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Reading Like a Writer

Written by Francine Prose

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Close Reading

CAN CREATIVE WRITING BE TAUGHT?

It's a reasonable question, but no matter how often I've been asked it, I never know quite what to say. Because if what people mean is: Can the love of language be taught? Can a gift for storytelling be taught? then the answer is no. Which may be why the question is so often asked in a skeptical tone implying that, unlike the multiplication tables or the principles of auto mechanics, creativity can't be transmitted from teacher to student. Imagine Milton enrolling in a graduate program for help with *Paradise Lost*, or Kafka enduring the seminar in which his classmates inform him that, frankly, they just don't believe the part about the guy waking up one morning to find he's a giant bug.

What confuses me is not the sensibleness of the question but the fact that it's being asked of a writer who has taught writing, on and off, for almost twenty years. What would it say about me, my students, and the hours we'd spent in the classroom if I said that any attempt to teach the writing of fiction was a complete

waste of time? Probably, I should just go ahead and admit that I've been committing criminal fraud.

Instead I answer by recalling my own most valuable experience, not as a teacher but as a student in one of the few fiction workshops I took. This was in the 1970s, during my brief career as a graduate student in medieval English literature, when I was allowed the indulgence of taking one fiction class. Its generous teacher showed me, among other things, how to line edit my work. For any writer, the ability to look at a sentence and see what's superfluous, what can be altered, revised, expanded, and, especially, cut, is essential. It's satisfying to see that sentence shrink, snap into place, and ultimately emerge in a more polished form: clear, economical, sharp.

Meanwhile, my classmates were providing me with my first real audience. In that prehistory, before mass photocopying enabled students to distribute manuscripts in advance, we read our work aloud. That year, I was beginning what would become my first novel. And what made an important difference to me was the attention I felt in the room as the others listened. I was encouraged by their eagerness to hear more.

That's the experience I describe, the answer I give to people who ask about teaching creative writing: A workshop can be useful. A good teacher can show you how to edit your work. The right class can form the basis of a community that will help and sustain you.

But that class, as helpful as it was, was not where I learned to write.

LIKE most—maybe all—writers, I learned to write by writing and, by example, by reading books.

Long before the idea of a writer's conference was a glimmer in anyone's eye, writers learned by reading the work of their

predecessors. They studied meter with Ovid, plot construction with Homer, comedy with Aristophanes; they honed their prose style by absorbing the lucid sentences of Montaigne and Samuel Johnson. And who could have asked for better teachers: generous, uncritical, blessed with wisdom and genius, as endlessly forgiving as only the dead can be?

Though writers have learned from the masters in a formal, methodical way—Harry Crews has described taking apart a Graham Greene novel to see how many chapters it contained, how much time it covered, how Greene handled pacing, tone, and point of view—the truth is that this sort of education more often involves a kind of osmosis. After I’ve written an essay in which I’ve quoted at length from great writers, so that I’ve had to copy out long passages of their work, I’ve noticed that my own work becomes, however briefly, just a little more fluent.

In the ongoing process of becoming a writer, I read and re-read the authors I most loved. I read for pleasure, first, but also more analytically, conscious of style, of diction, of how sentences were formed and information was being conveyed, how the writer was structuring a plot, creating characters, employing detail and dialogue. And as I wrote, I discovered that writing, like reading, was done one word at a time, one punctuation mark at a time. It required what a friend calls “putting every word on trial for its life”: changing an adjective, cutting a phrase, removing a comma, and putting the comma back in.

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.

This book is intended partly as a response to that unavoidable question about how writers learn to do something that can-

not be taught. 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. And so the book that follows represents an effort to recall my own education as a novelist and to help the passionate reader and would-be writer understand how a writer reads.

WHEN I was a high school junior, our English teacher assigned a term paper on the theme of blindness in *Oedipus Rex* and *King Lear*. We were supposed to go through the two tragedies and circle every reference to eyes, light, darkness, and vision, then draw some conclusion on which we would base our final essay.

It all seemed so dull, so mechanical. We felt we were way beyond it. Without this tedious, time-consuming exercise, all of us knew that blindness played a starring role in both dramas.

Still, we liked our English teacher, and we wanted to please him. And searching for every relevant word turned out to have an enjoyable treasure-hunt aspect, a *Where's Waldo* detective thrill. Once we started looking for eyes, we found them everywhere, glinting at us, winking from every page.

Long before the blinding of Oedipus or Gloucester, the language of vision and its opposite was preparing us, consciously or unconsciously, for those violent mutilations. It asked us to consider what it meant to be clear-sighted or obtuse, shortsighted or prescient, to heed the signs and warnings, to see or deny what was right in front of one's eyes. Teiresias, Oedipus, Goneril, Kent—all of them could be defined by the sincerity or falseness with which they mused or ranted on the subject of literal or metaphorical blindness.

It was fun to trace those patterns and to make those connections. It was like cracking a code that the playwright had embed-

ded in the text, a riddle that existed just for me to decipher. I felt as if I were engaged in some intimate communication with the writer, as if the ghosts of Sophocles and Shakespeare had been waiting patiently all those centuries for a bookish sixteen-year-old to come along and find them.

I believed that I was learning to read in a whole new way. But this was only partly true. Because in fact I was merely relearning to read in an old way that I had learned, but forgotten.

We all begin as close readers. Even before we learn to read, the process of being read aloud to, and of listening, is one in which we are taking in one word after another, one phrase at a time, in which we are paying attention to whatever each word or phrase is transmitting. Word by word is how we learn to hear and then read, which seems only fitting, because it is how the books we are reading were written in the first place.

The more we read, the faster we can perform that magic trick of seeing how the letters have been combined into words that have meaning. The more we read, the more we comprehend, the more likely we are to discover new ways to read, each one tailored to the reason why we are reading a particular book.

At first, the thrill of our own brand-new expertise is all we ask or expect from Dick and Jane. But soon we begin to ask what else those marks on the page can give us. We begin to want information, entertainment, invention, even truth and beauty. We concentrate, we skim, we skip words, put down the book and daydream, start over, and reread. We finish a book and return to it years later to see what we might have missed, or the ways in which time and age have affected our understanding.

As a child, I was drawn to the works of the great escapist children's writers. I liked trading my familiar world for the London of the four children whose nanny parachuted into their lives with her umbrella and who turned the most routine shopping trip into

a magical outing. I would gladly have followed the White Rabbit down into the rabbit hole and had tea with the Mad Hatter. I loved novels in which children stepped through portals—a garden door, a wardrobe—into an alternate universe.

Children love the imagination, with its kaleidoscopic possibilities and its protest against the way that children are always being told exactly what's true and what's false, what's real and what's illusion. Perhaps my taste in reading had something to do with the limitations I was discovering, day by day: the brick walls of time and space, science and probability, to say nothing of whatever messages I was picking up from the culture. I liked novels with plucky heroines like Pippi Longstocking, the astringent Jane Eyre, and the daughters in *Little Women*, girls whose resourcefulness and intelligence don't automatically exclude them from the pleasures of male attention.

Each word of these novels was a yellow brick in the road to Oz. There were chapters I read and reread so as to repeat the dependable, out-of-body sensation of being *somewhere else*. I read addictively, constantly. On one family vacation, my father pleaded with me to close my book long enough to look at the Grand Canyon. I borrowed stacks of books from the public library: novels, biographies, history, anything that looked even remotely engaging.

Along with pre-adolescence came a more pressing desire for escape. I read more widely, more indiscriminately, and mostly with an interest in how far a book could take me from my life and how long it could keep me there: *Gone With the Wind*, Pearl Buck, Edna Ferber, fat bestsellers by James Michener, with a dash of history sprinkled in to cool down the steamy love scenes between the Hawaiian girls and the missionaries, the geishas and the GIs. I also appreciated these books for the often misleading nuggets of information they provided about sex in that innocent era, the 1950s. I turned the pages of these page-turners as fast as

I could. Reading was like eating alone, with that same element of bingeing.

I was fortunate to have good teachers, and friends who were also readers. The books I read became more challenging, better written, more substantial: Steinbeck, Camus, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Twain, Salinger, Anne Frank. My friends and I, little beatniks, were passionate fans of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti. We read Truman Capote, Carson McCullers, and the proto-hippie classics of Herman Hesse, Carlos Castaneda—*Mary Poppins* for people who thought they'd outgrown the flying nanny. I must have been vaguely aware of the power of language, but only dimly, and only as it applied to whatever effect the book was having on me.

ALL of that that changed with every mark I made on the pages of *King Lear* and *Oedipus Rex*. I still have my old copy of Sophocles, heavily underlined, covered with sweet, embarrassing notes-to-self (“irony?” “recognition of fate?”) written in my rounded, heartbreakingly neat schoolgirl print. Like seeing a photograph of yourself as a child, encountering handwriting that you know was once yours but that now seems only dimly familiar can inspire a confrontation with the mystery of time.

Focusing on language proved to be a practical skill, useful the way sight-reading with ease can come in handy for a musician. My high school English teacher had only recently graduated from a college where his own English professors taught what was called New Criticism, a school of thought that favored reading what was on the page with only passing reference to the biography of the writer or the period in which the text was written. Luckily for me, that approach to literature was still in fashion when I graduated and went on to college. At my university there was a well-known professor and critic whose belief in close

reading trickled down and influenced the entire humanities program. In French class, we spent an hour each Friday afternoon working our way from *The Song of Roland* to Sartre, paragraph by paragraph, focusing on small sections for what was called the *explication de texte*.

Of course, there were many occasions on which I had to skim as rapidly as I could to get through those survey courses that gave us two weeks to finish *Don Quixote*, ten days for *War and Peace*—courses designed to produce college graduates who could say they'd read the classics. By then I knew enough to regret having to read those books that way. And I promised myself that I would revisit them as soon as I could give them the time and attention they deserved.

ONLY once did my passion for reading steer me in the wrong direction, and that was when I let it persuade me to go to graduate school. There, I soon realized that my love for books was unshared by many of my classmates and professors. I found it hard to understand what they *did* love, exactly, and this gave me an anxious shiver that would later seem like a warning about what would happen to the teaching of literature over the decade or so after I dropped out of my Ph.D. program. That was when literary academia split into warring camps of deconstructionists, Marxists, feminists, and so forth, all battling for the right to tell students that they were reading "texts" in which ideas and politics trumped what the writer had actually written.

I left graduate school and became a writer. I wrote my first novel in India, in Bombay, where I read as omnivorously as I had as a child, rereading classics that I borrowed from the old-fashioned, musty, beautiful university library that seemed to have acquired almost nothing written after 1920. Afraid of running out of books, I decided to slow myself down by reading Proust in French.

Reading a masterpiece in a language for which you need a dictionary is in itself a course in reading word by word. And as I puzzled out the gorgeous, labyrinthine sentences, I discovered how reading a book can make you want to write one.

A work of art can start you thinking about some aesthetic or philosophical problem; it can suggest some new method, some fresh approach to fiction. But the relationship between reading and writing is rarely so clear-cut, and in fact my first novel could hardly have been less Proustian.

More often the connection has to do with whatever mysterious promptings make you want to write. It's like watching someone dance and then secretly, in your own room, trying out a few steps. I often think of learning to write by reading as something like the way I first began to read. I had a few picture books I'd memorized and pretended I could read, as a sort of party trick that I did repeatedly for my parents, who were also pretending—in their case, to be amused. I never knew exactly when I crossed the line from pretending to actually being able, but that was how it happened.

Not long ago, a friend told me that her students had complained that reading masterpieces made them feel stupid. But I've always found that the better the book I'm reading, the smarter I feel, or, at least, the more able I am to imagine that I might, someday, *become* smarter. I've also heard fellow writers say that they cannot read while working on a book of their own, for fear that Tolstoy or Shakespeare might influence them. I've always *hoped* they would influence me, and I wonder if I would have taken so happily to being a writer if it had meant that I couldn't read during the years it might take to complete a novel.

To be truthful, some writers stop you dead in your tracks by making you see your own work in the most unflattering light. Each of us will meet a different harbinger of personal failure, some innocent genius chosen by us for reasons having to do with what we see as our own inadequacies. The only remedy to this

I have found is 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.

AFTER my novels began to be published, I started to teach, taking a succession of jobs as a visiting writer at a series of colleges and universities. Usually, I would teach one creative writing workshop each semester, together with a literature class entitled something like “The Modern Short Story”—a course designed for undergraduates who weren’t planning to major in literature or go on to graduate school and so would not be damaged by my inability to teach literary theory. Alternately, I would conduct a reading seminar for MFA students who wanted to be writers rather than scholars, which meant that it was all right for us to fritter away our time talking about books rather than politics or ideas.

I enjoyed the reading classes, and the opportunity to function as a sort of cheerleader for literature. I liked my students, who were often so eager, bright, and enthusiastic that it took me years to notice how much trouble they had in reading a fairly simple short story. Almost simultaneously, I was struck by how little attention they had been taught to pay to the language, to the actual words and sentences that a writer had used. Instead, they had been encouraged to form strong, critical, and often negative opinions of geniuses who had been read with delight for centuries before they were born. They had been instructed to prosecute or defend these authors, as if in a court of law, on charges having to do with the writers’ origins, their racial, cultural, and class backgrounds. They had been encouraged to rewrite the classics into the more acceptable forms that the authors might have discovered had they only shared their young critics’ level of insight, tolerance, and awareness.

No wonder my students found it so stressful to read! And

possibly because of the harsh judgments they felt required to make about fictional characters and their creators, they didn't seem to *like* reading, which also made me worry for them and wonder why they wanted to become writers. I asked myself how they planned to learn to write, since I had always thought that others learned, as I had, from reading.

Responding to what my students seemed to need, I began to change the way I taught. No more general discussions of this character or that plot turn. No more attempts to talk about how it *felt* to read Borges or Poe or to describe the experience of navigating the fantastic fictional worlds they created. It was a pity, because I'd often enjoyed these wide-ranging discussions, during which my students said things I would always remember. I recall one student saying that reading the stories of Bruno Schulz was like being a child again, hiding behind the door, eavesdropping on the adults, understanding a fraction of what they were saying and inventing the rest. But I assumed that I would still hear such things even if I organized classes around the more pedestrian, halting method of beginning at the beginning, lingering over every word, every phrase, every image, considering how it enhanced and contributed to the story as a whole. In this way, the students and I would get through as much of the text as possible—sometimes three or four, sometimes as many as ten, pages—in a two-hour class.

This remains the way I prefer to teach, partly because it's a method from which I benefit nearly as much as my students. And there are many stories that I have taught for years and from which I learn more each time I read them, word by word.

I've always thought that a close-reading course should at least be a companion, if not an alternative, to the writing workshop. Though it also doles out praise, the workshop most often focuses on what a writer has done wrong, what needs to be fixed, cut, or augmented. Whereas reading a masterpiece can inspire us by showing us how a writer does something brilliantly.

Occasionally, while I was teaching a reading course and simultaneously working on a novel, and when I had reached an impasse in my own work, I began to notice that whatever story I taught that week somehow helped me get past the obstacle that had been in my way. Once, for example, I was struggling with a party scene and happened to be teaching James Joyce's "The Dead," which taught me something about how to orchestrate the voices of the party guests into a chorus from which the principal players step forward, in turn, to take their solos.

On another occasion, I was writing a story that I knew was going to end in an eruption of horrific violence, and I was having trouble getting it to sound natural and inevitable rather than forced and melodramatic. Fortunately, I was teaching the stories of Isaac Babel, whose work so often explores the nature, the causes, and the aftermath of violence. What I noticed, close-reading along with my students, was that frequently in Babel's fiction, a moment of violence is directly preceded by a passage of intense lyricism. It's characteristic of Babel to offer the reader a lovely glimpse of the crescent moon just before all hell breaks loose. I tried it—first the poetry, then the horror—and suddenly everything came together, the pacing seemed right, and the incident I had been struggling with appeared, at least to me, to be plausible and convincing.

Close reading helped me figure out, as I hoped it did for my students, a way to approach a difficult aspect of writing, which is nearly always difficult. Readers of this book will notice that there are writers to whom I keep returning: Chekhov, Joyce, Austen, George Eliot, Kafka, Tolstoy, Flannery O'Connor, Katherine Mansfield, Nabokov, Heinrich von Kleist, Raymond Carver, Jane Bowles, James Baldwin, Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant—the list goes on and on. They are the teachers to whom I go, the authorities I consult, the models that still help to inspire me with the energy and courage it takes to sit down at a desk each day and resume the process of learning, anew, to write.