Brush Up Your Chekhov

Review by EMILY BARTON

At the start of her new book on writing, Francine Prose dispatches with The Question — the five words that inevitably confront writers who teach, writers who don’t teach, and possibly even nonwriters who do neither: “Can creative writing be taught?” Prose’s succinct answer is “no,” but she elaborates on it with characteristic humor, asking us to imagine “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.” Repelled by that sort of poisonous atmosphere, I used to inveigh against writing workshops — right up until the day I started teaching one. Now, like many of my colleagues, I find myself wondering just how much success I (and my students) can reasonably expect.

Useful teaching texts are few. For all the wisdom in John Gardner’s “Art of Fiction,” his sallies against 1970’s experimentalism are aging poorly, and undergrads seem to dislike his curmudgeonly tone. E.M. Forster’s “Aspects of the Novel” is likewise yellowing at the edges. Classic reference books like Strunk and White’s “Elements of Style” and William K. Zinsser’s “On Writing Well” are thorough sources for writers of both fiction and nonfiction, but their focus on grammar and other supposedly arcane topics makes them slow going. (Maira Kalman’s illustrations for the new edition of “The Elements of Style” at least illuminate the Strunkian demands with quirky panache.) Eudora Welty’s “One Writer’s Beginnings,” Anne Lamott’s “Bird by Bird” and Stephen King’s “On Writing” are heartening, but perhaps because they’re so personal, the advice to be gleaned from them is scattershot.

Another difficulty faced by writing teachers is, paradoxically, the lack of interest many students show in reading. And those who do read often lack the training to observe subtle writerly clues. There’s a real need, then, for “Reading Like a Writer” — a primer both for aspiring writers and for readers who’d like to increase their sensitivity to the elements of the writer’s craft.

Prose notes that the creative-writing workshop (which she brilliantly satirized in her novel “Blue Angel”) is a latecomer to literary culture, but that writers have always turned to their predecessors for inspiration: “They studied meter with Ovid, plot construction with Homer, comedy with Aristophanes.” In other words, it helps to read the masters: “You can assume that if a writer’s work has survived for centuries, there are reasons why this is so, explanations that have nothing to do with a conspiracy of academics plotting to resuscitate a zombie army of dead white males.”

Prose also recommends savoring books rather than racing through them, a strategy that “may require some rewiring, unhooking the connection that makes you think you have to have an opinion about the book and reconnecting that wire to whatever terminal lets you see reading as something that might move or delight you.”

Delight? As a student, I rarely heard the word mentioned, although, like Prose, I became a writer because books gave me such joy. Her insistence on that pleasure informs her method: reading carefully to see what an author does on the page and between the lines. This casts learning in a positive light, unlike the typical workshop’s E.R. approach of trying to diagnose and cure the ailments of a story.

Prose’s chapters focus on potentially challenging topics: dialogue, narration, even where to take paragraph breaks. (I wish she’d included one on getting characters in and out of rooms.) In each chapter, she quotes from authors who approach the subject in interesting ways. Writing about sentences, for example, she cites Rebecca West, Samuel Johnson, Philip Roth and Virginia Woolf, and then patiently explains why. Here, for example, from the chapter called “Words,” is her take on a passage from Paul Bowles’s story “A Distant Episode”:

“The contents of the Professor’s ‘two small overnight bags full of maps, sun lotions and medicines’ provide a tiny mini-course in
the importance of close reading. The protagonist’s anxiety and cautiousness, his whole psychological makeup, has been communicated in five words (‘maps, sun lotions and medicines’) and without the need to use one descriptive adjective or phrase. (He was an anxious man, who worried about getting lost or sunburned or sick and so forth.) What very different conclusions we might form about a man who carries a bag filled with dice, syringes and a handgun.”

Despite her book’s didactic purpose, Prose distrusts hard-and-fast rules. When she recalls advising students to stick to one point of view, or to avoid assigning two characters similar names, she remembers finding counterexamples in Chekhov. Her notions of good writing are elastic and open-minded: a liberal view rooted in a belief in the importance of reading. “The advantage of reading widely,” she notes, “as opposed to trying to formulate a series of general rules, is that we learn there are no general rules, only individual examples to help point you in a direction in which you might want to go.”

No reader will revere all the writers Prose finds great, and some may carp at her list of 117 “Books to Be Read Immediately.” But “Reading Like a Writer” is sufficiently capacious — and encouraging — to allow for such differences of opinion. As her subtitle promises, Prose’s little guide will motivate “people who love books” and “those who want to write them” to be sensitive readers of their own and others’ work. And it will inspire them to practice the skills she teaches when reading books like “Middlemarch” and “Sense and Sensibility,” two of the many her exegesis made me hungry to reread.

I don’t know if any book about writing can tell us where novels come from — or how they take shape in a writer’s mind. Nevertheless, “Reading Like a Writer” should be greatly appreciated in and out of the classroom. Like the great works of fiction, it’s a wise and voluble companion.

*Emily Barton’s most recent novel is “Brookland.”*