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BOOKS

Fresh questions

A collection of interviews by NPR's Terry Gross

REVIEWED BY SHAWN A. MILLER

ALL I DID WAS ASK by Terry Gross. Hyperion, 2004. 384 pp. \$24.95.

The mark of a good journalist is the ability to interest an audience in a topic or person previously considered uninteresting or, indeed, unknown altogether.

Terry Gross, host of the National Public Radio program *Fresh Air*, has this quality in spades. Her interviews are lively and cerebral whether she's speaking with a Washington policy wonk or a jazz musician. And it's her ability to elicit interesting responses rather than the force of her personality—for Gross is an unobtrusive interviewer—that can make the identity of the guests on *Fresh Air* almost an afterthought for listeners.

Gross's new book, *All I*

Did Was Ask, collects 39 of her radio interviews with writers, actors, musicians and artists, with an introduction giving a little bit of history about *Fresh Air* and how the show works. The book is essentially a collection of radio transcripts and, though the speaking styles and some of the personality of Gross and her guests disappear on the printed page, the record of their interaction is entertaining and worthwhile.

All I Did Was Ask shows the broad spectrum of Gross's guests and the eclectic interviews that result. At one moment Gross is asking Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Carol Shields if—given her advanced breast cancer—she fears death. The next she's asking Steven Tyler of the rock band Aerosmith about his heroin use, to which he replies:

"As far as heroin goes, it also afforded me to be able to sleep a lot, and heroin also keeps a lot of water in your flesh; that's the upside. The downside is that it will kill you in the end. Heroin makes you feel so good."

In her interview with funk musician George Clinton, who wears long multi-colored dreadlocks, Gross asks about him, "How were you wearing your hair

at the time, when you were in the barbershop conking other people's hair?"

"Clinton: Conked, too. How did you know that phrase? You ain't supposed to know that phrase. That's an inside phrase. Conk is a real old one."

Gross—a "very, very short" middle-aged Jewish woman—can speak the lingo, it seems, no matter what her guest's line of work, though she is careful to clearly indicate the limits of her knowledge and expertise. Despite her admission of extreme shyness, Gross will mix it up in an interview as she does in her notorious exchange with Kiss bassist Gene Simmons and, impressively, in an interview with actress Uta Hagen who initially bristles at a question before Gross brings her back

around without resorting to flattery or obsequiousness.

Though Gross's conversations with celebrities are funny and often substantial—she jokingly says to talk-show host Conan O'Brien, "Let's face it, you got married just to prove you're not gay"—she has a gift for engaging lesser-known artists whose insights are often profound and touching.

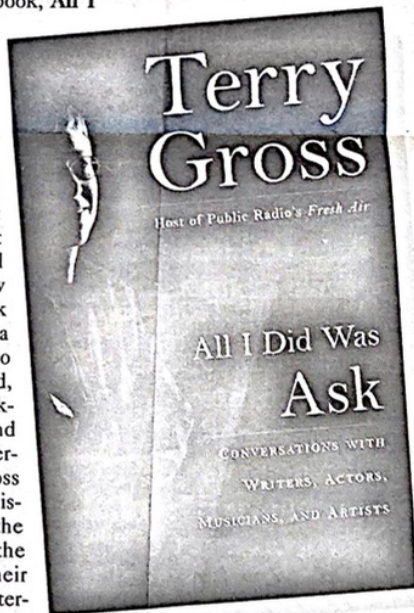
Writer Joyce Johnson, at one time the lover of Jack Kerouac, details her reaction to seeing a

photograph of Kerouac

used in a Gap ad in which she was air-brushed out. Memoirist Mary Karr describes kissing as "erotic cheese and crackers" before the main course of sex (that's how her boyfriend at the time saw it). And Andre Dubus talks about the long road of forgiveness he traveled after an accident confined him to a wheelchair.

The reader may not be familiar with any of these artists prior to reading Gross's interviews, but their stories are compelling all the same.

A number of the subjects Gross has interviewed have since died and though many of the interviews from the show can be heard online at www.freshair.npr.org, the record of their thoughts and feelings in book form is a valuable cultural contribution. ■



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