber-empathy of, say, a Barbara Walters. But it’s also void of the skepticism or judgment commonplace in a Mike Wallace interview.

“I’m a journalist, so I love it when we learn new things,” he said.

“But if you don’t put people in a confrontational situation, they become themselves. They’re not afraid to talk about themselves. I’m not trying to lower their barriers, I’m just trying to get to the person without being emotional about it. I don’t want them to cry. We’re not trying to get them to cry here. We’re just trying to get them to tell us about their lives and why they do what they do.”

They do.

The interview room is not unlike a confessional. It’s a small space — about 12 feet square — that holds two chairs, a small table and some cameras that are manipulated from the control booth. The walls are wrapped in black velvet, and no one else is there except Lamb and his guest.

When he asks questions about an author’s family, which have become a staple in the Lamb interview, the writers invariably drop whatever scripted comments they have (many acknowledge cramming before a Lamb interview). Their voices change. They become people instead of experts on some esoterica.

Sometimes — as it did with McWhorter — “you hit a note with them and bingo — there’s the emotion of the moment,” Lamb said. With McWhorter, whose parents had a stormy relationship and whose mother has

been restricted by an anurysm, ``I had no idea what his family situation was. I had no idea what I was getting till it was over. I wasn't trying to get him there. I just instinctively asked him about his father."

When that happens, Lamb said, ``you get an understanding about the person, and you then can decide whether you want to go buy their book. And if you want to buy their book, you have a dimension that you don't get from (other sources).

``This is one of my pet peeves of book publishers: They give you six lines in the book about the author. It drives me nuts. What in the world is that all about? Here you have somebody that's worked 15 years on their book, and you're getting six lines of their background. And then they tell you stupid things like they've written for the Washington Post, the New Republic, the New York Times and they've appeared on NPR and CBS morning news and the Today Show. I don't care about any of that. Tell me where they were born, how many kids they have, are they married, where do they live, where'd they go to school."

As intriguing as the interview was, McWhorter will never be asked to repeat Booknotes. Nor will Zacker, Murphy, Kondracke or the 700 other authors who have appeared on the program over the years.

There's an ironclad once-time-only rule.

``I stole the idea from Broadcasting magazine, of all things, the one-time rule," Lamb said. ``Broadcasting magazine has a thing called the Fifth Estater. It's a profile they do on a person in the broadcasting business, and you only get one in your life. I always thought that was smart because there are lots of folk out there. Television is the worst at concentrating on only a thousand people out of 288 million, and that's all you see on a yearly basis. ... I wanted to build in a system that made sure we were constantly going to new faces. Isn't it just fabulous that after 14 years, there have been 705 people, all different people?"

the end

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Brian Lamb, CEO and founder of C-SPAN

Age: 61

Hometown: Lafayette, Ind.

Education: Lafayette Jefferson High School, Purdue University

Career: U.S. Navy, various jobs on Capitol Hill and the Nixon White House, bureau chief of Cablevision magazine, founder of C-SPAN, the system financed by the cable TV industry. C-SPAN began live coverage of the House in 1979.

Book that launched his fascination with history: ``The Miracle of Philadelphia" by Catherine Drinker Bowen. ``It's the first time in my life -- and I read it in 1986 -- that I ever really thought of the Constitutional Convention. She just brought it to life as human, not as boring history."

Type of books he read before that: ``Bonfire of the Vanities."

Number of authors Lamb has interviewed on Booknotes: 702 o. ``I suspect that I have read 500 of them from cover to cover, and the other 200 almost cover to cover. I don't want to say every single book's been read cover to cover, because you run out of time periodically."

Average time the camera is on Lamb during a Booknotes program: 4.5 minutes.

Where all 702 Lamb interviews can be viewed or read verbatim:
www.booknotes.org/

Lamb's definition of a good book: ``Just teach me something. I want to walk away from this and know more than when I started. When they don't do that, I just scream. Then I'm saying, I'm not having any fun at this, and this weekend is long, and I don't like this."

The Booknotes guest who created the biggest viewer reaction: Ann Colter, author of ``Slander: Liberal Lies about the American Right." ``I had more e-mail, more reaction, more anger. It's because she's so strong, so direct, and people tend to either love her or hate her. Strong stuff: Like, how dare you interrupt my Sunday evening with that horrible human being? Or, she's the best guest you've ever had on that show."

His parents' attitude toward books: ``My parents weren't readers. There were no books to speak of at home. We didn't talk about books. We didn't give books away very often at Christmas. They did not play a major role in my life."

Books with his byline: Three; all compilations of interviews from Booknotes.

What's on Booknotes tonight: ``The Two Faces of Islam: The House of Sa'ud from Tradition to Terror" by Stephen Schwartz.

the end