



## What to Read and Why

*Francine Prose*

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## What to Read and Why Francine Prose

In this brilliant collection, the follow-up to her *New York Times* bestseller *Reading Like a Writer*, the distinguished novelist, literary critic, and essayist celebrates the pleasures of reading and pays homage to the works and writers she admires above all others, from Jane Austen and Charles Dickens to Jennifer Egan and Roberto Bolaño.

In an age defined by hyper-connectivity and constant stimulation, Francine Prose makes a compelling case for the solitary act of reading and the great enjoyment it brings. Inspiring and illuminating, *What to Read and Why* includes selections culled from Prose's previous essays, reviews, and introductions, combined with new, never-before-published pieces that focus on her favorite works of fiction and nonfiction, on works by masters of the short story, and even on books by photographers like Diane Arbus.

Prose considers why the works of literary masters such as Mary Shelley, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Jane Austen have endured, and shares intriguing insights about modern authors whose words stimulate our minds and enlarge our lives, including Roberto Bolaño, Karl Ove Knausgaard, Jennifer Egan, and Mohsin Hamid. Prose implores us to read Mavis Gallant for her marvelously rich and compact sentences, and her meticulously rendered characters who reveal our flawed and complex human nature; Edward St. Aubyn for his elegance and sophisticated humor; and Mark Strand for his gift for depicting unlikely transformations. Here, too, are original pieces in which Prose explores the craft of writing: "On Clarity" and "What Makes a Short Story."

Written with her sharp critical analysis, wit, and enthusiasm, *What to Read and Why* is a celebration of literature that will give readers a new appreciation for the power and beauty of the written word.

## What to Read and Why Details

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# From Reader Review What to Read and Why for online ebook

## Dave says

I think I like Prose' fiction better, but this is another gem like Reading Like A Writer. My favorite chapters were on Complimentary Toilet Paper, Lolita, and Mavis Gallant. I am reading all those authors now.

I like when she was able to related her own works like Blue Angel and A Changed Man to the other works and the writing process.

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## Melissa says

For comparison, I LOVE Prose's *Reading Like a Writer* but *What to Read and Why* is like its pale third cousin. It feels like a random collection of essays, which aren't particularly compelling or intersectional, and the "why" part is pretty vague. Two chapters capture the feel of *Reading Like a Writer* - "On Clarity" and "What Makes a Short Story?" - but these come at the end of the book, so too little, too late. Skip this one, unless you die hard on the hill of "Books about Books" then I recommend borrowing from the library.

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## Jenny Shank says

<https://www.dallasnews.com/arts/books...>

Dallas has a chance to talk books with Francine Prose and the editor of the New York Times Book Review July 3, 21018

Jenny Shank, Special Contributor

Francine Prose, grande dame of American letters, has been publishing fiction, essays and criticism for more than 40 years, including her most recent novel, 2016's *Mister Monkey*, her 21st work of fiction. She's won the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a Fulbright. What's her writing secret? As Prose explained in 2006's *Reading Like A Writer*, she never formally studied writing — she learned from reading voraciously and studying other writers' technique.

The close-reading approach Prose advocated for in *Reading Like A Writer* created a sensation among aspiring writers, is now a creative writing curriculum staple, and might be the book Prose is best known for. Her just-released *What to Read and Why* (Harper, \$23.99), is a companion to that hit, compiling "written pieces that I did for various prefaces for reissues of classics and long-form reviews," she explained over the phone from her home in New York, where she teaches at Bard College.

Prose will appear with the editor of the New York Times Book Review, Pamela Paul, at the Dallas Museum of Art on July 10, to discuss their mutual love of books as a part of the Arts & Letters Live series. (The conversation has been edited.)

**You probably weren't the first person to tell writers to read closely, but your book seemed to**

**crystallize that notion. Were you surprised by the reception of Reading Like A Writer?**

I'm amazed, and believe me, my publisher was amazed. They did a modest printing at the beginning. All it had was one review in the New York Times Book Review, and suddenly there it was, being assigned in classrooms and so forth. I couldn't be more delighted, for my book and for writing in general.

**You're primarily a novelist, but are you asked about Reading Like A Writer more often than you are about your novels?**

[Laughs.] It depends who I'm talking to. It's certainly assigned in classrooms more often than my novels are. Often when I was on tour for Reading Like A Writer or talking to people about it, people would say, "What should I read?" There's a list of 118 books that I recommend at the end of Reading Like A Writer. One of the reasons I wanted to do this new one is to go a little more in depth about why I think someone should read these books.

**If there were one classic book that you could convince more people to read, which would it be?**

I really can't. Start anywhere, read all of them.

**You write that you recruited friends to read Roberto Bolaño's 2666 so you could talk about it.**

[Laughs.] In a way, you could say this whole book is a big recruitment program. I feel like I'm recruiting people to read all these books. My class at Bard College is like a book group that I don't have to be democratic about. It's great to be able to talk to people about books that you love. They have characters that are suddenly like people you know in common.

**It's like when someone tries to work the name of the person they have a crush on into every conversation — I feel that way when talking about books I love.**

Exactly. The joke about first dates is that they're like, "Oh, you like beer? I like beer." It's sort of like that with books. When you have the same favorite book as someone else, you do feel, right off the bat, that there's something you have in common with that person.

**You write about 2666 — "Bolaño's terrifying and gorgeous vulture of a novel keeps landing in the same place — Santa Teresa — but the arc of its flight reminds you that evil is like that: it touches down in one country this time, next year in another place." Would you prescribe this novel to people to gain some insight about current events?**

Yes. For one thing, a great deal of it takes place on the U.S./Mexican border. I can't think of a more important place to think about now. So much of it is about the murders of these thousands of women on that border — women who came up through Central America, who were working in factories. It couldn't be more current or relevant. His desire to give names and histories and individual stories to these women who have become just numbers — it's fantastic.

**How do you choose which contemporary books to read?**

Whenever I can, I read the first two or three pages. Often it's just, do I like the way this is written? That usually has more of an effect on me than the plot or the subject or the theme. It's just: Do I like these sentences that are on the page?

**You write about Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*. That novel struck me as having a timeless quality as well as a timeliness, and an utter freshness. Would you place a bet on that novel to endure?**

I think it's a terrific book. It addresses the global refugee crisis, but it's also beautifully written and so inventive. The characters are so engaging, and you're rooting for them hard as you're reading the book. It has everything you want from fiction.

**You include an essay on the importance of clarity in writing, describing "paper-ese" — this language you only see in student papers. You cure the students of this by having them ask themselves, "Would I say this?" Have you noticed changes in student writing over the years, perhaps among the generation that grew up with text messaging, or is the paper-ese pretty consistent?**

It differs from year to year so much. This past year, they could all write, and it was extraordinary how well they could write. [I asked them how they learned to write.] One of them said, "I wrote book reviews for Goodreads, and that was my way of publication when I was in high school, and I honed my style writing for this website." Some of them were from other countries, so they had a more stringent education. People say, 'Well, kids can't write anymore.' But it depends, because I was lucky enough to teach a dozen students who were unbelievably gifted.

It was just about clarity. That's what makes it fairly easy to help a student who is having trouble writing. You just say, what are you trying to say? They find a way of saying what they've been trying to say, which is not in paper-ese, that weird language they've been taught to write in.

**In Rick Bass' new memoir *The Traveling Feast*, he observes that writers rarely retire. Do you plan to keep writing?**

I can't imagine what else I would do. Yes, I plan to keep on writing. I have grandchildren, I have a garden, and I've always tried to have what you would call a life in addition to being a writer. But I'm writing all the time. It's hard work and etcetera, but it's a source of great happiness and satisfaction. Also, by now I've so internalized the guilt from not writing that I can't imagine how I would live with it if I stopped.

A lot of people, myself included, have said that the current political moment is making it harder to write. It's very distracting, and it's never seemed to me so hard to stop looking at my phone and go back to what I'm working on. But that's just the moment we live in.

**Which of your novels would you most like to be remembered and reread the way that you have reflected on the books in *What to Read and Why*?**

The most recent one of course, *Mister Monkey*. Writing that book was sort of like opening a vein. The review it got in the Sunday New York Times by Cathleen Schine was the best review I've ever gotten. It so got what I was trying to do. A number of people thought it was just this comedy. But I thought everything I know about human beings went into that book.

*Jenny Shank's first novel, *The Ringer*, won the High Plains Book Award.*

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## **Lissa says**

I have discovered that no other writer displays an inextinguishable passion for reading and books like Francine Prose. The level of close reading she undertakes in order to really absorb a work of literature is inspiring and a joy itself to read. As she explains in her introduction, this collection is a mix of book reviews, introductions to classics and various relevant essays. Many authors were familiar but many more were added to my ever expanding list of books to read in the future. My recommendation is to read them slowly, not only to discover "what to read and why" but to also learn how to read in order to become fully immersed in a story. I kindly received a copy of this book from the publisher in exchange for an honest review.

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## **Jen says**

Books about books are the best books!

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## **Beth Alvarado says**

I'm enjoying reading this book slowly and not necessarily in order. Prose is such a good writer and reader that I have been going to the books she writes about and reading them as well. It will take me a long time to finish reading this book.

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## **Kirsti says**

I should have paid attention to the Goodreads reviews. I found this well-written but dreary. It didn't inspire me to read any of the authors mentioned. For books about reading, I will stick with Anne Fadiman from now on.

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## **Jenny Baker says**

I was so excited when I heard Francine Prose had a new book releasing this year. I loved her book *Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them* so much that I bought a copy for my home library. This wasn't quite as good, but I enjoyed her insight on some of the authors. My favorite chapters were the ones on Charles Dickens and Jane Austen, and I took a lot of notes from those chapters.

Aspiring writers will find this book helpful, especially if you enjoy reading books that give you insight on famous writers and their writing styles. The next time I read a Dickens or Austen novel, I'll be looking at their writing with a closer eye and with my notes in hand.

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## **Peter says**

What to Read and Why by Francine Prose works on many levels. For those books she discusses that a person has not read, her chapters offer insight and incisive commentary without ruining the joy of self-discovery if and when you do read the book. Prose has the ability to open doors and allow you to explore and consider ideas, but she does not demand you become an acolyte to her point of view. For the books you have read, you will find reasoned and interesting ideas to reflect upon should you ever read the book again.

Prose is a writer whose clarity is subtle, and yet ever-present. Her arguments are informed and examples from the novel being discussed are well chosen. She gives enough of a writer's background and influences to shed light on their work, but never forces you to see a novel as a direct extension of the author's life.

To read this book is to learn more about the books you have read; to read this book will also introduce you to novels you should read. Either way, and both ways, you should read this book.

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## **Aryssa says**

Has some really good essays but a lot of ones that don't resonate at all if you haven't read the book or even heard of it. The Nabokov essay is fascinating

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## **Lori says**

Nothing new here. I thoroughly appreciated Reading like a Writer, and hoped this would be a great followup. This felt more like a collection of synopses for an English 101 anthology. There were a few authors and books she discusses that piqued my interest, but for the most part, it was boring and felt like something I'd already read. I just couldn't stay focused or engaged.

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## **Diane Barnes says**

Essays about books, reading, and authors. Some I have read, some I haven't but choose not to, and others were added to my tbr. Which is the whole point of reading books like this. I did appreciate the background information on the authors.

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## **GONZA says**

As far as I am concerned, very few things are better than books about books, mostly because if you know the title you are going to learn something more about it, if you don't, you have a new book for your to read list. In this case there are many authors I didn't know and the other were mostly the one I like already so it was a real pleasure.

Per quanto mi riguarda, poche cose sono belle come i libri che parlano di libri, sia perché se già li consoci,

vieni comunque a scoprire cose nuove su di loro, e se non li conosci quanto meno la lista dei libri da leggere si allunga. In questo caso ce n'erano parecchi i cui autori mi erano sconosciuti, e tra quelli conosciuti c'erano alcuni tra i miei libri preferiti, quindi una win/win situation.

THANKS EDELWEISS FOR THE PREVIEW!

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### **Peg Schoenfelder says**

I confess I haven't finished this yet but was so entranced with the paper book I ordered it as an audiobook. She provides such interesting insight into many classic authors that it makes you want to read every one of them.

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### **Liz says**

This is a random collection of essays on writers, books and various aspects of literature that lacks structure and cohesiveness. Prose offers no rationale for her selections and very little explanation as to why we should read them. I was very inspired by her previous book, *Reading Like a Writer*, but sadly this one was a letdown.

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