



Sam Leith: “YOU TALKIN’ TO ME?”¹

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Have you ever wondered what do Plato, Adolf Hitler, Eminem, and Barack Obama have in common? You will, once you take a first glance at Sam Leith’s book *YOU TALKIN’ TO ME?* by Profile Books.

By speaking, we also perform an act, “practically, any speech act can be understood one way or another, as rhetorical – either in and of itself or in the context of its utterance”. Reading this book, you will learn what rhetoric is, gain a better understanding of how the art of persuasion works, and “be able to appreciate its wonders and pleasures”. In the meantime, one will also be able to use the gained knowledge in everyday life.

A fun and thrilling book² that gives us a deep insight into rhetoric – the answer to the initial question of our story. Leith published a second book on the topic in 2012, titled *Words like Loaded Pistols: Rhetoric from Aristotel to Obama*.

About the Author

Sam Leith was born in 1974 in Paddington, London. He is a former literary editor of the Daily Telegraph and contributes regularly to the *Evening Standard*, *Guardian*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Spectator*, and *Prospect*. Leith is also the author of *The Coincidence Engine* (2011) novel and three other books: *Dead Pets* (2005), *Sod’s Law* (2009), and *Words Like Loaded Pistols: Rhetoric from Aristotle to Obama* (2012).

The book *You Talkin’ to Me?* was inspired by a lengthy but successful newspaper article on Barack Obama’s rhetoric that the author wrote as an English literature student.

1 Profile Books LTD, London, Great Britain, 2011, ISBN 978-184-668-316-9.

2 *You Talkin’ to Me?* was first published in 2011 in London, Great Britain, then re-published in 2012. It is almost impossible to find this brilliant book in Romanian book shops, but you can get it easily for a fair price at Amazon and it is also available on Google Books.

At First Glance

You talkin' to me? is a small, light-weight paperback book with a bit less than 300 pages – a short overview of the subject. Not the kind that lasts forever, but it is the perfect choice for compensating those moments when waiting for someone or travelling on the bus. It is also available in Kindle edition.

The cover of the book has a creamish-coloured background with red, black, and blue letters on it. The first thing the reader comes across while checking out the front cover is the Sunday Times' review *Witty and Revealing* in small blue letters and the name of the author under it in large red capitals. The title follows in large navy blue capitals, between two red brackets. The front cover uses a centred one-word-in-a-row technique, spreading the title all over the cover page and adding pictures of public speakers that we are all familiar with, such as *Barack Obama* and *Margaret Thatcher*. The later one I found a bit of a scam since the book never actually discusses Thatcher's or any other female public speaker's techniques on the account that "the point at which women came to be not only enfranchised but welcomed into the legislatures, courtrooms and boardrooms of the modern world was near enough the point at which our long history of understanding and consciously thinking about rhetoric sank beneath the waters of Lethe". On the bottom of the cover page, in a single row, it says: "Rhetoric from Aristotle to Obama". The back cover reminded me of the front cover because it has the exact same two red brackets placed in the same spot, but this time Boris Johnson's words and a summary are between them, ending with *The Guardian's* review.

The book has already received good ratings by several papers like *The Times*, *Telegraph*, *Spectator*, *Evening Standard*, *Financial Times*, *TLS*, *Country Life*, *Metro Books of the Year*, *Scotland on Sunday*, *The Week*, *Avanti!Magazine*, *Literary Review*, *Belfast Telegraph*, and *Salon*. The first two pages – usually blank – are filled with these reviews giving us the feeling that we are about to read something brilliant that will give us a different perspective, a better understanding of rhetoric – and though I did not expect it to really work, by the time I had got to the end, it worked indeed! I would especially recommend this book to those who are new to the subject, as it gives you an overview of rhetoric, something that will spark your interest and keep you going for more, or at least gain some basic knowledge in the field. It can become interesting for those who are familiar with the subject or have previously studied rhetoric – like I have –, or at least give you a different, new perspective to think about.

The title *You Talkin' to Me?* is a rhetorical question, and it perfectly fits the content of the book – which I found very convincing concerning the importance of understanding how persuasion works even in our everyday life. This was the key component that convinced me – a social life and politics lover PR student – to add this item to my cart on Amazon, even if at the moment this book is only available in English.

Taking a Closer Look

The content is well structured, divided into seven main sections (Introduction, The Five Parts of Rhetoric, The Three Branches of Oratory, Conclusions, Glossary and Key Concepts, Notes and Index), some split up into smaller sections. The Introduction already gives us a general understanding of the main concept: “Rhetoric is language at play; language plus. It is what persuades and cajoles, inspires and bamboozles, thrills and misdirects,” what I totally agree with. By this book, the author intends “to provide a basic survey of the field: to trace how people have taught, practised and thought about rhetoric from its Attic origins to its twenty-first-century apotheosis”. *The Five Parts of Rhetoric* shortly explains the divisions of public speech: Ethos, Logos, Pathos, Exordium, Narration, Division, Proof, Refutation, and Peroration. It describes the role of Memory, Decorum, Jokes, Sound Effects, and the importance of controlling stress. The book brings up examples from the speeches of Satan, Cicero, Abraham Lincoln, Adolf Hitler, and Winston Churchill. *The Three Branches of Oratory* gives us an insight into the structure of deliberative, judicial, and epideictic rhetoric while analysing one branch of speech from Martin Luther King, Barack Obama, and The Unknown Speechwriter.

The language of the book is clear and highly sophisticated, but one must master English well in order to fully understand the text. The author’s style is a mix of formality and informality – I would consider it mostly informal because of the outright way of putting things as, for example: “This is one reason why the more good guys get clued into how it works, the better off we will all be” – all of this with a touch of sarcasm and a good sense of British humour. Leith’s style is – I believe – the perfect choice once you are trying to entertain both academics and non-academic readers, which is exactly what he did.

The author’s thesis is easy to follow since it not just details the structure of a well-built public speech but also gives readers a wide range of examples and introduces multiple points of views. Leith is a follower of Aristotle’s rhetoric, as he puts it in the concluding chapter titled *Thus It Can Be Shown...*:

Aristotle, to me, hit on something far more valuable than Plato. He saw that the world was compromised and imperfect, and that we don’t live among abstract forms, but among people. He saw that human beings are not actuated by abstract knowledge but by fear and desire, and that as long as there are people they will spend their whole lives trying to talk each other round. Rather than turn away in dismay, he worked to understand that. And what he found was wonderful.

The concepts are well defined thanks to the explanations provided both in the text while reading and in the *Glossary and Key Concepts* section at the back. Footnotes are also included, which provide important information on various

subjects mentioned and elaborate on points made in the text. The *Notes* chapter enlists the sources used by the author, sorted according to chapters, which simplifies the process of looking up unknown information in detail even while reading. Even if you have never studied any of the fields such as philosophy, literature, linguistics, or rhetoric, you would still be able to understand the main concept of this book and gain awareness in the topic. The ideas included are well-researched and -developed, covering shortly and plainly the ways of understanding public speeches and the intentions behind them. The information provided is very accurate, examining the methods and techniques of both past and present. Those who studied rhetoric know that choosing the scene of the speech is very important, just like the appearance of the speakers themselves and how they perform their speech. The book fails to mention any of these in detail.

Conclusion

The summary of the book *You Talkin' to Me?* is very powerful and convincing because it is built on seemingly both logical and sentimental arguments. “Rhetoric is everywhere language is, and language is everywhere people are. To be fascinated by rhetoric is to be fascinated by people, and to understand rhetoric is in large part to understand your fellow man.”

I believe Sam Leith’s book makes it easy and fun to understand the goals and purposes of public speeches for everyone. Though it does not really provide information about how to build up your own rhetoric speech, it rather focuses on describing what I like to call “small tricks” like how to convince your audience of your innocence even when you have been caught red-handed. It brings together plain historical facts and good humour on the same pages, but it does not mention the differences between classical and new rhetoric, which are key components of the subject discussed here.

Throughout the few hours of reading, it provided me a new perspective on the world and the role of rhetoric in it. When I finished reading this book and closed it, I was delighted at the fun I had had while reading. But then the following day I came to realize I would never look at public speakers the same way I had done before, though there is much left to read about the subject before delivering rhetorical speeches. I would highly recommend this book especially to those who feel like they have got tired of the boring everyday life and are seeking something different than usual.