A Garden of Prose

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

by SUSAN HODARA

Comparison 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 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-
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 Michel, 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

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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 validation,” 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.”


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). “[Music 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.