

# MERIDIAN

The Semi-Annual  
from the  
University of Virginia

Issue 13 ♦ Spring/Summer 2004



Photograph by Barry Goldstein

GINA WELCH

## *An Interview with Francine Prose*

IT SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE that Francine Prose is actually a single individual. Since 1973, she has written nearly twenty critically acclaimed and publicly devoured books—short-story and novella collections, non-fiction, books for children and young adults, and eight novels. A mother of two, Prose has also managed time to teach at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Johns Hopkins University, and Sewanee Writers' Conference as well as editing at *DoubleTake*. Lest we think her idle for not doing more, Prose has long written acutely observant reviews and articles in such powerhouse publications as *Harper's*, *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*. In all of this work, one can distinguish the hallmark of Prose's writing: a skeptical eye and icy wit turned on contemporary customs and institutions, but moderated by a deeply felt affection for all her characters and subjects, and—above all—for humanity. Russell Banks thinks her a “world-class story teller,” and *Kirkus Reviews* called her “one of our great cultural satirists.” Her work has provoked flare-ups of controversy (as her 1999 *Harper's* article “I Know Why the Caged Bird Cannot Read” did in censuring high school English classes for assembling syllabi based on the clarity of the moral message rather than the strength of the literature), but Prose never ruffles feathers just to ruffle feathers. For a writer as prolific as Prose, she is perhaps most remarkable in that all her work resonates with bold, important examinations of human nature.

Prose grew up in New York City and graduated from Radcliffe in 1968. Her most recent novel, *Blue Angel*, was a *New York Times* notable book and a National Book Award finalist. She is the recipient of numerous awards, including a Guggenheim and a Fulbright, and she is a Director's Fellow at the Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library. She is currently working on a novel.

*How do you begin?*

I sit down, I write one line, I see if there's a second line. I'm a completely Pavlovian creature. I have a Pavlovian response to my computer. I think by writing.

*How do you know when you've got a novel on your hands versus a short story?*

I never know. If it's a story that keeps growing and growing... I can tell if it's a novel more easily than I can tell if it's a story. If it's a) going to cover a long period of time, or b) going to have a lot of subplots, I know it's a novel. But I think it's a mistake to even think about form and genre before you start writing. In the case of [my young adult novel] *After*, it's the only book that started with an idea and a plot structure. It's not even a plot structure that I like. The plot structure is, things are going to get worse and worse.

*You've mentioned that you no longer like the things you wrote earlier in your career—your more optimistic stuff. Were there pivotal events that changed your work?*

The 80's, the 90's, the Reagan-Bush years. *Primitive People* was the pivotal novel for me. It got darker, the characters got less optimistic. In *Bigfoot Dreams*, the plot turned on the idea that you write something down, and then it happens. By the time I got to *Primitive People*, things were different.

*Is there any non-fiction work you've done that you've changed your mind about in retrospect?*

I don't know because I don't reread it. No. I take it back. The Maya Angelou piece. There are two things that I wish I'd done differently. You know what you think, and only when you get a response do you realize you haven't come across. If one person gets excited about reading her, although she's a terrible prose stylist, then that's a wonderful thing. I also wish I'd said how heroic teachers are. That piece was a bombshell; I was shocked. I knew I was doing something slightly controversial, but I had no idea. You always have this stupid idea that people are going to be grateful because you're saying the thing that everyone knows.

*Almost all of your work is laced with social commentary. Are you ever conscious of injecting politics into your fiction?*

I'm not conscious of it. But I live in the world. You write a scene with three characters and you notice what class they're associated with. But you don't notice it consciously.

*In your Harper's article "I Know Why the Caged Bird Cannot Read," you skewered high school English classes for using literary texts as an excuse to discuss morality and history. Where are college English classes going wrong?*

Where do we start? There are trends, but I don't know what the new trends are. I don't have patience for theory or for Marxism, Deconstructionism. The most important thing to do when teaching college is to have a passion for what you're doing. My function was to be a cheerleader for literature. I prayed some of my enthusiasm was transferring. Students aren't idiots—they'll pick up on the lack of fresh enthusiasm. But I dislike anything that moves you away from the text—as if the text is this bothersome thing—the text is what it is. Make the student see there was a blank page there and every word was the result of a decision.

*Do you feel it's detrimental at all for people to restrict their reading diets to books recommended by Oprah?*

It depends who's reading them. When I was a kid, I'd read anything. I was omnivorous. It was fine. If James Michener books were the only things I was reading now I'd worry. It depends what you want to do. If you only want to escape from your life, that's fine. I've often thought I'd like to teach *The Godfather*. It's a well-constructed novel; you can look at it like a garage mechanic. You don't have the distraction of greatness. You just have the construction. You take an okay book and turn it into a great movie.

*Your portrayals of the shortcomings of certain institutions and groups of people are quite bold: academics, PC-ophiles, fanatics about anything, teachers, literary critics all come under fire. What kind of reception have you gotten from the people you go after?*

People never recognize themselves. Or people are so flattered that you paid attention enough to put them in a novel. But every character's a composite. Being misread and being misunderstood is so painful, and it's always a shock. I'm always shocked when people use the word "satire" about my books. That's never what I think I'm doing; I feel incredible sympathy for my characters. In the new novel, there's a high school kid who writes a paper about Hitler, and part of the paper is about Hitler's sexuality. His dim, PC teacher calls him into the office and accuses him of being homophobic, and the kid is shocked. I fed my own experience of being misread-by people who think my characters are unsympathetic-directly into that. But I do have a certain lack of sympathy for institutions in general. I'm also incredibly wary of people who identify with institutions.

*Blue Angel was so scathing in its send-up of writing workshops that it would seem you don't believe in them at all. Swenson counsels Angela not to workshop her novel chapters because they're too good. What is a workshop at its worst? At its best?*

The good thing about it is it's just a fact that you can't know how someone else will read your work. If you have something in a story, and you do a lot of cutting, but the thing is still there in you mind, but someone else doesn't know about it, it's useful to know that. It's useful to know how people are reading your characters. The clichés of the workshop—showing instead of telling. The most damaging thing is it's as if everyone in workshop were the psychotherapist of the characters. The cheap psychologizing, or the demanding to know motivations. So when I teach literature classes for M.F.A.'s, the way I devise the reading list—I also do line-by-line readings—but I also tend to gravitate towards stories that defy the sorts of things that you hear in workshop. I teach Beckett's *First Love*. None of the things you might ask about a character are there—it's just a brain in a jar—but it's all there. In every case, I say, imagine bringing this into your workshop. Writing is, so much of the time, a high wire act. There are no rules for writing. The workshops that aren't good are the ones that present you with rules that have nothing to do with writing.

*Much of your work looks at religion in some way. What interests you about how people worship?*

I don't write much about religion anymore. More than anything, I'm interested in obsession. Religion can function that way. I guess it's peoples' efforts to explain things to themselves—how you come away with it. "How you get through the day" is the quintessential novel. But I hate organized religion. But I went to Quaker school and my kids went to Quaker school.

*What bothers you most about organized religion?*

It's telling other people how to get through their day. It's the intolerance and the bigotry and the "My God is bigger than your God" stuff. But I do support anything that gives people solace.

*As someone who has worked in so many different forms with so much diverse material, do you have things you hope to do in the future?*

I want to do things that are more and more difficult. The horror of repeating yourself is intense. My project is picking characters who aren't apparently sympathetic and making them sympathetic.