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Donna Seaman. *Writers on the Air: Conversations about Books*. Paul Dry Books. 2005. 467 pp. \$24.95. Vendela Vida. *The Believer Book of Writers Talking to Writers*. Believer Books, 2005. 485 pp. Paper: \$18.00.

When a writer is interviewed, there's often the risk that he or she will come off like an idiot or inadvertently gut their work of significance. Neither of /154/ those things is avoided in the books under review, but the self-embarrassment is minimal.

The first title collects thirty-two interviews ably conducted by Donna Seaman and drawn from her radio program *Open Books*. A gentle and skilled interrogator, she clearly does her own research. Margaret Atwood's self-congratulation leaps off the page, while Peter Carey takes the questions, broadens them, and courteously involves Seaman in the process. Philip Lopate preens, while Diane Ackerman infectiously enthuses. Aleksandar Hemon is unfettered: "Nonfiction is for cowards" puts things clearly, contrasting with Lee Gutkind making a case for creative nonfiction and Ward Just arguing that journalism is the best way to "get into the way of life." Such contrasts enrich the book. T.C. Boyle's views on the decline of the environment are counter-balanced by Wade Davis and Sy Montgomery. First-time novelists understandably speak on more narrow topics, but Seaman respects each guest's contribution. Such is the power of radio that it can throw a veil over all disfigurements, despite its apparent intimacy. Unfortunately, the editing methodology behind the transposition of the spoken word to the page so as to "conform to print conventions" and make the interviews easier reading is not revealed.

The mediums in Vendela Vida's *Believer* book include regular mail, e-mail, telephone, fax and in-person interviews. Each subject was chosen because someone said, "I'd like to have a conversation with ___." The results show that a national broadcast can cow those who are intrepid in print. Edward P. Jones opens up to Z.Z. Packer more than he did with Seaman. Since interrogator and subject know each other, the interplay between Zadie Smith and Ian McEwan, Adam Thirlwell and Tom Stoppard, Dave Eggers and Joan Didion, or, especially, Ben Marcus and George Saunders, display humour and a performance aspect which are often missing from pronouncements on what the role of the artist is in today's world. Jonathan Lethem and Thisbe Nisse ask questions that are more insightful than the answers Paul Auster and Siri Hustvedt supply. When Janet Malcolm gets "all huffy" over a vexing topic, she analyses her reaction for the benefit of Daphne Beal, and concludes: "even journalists are not immune to the vanity and self-deception that interviews bring out in their subjects and that journalists, like novelists, lie in wait for." Readers of these books will come to their own conclusions on how the subjects accidentally reveal or hide themselves. Vida and Seaman have compiled entertaining and valuable sources for further examination of new and familiar authors.