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Contact: Kristen Radtke  
Director of Marketing  
kristen@sarabandebooks.org

Rights: Sarah Gorham  
sgorham@sarabandebooks.org

2234 Dundee Road, Suite 200  
Louisville, KY 40205  
502/458-4028  
www.sarabandebooks.org

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## Reader's Guide

### *Author Asks*

from Elena Passarello

author of *Let Me Clear My Throat*

1. Do you think that, in the collective work of all fourteen essays and fifteen monologues, I reach any major conclusions about the voice? If so, what are they? If not, should I have?
2. Who, for you, is the loudest of all the voices in the book? What about this voice's presence makes it so? And how does the fact that this particular voice stands out color the overall "message" of the book?
3. There's an old saying: "writing about jazz is like dancing about architecture." If this is the case, then I'm sunk! What are the various ways I tried to get music and voices onto the page? Which sonic descriptions were the most evocative? After reading the book, do you agree with the adage that writing about music is, essentially, futile?
4. For the history-focused essays in the book, I tried to keep my persona at a remove. When you "met" that persona in full-on personal essays like "Harpy" and "Playing Sick," did that speaker/character jive with the speaker of more heavily-researched pieces like "How to Spell the Rebel Yell" or "Hey Big Spender?"
5. I had a difficult time pinpointing the first crows of American pop music in "And Your Bird Can Sing." I scoured every week of 15 years of the Billboard Hot 100 charts and listened to hundreds of songs before I found my proposed "first crows," the Fendermen. Are they pop's first crows in your opinion? If not, who is? And what do you think of my branding Elvis and Little Richard as non-crows?
6. A few voices (maybe six total) appear in two or more essays. Which "recurring voices" did you track? How/ why are they treated differently in each essay?
7. Some essays—"The Wilhelm Scream," "A Monstrous Little Voice," "Playing Sick," "Judy! Judy! Judy!"—steal their formats from other kinds of documents (questionnaires, record liner notes, screenplays, etc.). Why do you think I made these structural choices? How does your reading style change when you encounter them (versus the essays with a more traditional, "paragraph-by-paragraph" form)?
8. What was it like to read the short monologues ("The Novice," "The Shape-Shifter," etc) in between the longer essays? Did you connect them to the long essays around them? How did they enhance (or detract from) your overall reading experience?
9. How did the titles of the three major sections influence your interpretations of the essays? Which title best represented its section? Would you have preferred I not divide the book into separate sections?

10. Nearly every essay includes an extended exploration of a second topic that accompanies the star voice, almost like a “pairing” in food and wine. I paired rock voices with a murder of winter crows, stage fright with psychological theories on disgust, and Judy Garland with architecture, for example. What other major “pairings” did you spot? How does this kind of work change the overall “contract” of an essay on voices?

11. I began writing the first 2/3 of “Harpy” months before I entered the Stella! Contest, imagining that I was going to go down there and lose. How would the essay have changed in tone if it ended with me not winning? Would it have been a more fitting ending? Was it dangerous of me to begin writing with that assumption?

12. “Space Oddity” is all about the two dozen voices currently floating outside our solar system on NASA’s “Golden Record.” Which voices would you have included? Why are your choices excellent representatives of the human voice?

## *Writing Exercises*

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### 1. VOICE AS MIRROR

It’s often surprising to learn how others hear your voice—sort of like the shock you feel when you hear yourself on a recording. Mining your experiences for instances in which friends, strangers, or family commented about the way your voice sounds is a somewhat untapped way to go about creating yourself on the page.

When in your life has someone commented on the way you sounded? Maybe you moved to a new town and got teased for your accent, or maybe your voice changed before those of the other guys in Jr. High, or maybe a lover once told you s/he called “just to hear the sound of your voice.” List up to ten of these. Then either A) tell the one story with the most potential, or B) string several shorter stories together in a series of vignettes.

### 2. DEvised MONOLOGUES

I loved making the 15 little interstitial “monologues” of the book, most of which came from interviews with a single subject. It was so fun to go out and not only capture another person’s story, but also to then come home and shape their words so that their voices sprang from the page.

Try it yourself—think of a friend or colleague with a compact story to tell (nothing too epic). Instead of writing a series of interview questions, devise a few (3-4) loaded and open-ended questions that will get them “monologue-ing.” An example might be: “Tell me the whole story of the concert, from when you got the tickets to when you went home” or “Describe the whole process of becoming a contestant on Jeopardy.” You should prepare a few follow-ups or supporting questions if the monologue wanes (and anticipate generating a supplemental question on the fly, just in case.)

Get your subject in a room (or on a phone—no emailing or chatting!) and set them up to answer your questions in a short space of time—30 minutes, tops. While they speak, let them know that you’re listening to and enjoying them. Either take furious notes or record them to capture their speech idiosyncrasies.

Then, when you are back at your desk, whittle their transcript into a one-page “monologue” with a beginning, middle, and end. Force yourself to keep things compact—300 words, tops. Make sure you highlight the phrases and details that best capture the music of this particular speaker. You might have to re-arrange the order of text a little, which is fine, but use the transcript as the sole material for the monologue.

You’ll know you’re finished when you can see the piece as a self-standing document that an actor or a stand-up comedian might perform—a real “character” built into the nuts and bolts of the prose speech.

# Suggested Reading, Listening & Viewing

## READS

1. Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces* and Lester Bangs, *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung*: Two writers that taught us how to take rock voices seriously.
2. Carl Sagan et al, *Murmurs of the Earth*: The story of the NASA team that shot a golden record filled with singing into outer space.
3. Margo Jefferson, *On Michael Jackson*: A brilliantly quiet examination of perhaps the loudest presence in our popular culture.
4. David Foster Wallace, “Up, Simba” from *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*: DFW on the McCain campaign in the 2000 primaries. I was very inspired by the structure here—specifically, the rush of menace (and meaning) that came at the end of so many pages of Wallace’s wild joviality.
5. Jean Cocteau, *La Voix Humaine*: The haunting 1936 Surrealist one-act that proves that a one-sided telephone conversation can be high drama.

...And a book about sound and performance can never just have suggested “reads,” so...

## WATCHES

6. *Farinelli* (1994): A vivid, if silly, reimagining of life when castrati were the rock stars.
7. *The Conversation* (1974) and *Blow Out* (1981): My two favorite films about recorded sound.
8. *Little Voice* (1998) based on the Jim Cartwright play, it is my number-one ode to song and stage fright (Michael Caine singing Roy Orbison is worth a viewing alone).

## LISTENS

9. *Judy! Live at Carnegie Hall* (1961): Hear what the five decades of fuss is all about.
10. John Cage’s “Aria (for any voice)”: Cage’s 20-minute vocal piece is written in pictures rather than notes; it asks vocalists to sing things like colors and wiggly lines and gibberish phrases. First listen to a few YouTube clips of singers trying it and then do as the title instructs and try singing it yourself.