

# A Garden of Prose

Don't call it satire: Francine Prose's novels are just smart and funny.

by SUSAN HODARA

**T**HE 2,000-SQUARE-FOOT vegetable plot—planted with fava beans, peas, arugula, raspberries, even artichokes—that author Francine Prose '68, A.M. '69, cultivates at her upstate New York home has become, she says, “an obsession. Sometimes I think I write for a few hours a day so I don't have to feel guilty about working in the garden.”

After more than 30 books, the first published when she was 26, Prose's guilt should be nicely quelled. Her novels include *Blue Angel* (2000), a finalist for the National Book Award, and *Household Saints* (1981), which was adapted into a film. She's written short stories, young-adult and children's books, and nonfiction works including the *New York Times* best-seller *Reading Like a Writer* (2006) and, most recently, *Anne Frank: The Book, the Life, the Afterlife* (2009; appearing in softcover this fall). Prose writes everything except, well, poetry.

“Francine is one of the great writers of her generation,” says James Atlas '71, president of the publishing imprint Atlas & Co., a friend since their college days. (Prose's 2005 *Caravaggio: Painter of Miracles* is part of the firm's Eminent Lives series.)

Comparing her to Virginia Woolf, Atlas describes Prose as “a versatile woman of letters in the old-fashioned sense,” and novelist Larry McMurtry, in his review of Prose's *Bigfoot Dreams* (1986), called her “one of our finest writers.”

Magical realism influenced her early books, but “things took a radical turn in the late '80s, early '90s, the Reagan-Bush years,” she says. “I was horrified by what was happening around me. My work got a lot more contemporary, a lot more political.” Her novels took on a more acerbic tone, introducing readers to complex if not always likable characters such as Vera, who concocts fictitious stories for a tabloid in *Bigfoot Dreams*, and the smug Hudson Valley socialites in *Primitive People* (1992), as viewed by a Haitian au pair.

During this period, reviewers began calling Prose's fiction satirical, a label she deplores. “I'm not satirizing,” she says. “I'm reporting. I'm describing the world I see.” Consider this portrayal in *Blue Angel* of parents on a college campus during visiting weekend: “How uncomfortable they are in the presence of their children! ...These hulking boys and gum-chewing girls could be visiting dignitaries or important business contacts, that's how obsequiously



Francine Prose

the grown-ups trot behind them, keeping up their interrogations—how's the food? your roommate? your math professor?—questions their children ignore, walking farther ahead....”

“Yes, sometimes it's funny,” Prose continues, “but my aim isn't to satirize. My principal aim is to create characters, to get inside their consciousnesses.”

The range of those characters is remarkable. Her narrators include a tattooed neo-Nazi seeking redemption (*A Changed Man*), a 13-year-old mourning her sister (*Gold-*

COURTESY OF FRANCINE PROSE

**William Storrer** hopes that someone can provide a source for the quotation, supposedly from Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, that George

reads aloud near the end of the second act of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The text runs: “And the West, encumbered by crippling alliances, and burdened with a morality too rigid to accommodate itself to the swing of events, must...eventually...fall.”

**Wesley Moore** asks who wrote a short unidentified poem, found on a website, that begins, “Stranger, go, tell the Spartans--/No; simply say 'we obeyed'.../ Make us sound laconic and all iron....” and

## Chapter & Verse

Correspondence on not-so-famous lost words

ends, “What truth soldiers would speak/ None would hear, and none repeat.”

“**Wisdom is so rare an attribute that it were better it come late than not at all**” (July-August). We thank the more than two dozen readers—lawyers, law professors, a judge, and a longtime professional Supreme Court watcher among them—who wrote to identify this mis-stated version of a comment by Justice Felix Frankfurter, dissenting in *Henslee v. Union Planters National Bank & Trust Co.*,

335 U.S. 595, 600 (1949). The correct wording is: “Wisdom too often never comes, and so one ought not to reject it merely because it comes late.” Richard

Spector's reply was the first to reach us. Dominic Ayotte noted that the case does concern the estate tax. And Anthony Shippo offered the gentle reminder that a query about the same quotation ran in this column in May-June 1986, and was answered in the subsequent issue by B. Abbott Goldberg and Erwin Griswold.

Send inquiries and answers to “Chapter and Verse,” *Harvard Magazine*, 7 Ware Street, Cambridge 02138, or via e-mail to [chapterandverse@harvardmag.com](mailto:chapterandverse@harvardmag.com).

engrove), and a college professor tempted by an unlikely student (*Blue Angel*). “The joy of trying to see the world through the eyes of someone as different from yourself as possible is hugely liberating,” Prose says. “Regardless of who they are, their views of the world must be as nuanced and layered as mine and my friends’ are.”

The central element in accomplishing this is language. “It’s about hearing the language they speak inside their heads,” she explains. Listen to what’s going on inside Vincent Nolan’s head on a crowded Manhattan street early in *A Changed Man*: “He’s never seen it this bad. A giant mosh pit with cars. Just walking demands concentration, like driving in heavy traffic. He remembers the old Times Square on those righteous long-ago weekends when he and his high school friends took the bus into the city to get hammered and eyeball the hookers.”

Validating Prose’s own stance, Andrew O’Hehir writes in his Salon.com review of *A Changed Man* that her “desire to capture

contemporary Americans, with all their internal contradictions, solipsism and general screwed-upness, is guided more by the spirit of compassion than by that of mockery.”

A tall woman with porcelain skin, Prose and her husband, the artist Howard Michels, moved upstate to raise their sons, now 31 and 27; they divide their time between the town of Olivebridge and their Manhattan apartment. Her time at Harvard, which included a *summa cum laude* degree and a couple of years as a graduate student, provided “all the tools you need as a writer. Language, narrative, dialogue, voice—it was all there,” she says. “No one sat me down and said, ‘This is what you’re learning,’ but I was.”

Having recently completed two new

novels (one is due out next summer, the other, a young-adult novel, after that), Prose is working on a third, based on the life of Violette Morris, one of the women in the Brassai’s photograph “Lesbian Couple at Le Monocle.” The book began as a nonfiction study of Morris, a French professional athlete recruited by the Nazis as a spy. But the work bogged down until Prose recast it as fiction. “Suddenly the idea of seeing the Berlin Olympics from the perspective of a furious lesbian athlete became fascinating,” she says.

Each project follows a similar trajectory that she claims doesn’t get easier. “First drafts are really hard,” she says. “It’s different from book to book, but they’re always a slog, and I never feel I’ve learned anything from one to the next. And there are moments of great despair.”

Like *Blue Angel*’s protagonist, Prose has taught creative writing. Since 2000, she has



Hear Francine Prose talk about her writing process at [harvardmag.com/extras](http://harvardmag.com/extras).



KIRKLAND HOUSE RESIDENTS SHOW THEIR SPIRIT ON HOUSING DAY.

## I choose Harvard...

Because an undergraduate housing assignment can lead to friends who will cheer you on for a lifetime.

[ENHANCING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE]

Support the



Harvard College Fund

been visiting professor of literature and Distinguished Writer in Residence at Bard College. She has received Guggenheim and Fulbright fellowships and in May was

inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the 112-year-old institution composed of 250 architects, composers, artists, and writers. "It was such a val-

idation," Prose says. "The people making those selections are not critics; they have nothing to do with the commercial world. They are us. It feels really good." ▢

## Off the Shelf

Recent books with Harvard connections

**Reputation and Power**, by Daniel Carpenter, Freed professor of government (Princeton, \$29.95 paper). At a time of debate over government and regulation (oil spills or financial crises, anyone?), the director of Harvard's Center for American Political Studies delivers the definitive (752 pages) analysis of the Food and Drug Administration and pharmaceutical regulation. He finds that such power "coheres well with the Federalists' vision of 'strong' government" and that "the central criterion of strong governance is... legitimated vigor."

**Modern Architecture: Representation and Reality**, by Neil Levine, Gleason professor of history of art and architecture (Yale, \$65). A sweeping "postmodern view" of architecture's development across three centuries, profusely illustrated.

**Taking Back Eden**, by Oliver A. Houck '60 (Island Press, \$35). A Tulane law professor narrates eight landmark environmental lawsuits, including the one involving Con Edison's power-plant plans for Storm King Mountain, along the Hudson, litigated by his College classmate, Albert K. Butzel (also LL.B. '64).

**Listen to This**, by Alex Ross '90 (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$27). "[M]usic criticism is a curious and dubious science," says its premier practitioner. This is the first collection of his *New Yorker* essays, following publication of his acclaimed book on twentieth-century classical music, *The Rest Is Noise*. (Ross was profiled in the July-August 2008 issue of this magazine.)

**Exploring Happiness**, by Sissela Bok, Ph.D. '70 (Yale, \$24). The author, now senior visiting fellow at the Center for Population and Development Studies, turns her attention from such past subjects as *Lying*, *Mayhem*, and *Secrets* to the nature of happiness and its representation from philosophy to contemporary science.

**Shelter: Where Harvard Meets the Homeless**, by Scott Seider '99, Ed.D. '08 (Continuum, \$80; \$22.95 paper). The author, an assistant professor of education

at Boston University, studies the civic development of adolescents. One important example is the student-run Harvard Square Homeless Shelter, where opportunities arise to "do passion well."

**Laws, Outlaws, and Terrorists**, by Gabriella Blum, assistant professor of law, and Philip B. Heymann, Ames professor of law (MIT, \$21.95). A reflective critique of the war on terror, conducted in what the authors call a "No-Law Zone." They aim to demonstrate that "the nation loses when either national security or the rule of law wholly vanquishes the other at a time of emergency." For a perspective on the same problems by the authors' Law School colleague Charles Fried and his son, Gregory, see page 36.

**Handing One Another Along**, by Robert Coles, professor of psychiatry and medical humanities emeritus (Random House, \$26). Drawing from his "Literature of Social Reflection" (Gen. Ed. 105) course, the author pursues moral understanding through stories of others, drawn from literature and from his life, including meeting William Carlos Williams, the subject of his English thesis.

**Facing Catastrophe**, by Robert R.M. Verchick, J.D. '89 (Harvard, \$45). What better vantage point (unfortunately) for studying the subject than Loyola University's law school, in New Orleans? The author offers an environmental-law perspective on disasters. He suggests respecting natural buffers, attending to public health and safety, and anticipating risks.

**In Brown's Wake: Legacies of America's Educational Landmark**, by Martha Minow, dean, Harvard Law School (Oxford, \$24.95). The project of attaining equal educational opportunity regardless of race remains unfulfilled. But Minow finds that the impact of *Brown v. Board of Education* has been far wider—in the classroom, in society at large, and even in the global realm of human rights.



The site of a foundational environmental lawsuit, as rendered a century earlier in Samuel Colman's *Storm King on the Hudson* (1866)

**The Shape of Inner Space**, by Shing-Tung Yau, Graustein professor of mathematics, and Steve Nadis (Basic Books, \$30). An exploration of the geometry underlying much work in string theory, by the scholar who made the decisive proof in the field, with a collaborating writer. Lay readers will still find the vocabulary and underlying ideas strange and challenging.

**Never Pure**, by Steven Shapin, Ford professor of the history of science (Johns Hopkins, \$70; \$30 paper). Few historians of science proceed from Woody Allen or Monty Python. But few review elegantly for