

***PARTIAL TRANSCRIPT FROM A BIG THINK INTERVIEW WITH FRANCINE PROSE***

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***Question:*** *Should kids be allowed to read whatever they want?*

**Francine Prose:** You know, I wrote this article years ago, maybe 2000 in Harper's, that became kind of infamous for awhile called "I Know Why the Caged Bird Can't Read." And it was about—you know, I went out and found 800 high school reading lists from across the country to look at what was being taught. And one of the things I discovered was that, you know, in the effort to have a, kind of, broadly inclusive curriculum which I couldn't support more, there were many books that were actually not that great and that were sort of dull, being taught to kids. I mean my own children, my sons, they were assigned to read some of the same books over and over and over again and there were books I myself couldn't have read for, really, a million dollars.

I mean, they would just read the same book in third grade, in fifth grade, in seventh grade and you know just these unbelievably dry, boring books. And it's not the teachers' fault because in many places they don't have control over the curriculum. I mean, one of the things that became very clear to me. I mean after this article came out, one of the bad effects was that high school teachers felt as if they'd been attacked by what I was writing which wasn't my intention. So for a few months I was on all these call in shows and you know so forth. And most of the people, who called in and were quite angry, were teachers. And I began saying to them, okay look, if you could pick a book to teach, what would it be? And I felt at the end of that process, I could have generated a really amazing reading list based on what the teachers suggested. I mean, if you have to teach – and it's why I feel so glad to be able to teach the way I teach and what I teach, I'm never asked to teach a book I don't like.

Or if I do teach a book I don't like, there's a reason why I don't like it which I want my students to know and I teach it as a book I don't like, not as a book I like. So if you have teachers teaching books for which they feel no affection and no enthusiasm, it's very hard to make students like. I mean, it really has to come from—I mean, I always say when I'm teaching literature, I feel like a cheer leader for literature. Well you want that. And you want that especially in the early grades. And unfortunately, the way the educational system, especially since No Child Left Behind and all the horrific measures we've taken to improve our system, teachers are rarely given that latitude to inspire their students with love for reading.

***Question:*** *What books should be taken out of the canon?*

**Francine Prose:** Well, you know it can, speaking of that article, you know, only after you've written something do you find out what you should have written or what you should have said. I was very critical of Maya Angelou and it got me into a lot of trouble. Now I think, look, if one student read *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, if one student read that book and became a lifelong passionate reader as a result of that book then how great. Then by all means teach that

book. I mean, I think, you know, the trouble is that a lot of books are taught because they're easy to draw moral – improving moral lessons from the canon or another sort of other which is not, which doesn't have that much to do with literature. I mean, the other thing I was looking at was the way classics are taught. So for example, you know, *Huckleberry Finn* is taught as a kind of morality, that is what should Tom and Huck have done instead of what they did. Well, you know, and very few people are saying, look, Mark Twain managed to get the voice of a teenage boy on the page in a way that it had never been done before. Isn't that extraordinary? How did he do that?

*Question: Should literature be taught in conjunction with history?*

**Francine Prose:** Well, yeah. I mean, I think it would be hard to read *Huckleberry Finn* without knowing about the history of slavery in the United States. So those two things work together. But I think that if you read the literature, someone at some point should say to you, look, this novel makes you realize what it was like to live inside this in the way that your history book doesn't. And that's quite different.

**Francine Prose:** Also, *The Great Gatsby* is often taught in sort of bogus ways. I mean, you know, as an example of the unreliable narrator. Like who cares about that? Who cares about that? I mean, what's amazing about the book, just for starters, is how beautiful it is. You know, so for everybody that's taught about the unreliable narrator, if only somebody would say to them, listen to this, it's gorgeous. You know, and I think, you know, your teacher who knew it by heart, that's what you get from that.

*Question: What's your favorite book to teach?*

**Francine Prose:** Well, there's so many. You know, Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Sons*, I've always thought, was made for teachers of undergraduates, you know. I mean, it's just great to teach. I have whole of quite a long list that every year I take different things from it. So, you know, things Mavis Gallant is great to teach. Deborah Eisenberg is great to teach. Roberto Bolano. Leonard Michaels. John Cheever. There's a great, there's a huge long list. And also every semester I like to teach something that is actually kind of impossible to teach. And it always is impossible to teach but then that's sort of interesting.