



# THE CONVERSATION

by David Brooks

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## THE STORY

Two strangers meet in a restaurant in a piazza in the Italian city of Trieste. Stephen, an Australian engineer living in Paris, and Irena, an Italian translator, share a meal and exchange stories in an atmosphere of geniality and refinement.

As the story gradually unfolds in conversation, the reader is treated to Brooks' effortless reflections on language, history, art, love and desire, and all of the thoughts and sensations that strike an Australian in Europe. The play of culture, philosophy and food is reminiscent of John Lanchester's brilliant *The Debt to Pleasure*. The chapter titles, Antipasti, followed by Primi Piatti, and Insalata etc., add to the atmosphere of delightful indulgence.

Together, Brooks' whimsy, the romantic exotica of the Italian setting and the mysterious plot make for a wonderfully entertaining read that effortlessly balances substance with style.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Brooks has published several collections of poetry, short fiction and essays, and three previous novels, *The House of Balthus* (1995), *The Fern Tattoo* (2007) and *The Umbrella Club* (2009). His work has been highly acclaimed, widely translated and anthologised, and short-listed for the Miles Franklin, New South Wales Premier's, Adelaide Festival and many other awards. In 2011 his non-fiction work *The Sons of Clovis: Ern Malley, Adoré Floupette, and a secret history of Australian poetry* was published. He teaches Australian literature at the University of Sydney, is co-editor of the journal *Southerly*, lives in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales, and spends a small part of each year in a village on the sea coast of Slovenia.

## DISCUSSION NOTES

1. One of the early reviewers of *The Conversation* said that the book read sometimes like a thriller. Do you agree? What do you think this reviewer might have meant by that?
2. Almost the entire novel is written in dialogue. Were you conscious of this? Did you find this affected your reading in some way?
3. The young woman's name is Irena Rizzoli. Although she has lived in Trieste, she now works in Turin, and is originally from a village near Padua. But is she who she seems she is?

University of Queensland Press – Book Club Notes

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4. 'Confession,' writes J.M. Coetzee, 'is one element in a sequence of transgression, confession, penitence, and absolution.' Would you agree that there is an element of confession in Stephen's half of the conversation? If so, do you think he receives any kind of absolution?
5. If Stephen can be seen as involved in some kind of confession, could the same thing be said of Irena? Why/why not?
6. *The Conversation* is about a conversation, obviously, but is there something more? A plot behind the plot?
7. Have you ever had a conversation as long and intense as this? If so, what were the circumstances that enabled it to happen?
8. Which of the book's 'philosophical' ideas appealed to you most? Why?
9. Which of the book's stories appealed to you most? Why?
10. Stephen: a wise man? a fool? lost? found?
11. Do you think there is a particular theme running through the stories that Stephen and Irena tell each other? A theme that they might not be aware of? What do you think it is?
12. Does a novel have to be set in Australia to be Australian? Stephen Mitchell is Australian. The author is an Australian. Are there some other ways in which this seems an Australian novel to you?
13. About three-fifths of the way through the book, Stephen says, 'It's been wonderful to talk with you, I have thoroughly enjoyed it – loved it – and I hope that it can continue for a while longer! But is it, is this, the real conversation?' What do you think? Is there some larger conversation that this conversation between Stephen and Irena is a part of?
14. The book ends with a very definite suggestion of repetition: Stephen and the Russian find themselves in very nearly the same predicament. Why do you think the book has been constructed in this way? Is it their predicament, or is it Irena's?
15. There is unity of time (the book takes as long to read aloud as the conversation would take). There is unity of place (the Piazza Unita). There is even, in a sense, unity of theme (experiences of love). The evening and the conversation seem to be rather scrupulously realistic. So why does the book end in the strange way that it does? Have there been hints of this before? What is the author trying to convey by this?