



Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them

Francine Prose

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Long before there were creative-writing workshops and degrees, how did aspiring writers learn to write? By reading the work of their predecessors and contemporaries, says Francine Prose.

In *Reading Like a Writer*, Prose invites you to sit by her side and take a guided tour of the tools and the tricks of the masters. She reads the work of the very best writers—Dostoyevsky, Flaubert, Kafka, Austen, Dickens, Woolf, Chekhov—and discovers why their work has endured. She takes pleasure in the long and magnificent sentences of Philip Roth and the breathtaking paragraphs of Isaac Babel; she is deeply moved by the brilliant characterization in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. She looks to John Le Carré for a lesson in how to advance plot through dialogue, to Flannery O'Connor for the cunning use of the telling detail, and to James Joyce and Katherine Mansfield for clever examples of how to employ gesture to create character. She cautions readers to slow down and pay attention to words, the raw material out of which literature is crafted.

Written with passion, humor, and wisdom, *Reading Like a Writer* will inspire readers to return to literature with a fresh eye and an eager heart.

Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them Details

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Will Byrnes says

I was reminded of teachers of programming and tech things of that nature. What they do is offer ten to twenty minutes of lecture then go around from desk to desk answering individual questions. That appears to be Prose's technique, which got on my nerves. I was hoping for something a bit more formulaic, in the sense of indicating what rules made sense, showing how to use this or that tool to create such-and-such an effect. Instead, Prose says that there are rules, but here are many, many examples of writing outside those rules. Prose keeps saying that really-talented writers "doan need no stinking rules," without the bandolero, of course. This is what makes the book so frustrating. She clearly loves literature and can explain how a particular piece works. So that is what she does. She takes many, many examples of good writing and explains for each exactly what is right about it. I got the sense that she was using these quotes as filler, and I got really annoyed when they began to exceed reasonable paragraph length and go on for pages at a time. It feels like cheating. One thing she favors in her teaching is to read literature very, very closely, line by line, looking for the methods as well as information that is being used and communicated. There is certainly merit in this sort of analysis. And I suppose that is the strength of this book, her ability to look at the many examples offered and deconstruct them. But I felt unsatisfied by the book, no better off than before I had read it.

Lis says

I picked this up in the streets of Boston where they had those tables where it's like "take a book leave a book: the honor system" so I took this one and left it some harlequin romance book my mom had sitting in her car.

I probably should've kept the harlequin romance, jesus christ.

I dunno. There wasn't anything particular that irked me, it was just an amalgamation of tiny niggling little things that built up and eventually overwhelmed me into putting the damn thing down.

Some of her points were good ones, but not ones that I couldn't have learned in a normal high school English course at my school. Some of the other stuff was exceedingly outdated-- she seems to have a slightly over-the-top fixation on 19th century lit, and all that may not be as applicable now as it was back in the Victorian era.

I like an author that keeps it personal and honest; anecdotal stories are great things to put through a book with slightly dry subject matter. How ever, there *is* a limit. This...was something else.

She even spent several pages describing the horrors of public school transportation and how she spent 2 and a half hours (GASP) on the road in a bus. She bemoaned the drive and the kids she shared the bus with for most of the chapter.

\o/ Not my cup of tea.

Laura says

According to Francine Prose, creative writing cannot, in fact, be taught, but would-be writers can learn by studying the masters -- among others, Bruce Wagner, Jonathan Franzen, Alice Munro, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Scott Spencer. Prose is a proponent of New Criticism -- the philosophy that works can be understood only by reading of the work as an entity unto itself, and not by reference to external indicia, like the author's life or political beliefs. In keeping with that philosophy, Prose selects passages that she considers to be prime examples of effective writing, encouraging readers to linger over the words and savor them, rather than speed reading, and to read closely, with careful attention to each word and phrase (a technique you might have encountered as "close reading").

Above all, Prose admires the well-wrought sentence, the result of a painstaking, thoughtful use of language, which in turn she likens to painting or composing music. To show readers how to appreciate the writer's craft, Prose highlights passages from various authors, examining closely how their language creates characterization, rhythm, or mood. Though you might be a bit dubious about this approach at the beginning of this book (didn't we learn how to do this close reading stuff a while ago, in school?), Prose manages to excite, not bore, with her explication of how to discern the many minute decisions that authors have to make with every word, and how those decisions shape a work and a reader's reaction to the plot and characters. By the end, I was eager to go and read many of the books on the list of reading she considers essential -- her "Books to Be Read Immediately."

Of course, as with all such lists, people will take issue with inclusion of certain books and exclusion of others. Some people (I'm talking to you, Bookslut) have criticized this book for its undue attention to "dead white men," presumably because Prose is overly taken with the likes of John Cheever, Charles Dickens, and Anton Chekhov. This criticism is, not to put too fine a point on it, really fucking stupid. I'm all for inclusion and diversity, but good writing is good writing. And yes, Prose focuses mainly on white men, but she also pays close and extended attention to Jane Austen, ZZ Packer, Louisa May Alcott, Mavis Galant, Tatyana Tolstaya, Diane Johnson, and James Baldwin.

On the whole, Prose provides an entertaining and wise take on why good writing can move a reader.

Julie Christine says

This useful and engaging book is wisely divided into chapters of the key structures of literary fiction: Words; Sentences; Paragraphs; Narration; Character; Dialogue; Details; Gesture. In this way, an initial reading can provide a foundation, but the chapters remain as toolbox to open when a particular writing challenge presents itself.

In addition, Prose expounds upon her own particular literary Eurekas in chapters devoted to reading for inspiration and "courage," as well as an extensive list of works she exhorts the reader to consume as soon as is possible.

The tools that shone most brightly perhaps reveal more of me as a reader and writer than of Prose as the author. I just dug the sections on words, sentences and paragraphs; these are what turn me on the most when I read brilliant writing. I love the individual pieces that create the puzzle almost more than the puzzle itself. Each is unique and the skill is in putting them together to create a seamless work of art.

Dialogue scares the bejesus out of me, so I pored over this section, looking for the key. I became lost in the excerpt of Scott Spencer's *A Ship Made of Paper*, a copy of which I've got to find, soon, so I can see how things turn out.

Ms. Prose has a preference for the Russian greats: Kafka, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Gogol; 18th/19th century Western classics: Austen, Bronte, Dickens, Eliot, Flaubert, James, Melville, Proust. She references 20th century rebels like Joyce, Woolf, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Marquez, Nabokov, Salinger, Yates and a slew of writers I've never encountered, among them Henry Green, Denis Johnson, ZZ Packer, and Rebecca West.

Several of Prose's literary examples failed to light any fire in me. Others, like the scenes from Katherine Mansfield's *The Fly* and Heinrich von Kleist's *The Marquise of O--* were mesmerizing. I've read perhaps a third of the books or authors in her recommended list but I'd add only a handful of others to my TBR list, primarily the Russians, as well as rereads of Hemingway, Dickens, Trevor. But never will anyone convince me- not Oprah, not Francine Prose- that Gabriel Garcia Marquez is anything but a gigantic yawn. I've tried to muscle through GGM, I really have. Life is too short. Must save precious moments to read, reread and savor Austen.

Although I might not appreciate many of the works or the authors that Prose cites as masters of their craft, I am now inspired to explore the novels and short stories I do admire in new ways. And to perhaps create a meaningful sentence or paragraph of my own.

David says

This was another one of my forays into "Books about writing written by writers," some of which have been quite interesting, a few of which have been useful, but often they turn out to be tedious.

This was one of the tedious ones.

For starters, Francine Prose (who is apparently a highly regarded novelist with many books to her name, but with apologies, I've never read anything by her nor had I even heard of her before) is very much a **literary** writer. Meaning, books should be Important and Literary and Art and Say Something About the Human Condition. She doesn't actually put it like that, and she never comes out and says "Genre fiction is shit," but reading between the lines, that seems to be her attitude. In this book full of sometimes multiple-page excerpts from books that highlight her points, not one is from a popular or "genre" novel. She makes a few comments about how when she was young she read everything voraciously, "big crappy novels" and "childhood classics" - before she discovered there were "good books" out there.

She never names any of those "big crappy novels" or "childhood classics" that were so unworthy of her attention, but you can infer quite a bit from what she doesn't mention. Like most writers writing books like this, she ends it with a list of her personal "books you must read," and there is a lot of high-falutin' literature (Balzac, Calvino, Marquez, Franzen) a sampling of the usual classics (Dickens, Austen, Dostoevsky,

Flaubert, Hemingway), but the only book that could be remotely considered a modern genre novel is John Le Carré's *A Perfect Spy* — Le Carré being the usual go-to for people who need someone who writes genre fiction that they can grudgingly acknowledge as literary.

So Prose (who does have the perfect name for an author, doesn't she?) doesn't have much use for science fiction or fantasy or thrillers or adventure novels or any of that pop culture stuff. Fine. Everyone has their comfort zone. I'm still willing to listen to what an accomplished writer has to say.

The thing is, this book, which is subtitled "A Guide for People Who Love Books and For Those Who Want to Write Like Them," is really not much of a guide at all and contains very little writer's advice. It's mostly just Francine Prose's views on literature and what makes for good writing. Her observations are generally detailed and wise and knowledgeable, but it's a lot like reading the MFA or English lit classes that she talks about once teaching. Her chapters consist mostly of her saying "Here is something writers need to do well, and here is a lengthy excerpt from some highly literary work that does it well."

Like most MFA and English Lit teachers, she basically teaches what she, personally, knows and loves, so this is a great book if you really like Francine Prose's writing, or you love the same sorts of books she loves, but I wonder what she says to the eager young student who tells her he wants to write sci-fi?

Her chapters are titled *Close Reading, Words, Sentences, Paragraphs, Narration, Character (not "Characters," note), Dialogue, Details, Gesture, Learning from Chekhov* (yes, there is an entire chapter about how much you can learn from Chekhov), and *Reading for Courage*.

Notice what's missing? How about **Plot**?

Now, I'm sure Prose would say that plot is necessary too, but I get the impression that to her, plot is something that sort of happens as a byproduct of crafting your words and characters into the narrative you want to tell. I'm almost certain she's the sort of writer who looks down on writers who start with the plot and consider books to be primarily *stories* used as a vehicle to entertain the reader.

Yes, I realize I'm assuming here. Maybe Francine Prose doesn't think space operas and the works of J.R.R. Tolkien are "big crappy novels." Maybe she is actually a huge Harry Potter fan. But I doubt it.

I'm not up on a high horse because I perceive Prose to be disrespecting genre fiction. I try to bridge both worlds, and while I write (unpublished) genre fiction, and mostly read it, I do have some appreciation for the high-falutin' literary stuff too. And in recent years I have become quite convinced of the value of knowing your classics, even if what you really love is fantasy and science fiction. (Seriously, genre geeks, you'll be amazed how much more you will enjoy your genre stories when you catch references and allusions to older, more literary stuff permeating them.) And yes, Ms. Prose, you've convinced me, I should probably read some Chekhov.

But, I find her vision quite narrow, not even acknowledging this other dimension of reading and writing which draws people to books.

To be honest, I found the author Q&A in the addendum, in which she speaks rather critically and honestly about the publishing industry and MFA programs, to be more interesting than the book itself.

kris says

As a reader who would like to think herself a writer, I was hoping *Reading Like a Writer* would serve as a "how to" book on picking apart the books I read and the books I enjoy and the books I do not in order to better develop my own meager talents at writing.

Except this book is not quite that. It is rather an ode to High Literature, to Style and Gesture and Character. It does not stoop to "Low Brow Books" like fantasy, science fiction, romance. It seems to suggest that the only way to improve your skill as a writer is to attempt to ape the Classics, the Greats, the Writers. There's very little room for self or growth in this book: it's all lectures and lessons.

This, I find obnoxious. Why not write a book about finding voice? About how to determine the stories that make you sing and then figure out what notes they hit that make you feel things? How to turn that sensation of '*I like this writer*' into words, examples, a how-to manual to develop your own writing? I want a book that doesn't so much point readers to the "proper books" but rather hands them the tools to use on the books they are already seeking out.

I would happily read that book.

Robert says

Reading Like a Writer synthesizes Francine Prose's lifetime's experience in literature--as a reader, a writer, and a teacher. It's a splendid book because it is so learned, well-written, and insightful, presenting fiction (that's Prose's literary focus) in its component guises of words, sentences, paragraphs, narrative strategies, and telling details.

Francine Prose emphasizes close reading to best appreciate literary effects. She's not a member of a critical school; that never made sense to her. What made sense, from early on, was pondering James Joyce's diction, the rhythms of Tim O'Brien's incantatory sentences, the cunning of Isaac Babel's paragraphs, and the mastery of Chekhov's revealing details. In all cases, and many more (she cites Tolstoy, Cheever, Richard Yates, Henry Green, Kafka, Juan Rulfo, etc.) Prose illustrates her points with excerpts that go on as long as necessary. There are instances of such excerpts lasting a page or even two pages.

Yet this isn't a textbook; it's more a summary of discussions, observations, and debates that have gone on in writing workshops and literary seminars she's conducted at colleges and universities across the US for decades.

Prose excels in offering potential "rules" for writing vivid, compelling fiction, and then debunking those rules. Her penultimate chapter, focused on Chekhov, is a study in what might be called "the exceptionalism of genius."

I found Prose's defense of the sufficiency of fiction unto itself--not needing excessive theoretical interpretation--effortlessly compelling. Without belaboring the point, she frequently adverts to the ways in which fiction points in directions beyond reason and fact toward paradoxically convincing uncertainties. Fiction is best when it's definite and concrete, yet it is never a math problem with a rules-based answer to the calculations it provokes.

The final chapter focuses on how hard it has been for writers like Flaubert, Babel, and others to fulfill their sense of inspiration. Prose makes good use of their letters and diary entries to substantiate the utter uncertainty of a given story or novel, word by word, sentence by sentence.

This book will make better readers of writers, and better writers of fiction. It's written with humility and humor. A lot of fun.

As a bonus, there is a list at the very end of the book suggesting titles that must be read immediately...as if your life depended on it. This is a handy guide for revisiting Prose's observations in the context of complete works, most of them masterpieces, large and small.

Mark says

I finished the book today. I do not consider it essential reading but Prose's passion for literature, hums on every page. The book may be geared more to budding writers, than to readers. That said, serious readers will learn an important lesson: Slow down and savor. She calls it "close reading" and I have been guilty of this infraction, called: Fast Reading. I think I will attempt to read more "classic" works in print, than listening to them on audio, or at least for the debut voyage.

Conrad says

Overall very good. I tend to skim books a lot when I get to parts that bore me, and then I end up falling into the habit and skimming all the time. Reading this restored the pleasure and argued well for the necessity of careful, time-consuming reading (I have no idea how Francine Prose has had time to read everything she's read.)

My favorite chapters by far were the ones on dialog and sentences. Writing dialog is really tricky, and she doles out a lot of good advice.

(Once, in college, I brought a tape recorder with me in a pocket when I was having dinner with this girl I'd known since high school. She was and is a deft conversationalist, and I wanted to catch the nuances and rhythms of her speech and see what it looked like on paper. We sat down at the cafeteria and she started telling me about how her dad was divorcing her mom, and how she herself had been pregnant the month before and had an abortion without telling anyone. I immediately took out the tape recorder and turned it off. I'm surprised she's ever spoken to me again.)

Some of the others - particularly "Gestures" and "Paragraphs" - did not pack the same punch and excerpted too much, ending up like laundry lists of passages Francine Prose liked. (I found "Paragraphs" almost unbearably inconsequential. A summary: you can break a paragraph in different places. It affects the pacing of what you write. Revolutionary.)

Prose herself is a judicious and open-minded reader, and doesn't fall for the weird romanticism that a lot of writers bring when they give advice. (The sight of a keyboard had better give you a raging hard-on; if you ever write fewer than 93 drafts, you are completely hopeless; spend at least four hours pondering each comma; *real* writers don't have friends or pets or parents or plants or anything but a desk and a pen and a

stack of legal pads; blah blah blah.)

C.J. says

I really enjoyed this book and the author's focus on the finer points of writing. She references dozens of classic works and discusses word choice, sentences, paragraph structure, voice and many other fundamentals of writing fiction.

Her comments are geared to literary writers and often I felt insulted (as a lowly thriller writer). At one point she says, "Opening a mass-market thriller at random," and she quotes a horrible passage that I didn't recognize. She's telling us that mass-market thriller writers are lousy writers. I felt like a student in one of her fiction classes.

I would recommend this book for serious writers and those who love classic literature, though readers may find this book very dry.

Fabian says

Oh, these nuggets of wisdom from popular producing writers. First, it was King and his wackiness (only 2 drafts per novel? HOLY S***!), & sincere cheers (he wants you to succeed). Then JCO, even MORE PROLIFIC (if that can be fathomable) than King, telling you to WRITE YOUR HEART OUT (and basically to keep on keeping on--a writer always starts off as a reader, undoubtedly). Finally, Prose gives us an exhaustive delve into the greats themselves: 100 Years of Solitude, (gasp!) Revolutionary Road, Pedro Paramo, Pride and Prejudice, et al. Sometimes this becomes a hindrance: she gives us selections of select novels to give us a select lesson on plot, or sentence, or paragraph or character or details--too specific though enlightening. So many things go into the construction of fiction--I found myself being thoroughly overwhelmed. King and Carol Oates gave us a confidence that Prose pretty much drowns in academia's gastric juices. I will not, however, say that this was a complete waste of time. On the contrary, after reading this, yet ANOTHER POV is added on to literary knowledge (!!!!): it is imperative to know why writers write in the first place.

Shannon says

I've never read Francine Prose's fiction. But I wouldn't put it past her to be the most well read, articulate and accessible bibliophile currently operating. It seems she knows EVERYTHING, but she never makes me feel stupid or base in my reading choices. Instead, she is absolutely inspirational. It was all I could do not to put this book down at every page and run to the bookstore to scoop up and devour to classics that she brings to life through example, examination and pure joyful love of the creation of the written word.

If you want to write, this book will inspire. If you want to read classics, but need a starting point or a useable guide to the intimidating pantheon of cherished books, let Francine Prose be your guide. You'll get lost, but only in a good book.

Zach says

From the very beginning this book irritated me. I found myself stopping at intervals to try and figure out why that was. Unfortunately, I couldn't come up with a definitive answer. I think, simply, that I don't like Prose's personality. That sounds harsher than I mean it. Put a (slightly) nicer way, she's not the kind of person I would ever want to talk about books with. There is a degree of condescension and snobbery in her tone. She is a literary elitist, and I'm opposed to that.

I also felt deceived by the word "guide" in the subtitle. It seems to suggest the book will contain practical advice, but the book is anything but practical. Prose moves in the direction of Narratology, but she stops well short, and the reader is left with wishy-washy, half-realized theories. It is more a collection of feelings than a statement of anything definitive.

The book follows a systematic format almost without fail. Prose quotes a section of a work of fiction, then spends the next several paragraphs (usually three or four times the amount of text in the quote) describing what happened in the excerpt. She rarely pays attention to the supposed theme of each chapter (the theme being the element of writing she is telling the reader how to read like a writer). Maybe I'm a better reader than I realize, but almost never were any of her observations enlightening. Rarely did I feel she pointed out anything vital, something I hadn't gotten just from reading the original fiction.

The only section of the book I enjoyed was the next to last chapter, "Learning from Chekhov." It reminds me of my undergraduate days in music theory, when Bach was always used as the example of how to break a rule in four-part composition. Sadly, the wonderful lessons she claims to have learned from reading Chekhov were not applied to most of the book. I can't imagine this text being used for a writing workshop. It seems unhelpful at best and crippling at worst.

I don't care how many books she's published or whatever other successes she claims, the section at the end, "Books to be Read Immediately," is a pretentious load of crap. I agree that some of the books listed are great. But don't impose a reading list on me, and don't hold the whole world to your standard of reading enjoyment.

That's what it is. A book full of presumption. But it's popular and well-received. I won't say not to read it, lest I presume the universality of my own opinion.

Justin Tate says

My highlighter ran dry as I eagerly noted large swaths of wisdom and great lines from the many excerpts. It's not so much a guide to writing as it is guide to writer mindset. At the very least, it's a celebration of books and the art that goes into creating them. Fair warning, your to-read list (and Amazon cart) will overflow after only a few chapters.

With that being said, there are plenty of dull moments. Easily 50% of the book is wasted on setting up context for an excerpt that may be hit-or-miss. Prose seems to have little interest in literature written later than 1900 or in a language that's not Russian. I'm all for classics, but some variety wouldn't hurt. One particular failure occurred in the "Gestures" chapter where she tsk-tsked unnecessary actions in dialogue but

provided only one weak example of how this can be done effectively.

In the end, though, if you're as nerdy as I am for books, writing, and books on writing, you're going to have a good time.

Lewis Weinstein says

Reading Like a Writer has certainly made me a better reader, and perhaps a better writer. I was worried that "reading like a writer" would make reading more of a chore and less enjoyable. Not so. For me, it enhances my reading pleasure to stop every once in a while and consider what the writer is doing, and why, and how well. This approach is very helpful in editing my own writing.

I have accumulated many thoughts about writing, from Francine Prose and other sources, on my author blog. These thoughts are organized and linked by topic ... see ...

<http://lewweinsteinauthorblog.com/201....>

My GR friends are welcome to browse and to comment. Here are the topics ... so far ...

- * beginnings
- * character development
- * character development ... Daniel Silva on Gabriel Allon
- * conflict
- * dialogue
- * endings

HISTORICAL FICTION

- * historical fiction
- * historical fiction ... Reading and Writing Historical Fiction by Sue Peabody
- * historical fiction ... Blending Fiction and History: What Works? What Doesn't? by Paula Fleming
- * historical fiction ... in Eye of the Needle by Ken Follett

- * pace
- * plot
- * POV and voice
- * process ... in Write Away by Elizabeth George
- * process ... an interview with Elizabeth George ... Demystifying the writing process

* reflections on writing

* scenes

* setting

* surprise

* suspense & tension

* techniques

* theme

Shannon (Giraffe Days) says

I was eagerly awaiting the paperback edition to read this, it sounded so interesting. And it was. Is. Grr. Don't worry, it's not about grammar or punctuation. This is about reading for enjoyment and also for inspiration, motivation, guidance, example....

Divided into chapters on words, sentences, paragraphs, narration, dialogue, gestures - you get the picture - Prose (isn't that the most perfect name?!) uses analysis, anecdotes and extensive quotes to bring books and short stories to life.

The first chapter, on Close Reading, was very reassuring and gave me cause to be quite pleased with myself too. (Writers are perhaps the most needy of people, constantly needing reassurance and a bolstering of the ego.) She offers advice to new writers on reading books like 'professional' writers do:

I read closely, word by word, sentence by sentence, pondering each deceptively minor decision the writer had made. And though it's impossible to recall every source of inspiration and instruction, I can remember the novels and stories that seemed to me revelations: wells of beauty and pleasure that were also textbooks, private lessons in the art of fiction. ... What writers know is that, ultimately, we learn to write by practice, hard work, by repeated trial and error, success and failure, and from the books we admire.

This is so true. From the time I could read - also the time I could write - I was fascinated by how stories were created, formed, structured, plotted. I was the only kid in my class, if not my entire primary school, who wrote what the teachers called "sagas" (a new word for me): very involved stories, complete with dialogue, plot, beginning, middle, ending, and illustrations. Even my punctuation - learnt from reading - was spot-on. I'm sure they weren't particularly original, but they satisfied a great, urgent need in me, and still do. I also learnt - and continue to learn - vocabulary: I can still remember discovering the word "melancholy" from a book I was reading in grade 5, and it was fun to work out the meanings of new words from the context in which they were used. Sadly, this means I often struggle to give a dictionary-definition of a word; I'm more likely to put it in a sentence and expect people to get it like I do. Better get better at that if I want to be a teacher!

Different books got me started on experimenting with different styles. After reading the Silver Brumby

books, for instance, I practiced writing description, creating pieces that weren't even complete short stories, often discarded, like sketches. After reading Georgette Heyer's Regency romances (don't knock 'em till you've read 'em!), I practiced dialogue - she has a great knack for it. And so on.

The works that Francine Prose quotes from are a little more sophisticated than the ones I used growing up, but the principle is the same. Her chapters on gestures and details is a great reference for me - they're often overlooked aspects in my writing, that still needs a lot of work. I fear cliches, which are almost unavoidable. She leans towards Chekov, Flannery O'Connor, Joyce, Flaubert, Kleist, Alice Munro, Melville, Austen, Paula Fox and Henry Green, for example - only a few of the books she mentions or uses in analysis have I read. A particularly fun chapter, Character, starts with an anecdote of the time when, slightly out of mischief, she assigned a story by Heinrich von Kleist called *The Marquise of O-* to a group of students in Utah: all mormons, which was about a lady who was raped by the chivalrous knight while unconscious after he'd saved her from a fire (during a battle), and so on, only to discover that the students came alive in their discussions and talked about the characters like they knew them personally.

The problem with this book is it gets you so impatient not only to start reading these works of literature, but also to go back over your own writing and see what traps, if any, you've fallen into, or how you can lift up a passage of dialogue or even reveal your characters in a different way. It's definitely one of the better writing guides I've come across - and the only one I've ever bothered to read, since it's an informal guide at best, not at all condescending, and lacks a superiority complex. Prose loves to read as much as she loves to write, and teaches as well, and has a real talent for opening up an otherwise dry passage to the treasures going on in the inner workings.

What Prose also mentions is that there are no rules, that every time she tried to give advice to her students such as Don't write from the point of view (first person) of someone who dies in the story, she finds a story - often by Chekov - that contradicts that rule, and works. In this sense, writing is a very distinct artform: you learn how to do it "properly", just as you learn how to draw a face with perfect proportions, before you go all Picasso on it and have the eyes sticking out the side and the nose upside-down. Perhaps an absolute genius would skip that learning stage, but if we do it's like - what's the expression? Learning to run before you can walk? It takes time, and patience, and hard work, and perseverance, but if you have the passion it's not painful in the slightest. And if you lose momentum, or get writer's block, Prose has some great advice: to have a shelf put aside for especially inspiring novels, to pick up one author who excels at, say, dialogue, and read a passage at random for inspiration. She even has a list of "Books to be read immediately" at the end of the book. For myself, I can say that this works, though I usually read the entire book to get into the flow of a style. Even when working on my fantasy story, though, I often prefer to read literature. I find it helps to stop me from slipping into cliche-mode.

Jason Koivu says

Made for a reader, but strong enough for a writer!

Not surprisingly *Reading Like a Writer* weighs a bit heavier on the writerly side rather than the reader. Francine Prose (that HAS to be a pen name) has taught writing and so that is her approach to writing this novel, which by the title sounds as if it's meant to assist the reader. Well clearly what makes good writing is the stuff readers should be aware of if they wish to get the most of their occupation, so I can forgive her that.

Another reason I said "not surprisingly" at the beginning of this paragraph was because, well, how much can one talk about reading? It's usually a solitary activity and an almost entirely subjective one. To each their own and they do it alone.

The individual sections focus on one topic: the sentence, paragraphs, narration, character, etc. Each topic is discussed at length, often with the addition of personal anecdotes and always with poignant quotes from classics to more obscure writers that Prose admires. Occasionally the quotes become unnecessarily long and in one particular instance she freely admits, indulgent. She's an avid reader talking about her favorite authors, so how can we blame her?

Ethan says

I knew I was in trouble when, a few pages into this book, I came upon the author's revelation that she *really* learned how to read when she was studying in India and decided to read Proust in the original French.

Oh no, I thought, but I plunged further into the book and was "rewarded" by Francine "Deathless" Prose describing in breathy terms her most beloved authors and passages, most of which left me cold.

Some of her points were interesting; her chapter on paragraphing had some good examples, and provided some nice observations. The chapter on character was all right, though she seemed to think that multi-paragraph descriptions of personality were brilliant examples of how true writers should reveal character. Maybe her advice would have been great back in Victorian times (she seems unhealthily focused on the 19th century) but it just didn't work for me.

She also described her terrible, terrible weekly bus trip to teach school, when she was forced to ride on a bus for *two and a half hours*, fearing for her life because of the riff raff she had to share the ride with. I felt no sympathy for her, nor did I understand why she felt compelled to talk about her dark struggles with public transportation. It only reinforced my suspicion that Francine Prose and I were from different planets.

This book is for folks who want to write literary fiction and who yearn for tangled syntax and convoluted meaning. Those who don't have the time nor the inclination to ponder every luscious word and are more interested in writing a story than crafting the perfect sentence need not apply.

Mandapants says

The trouble with Prose's book is that it's good. It's annoyingly like finding oil changing advice in the New York Times crossword or having your wine snob friend demonstrate the way to lay drywall with metaphors drawn from the bouquet of their favorite shiraz.

Still, Prose brings up several excellent points. Her section on gesture is particularly good; it's easily as illuminating and Stephen King's hatred of adverbs. But I think what I will take away most from this book is her advice for when you read someone's work that makes you feel completely inadequate as a writer, to "read a writer whose work is entirely different from another, though not necessarily more like your own- a difference that will remind you of how many rooms there are in the house of art."

Perhaps my annoyance comes from feeling very little joy of recognition other than from books we're all required to read in 10th grade English, and Raymond Chandler, who's so low brow he's high brow. I somehow doubt Prose has ever read Stephen King, and it's his book on writing that I'll continue to recommend to writer friends.

Madeline says

First, let me get this out of the way: Francine Prose is the absolute best name for an author, ever. Some people get all the luck.

Okay, on to the actual book. Prose basically starts by saying, I'm a creative writing teacher and I kind of dislike creative writing workshops. She then spends each chapter going over a specific element of style used in novels - in case you were wondering, the chapter titles go like this: Close Reading, Words, Sentences, Paragraphs, Narration, Character, Dialogue, Details, Gesture, Learning from Chekhov, and Reading for Courage. The book ends with her list of Books To Be Read Immediately, which I found very helpful. The chapter on sentences was my favorite, just for the way Prose just plain geeks out on the subject of sentences:

"To talk to another writer about sentences feels like forging a connection based on the most intimate and arcane sort of shop-talk, much the way mathematicians might bond on the basis of a shared admiration for some obscure, elegant theorem. Every so often I'll hear writers say that there are other writers they would read if for no other reason than to marvel at the skill with which they can put together the sort of sentences that move us to read closely, to disassemble and reassemble them, much the way a mechanic might learn about an engine by taking it apart.

The well-made sentence transcends time and genre. A beautiful sentence is a beautiful sentence, regardless of when it was written, or whether it appears in a play or a magazine article. Which is just one of the many reasons why it's pleasurable to read outside of one's own genre. The writer of the lyrical fiction or of the quirkiest, most free-form stream-of-consciousness novel can learn by paying close attention to the sentences of the most logical author of the exactingly reasoned personal essay. Indeed, the brilliant sentences in Rebecca West's journalism and travel writing often outsparkle those with which she composed her novels. This may suggest the possibility that certain writers' sentences improve in proportion to the density and the gravity of the information they have to impart."

Wow.

Read for: Creative Writing workshop
