

CLOSE READING

Learning to write by learning to read

BY FRANCINE PROSE

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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, when addressed to me, 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've spent in the classroom if I said that any attempt to teach the writing of fiction is a complete waste of time? I should probably 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 have ever taken. 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 very 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 encourage you and form the basis of a community that will help and sustain you.

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

Like most—maybe all—writers, I learned to write by writing and, by example, from 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 reread 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

