

I Know Why the Caged Bird Cannot Read

How American High School Students Learn to Loathe Literature

FRANCINE PROSE



Francine Prose, who was born in the late 1940s, is a reporter, essayist, critic, and editor. She has also written more than twenty books, including poetry, fiction, and children's literature. Her novel *Blue Angel* (2000) was a finalist for the National Book Award, and her nonfiction works *The Lives of the Muses: Nine Women and the Artists They Inspired* (2002) and *Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and Those Who Want to Write Them* (2006) were both national best sellers. She has received numerous grants and awards, including Guggenheim and Fulbright fellowships. She is most recently the author of the satiric novel *My New American Life* (2011). Prose is currently a book reviewer for a number of magazines and periodicals, including the *New York Times Book Review* and *O*. The following essay, published in *Harper's* in September 1999, is a critique of the quality of required reading in American high schools.

Books discussed in this essay include:

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou. Bantam Books, 1983.

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee. Warner Books, 1988.

Teaching Values through Teaching Literature by Margaret Dodson.

Eric/Edinfo Press, 1993.

Teaching the Novel by Becky Alano. Eric/Edinfo Press, 1989.

Teaching Literature by Women Authors by Carolyn Smith McGowen.

Eric/Edinfo Press, 1993.

Like most parents who have, against all odds, preserved a lively and still evolving passion for good books, I find myself, each September, increasingly appalled by the dismal lists of texts that my sons are doomed to waste a school year reading. What I get as compensation is a measure of insight into why our society has come to admire Montel Williams and Ricki Lake so much more than Dante and Homer. Given the dreariness with which literature is taught in many American classrooms, it seems miraculous that any sentient teenager would view reading as a source of pleasure. Traditionally, the love of reading has been born and nurtured in high school English class—the last time many students will find themselves in a roomful of people who have all read the same text and are, in theory, prepared to discuss it. High school—even more than college—is where literary tastes and allegiances are formed: what we read in adolescence is imprinted on our brains as the dreary notions of childhood crystallize into hard data.

The intense loyalty adults harbor for books first encountered in youth is one probable reason for the otherwise baffling longevity of vintage mediocre novels, books that teachers may themselves have read in adolescence; it is also the most plausible explanation for the peculiar [1998] Modern Library list of the “100 Best Novels of the 20th Century,” a roster dominated by robust survivors from the tenth-grade syllabus. *Darkness at Noon*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Brave New World*, and *The Studs Lonigan Trilogy* all speak, in various ways, to the vestigial teenage psyches of men of a certain age. The parallel list drawn up by students (younger, more of them female) in the Radcliffe Publishing Course reflects the equally romantic and tacky tastes (*Gone with the Wind*, *The Fountainhead*) of a later generation of adolescent girls.

Given the fact that these early encounters with literature leave such indelible impressions, it would seem doubly important to make sure that high school students are actually reading literature. Yet every opportunity to instill adolescents with a lifelong affinity for narrative, for the ways in which the vision of an artist can percolate through an idiosyncratic use of language, and for the supple gymnastics of a mind that exercises the mind of the reader is being squandered on regimens of trash and semi-trash, taught for reasons that have nothing to do with how well a book is written. In fact, less and less attention is being paid to what has been written, let alone how; it’s become a rarity for a teacher to suggest that a book might be a work of art composed of words and sentences, or that the choice of these words and sentences can inform and delight us. We hear that more books are being bought and sold than ever before, yet no one, as far as I know, is arguing that we are producing and becoming a nation of avid readers of serious literature.

Much has been made of the lemminglike fervor with which our universities have rushed to sacrifice complexity for diversity; for decades now, critics have decried our plummeting scholastic standards and mourned the death of cultural literacy without having done one appreciable thing to raise the educational bar or revive our moribund culture. Meanwhile, scant notice has been paid, except by exasperated parents, to the missed opportunities and misinformation that form the true curriculum of so many high school English classes.

My own two sons, now twenty-one and seventeen, have read (in public and private schools) Shakespeare, Hawthorne, and Melville. But they’ve also slogged repeatedly through the manipulative melodramas of Alice Walker and Maya Angelou, through sentimental, middlebrow favorites (*To Kill a Mockingbird* and *A Separate Peace*), the weaker novels of John Steinbeck, the fantasies of Ray Bradbury. My older son spent the first several weeks of sophomore English discussing the class’s summer assignment, *Ordinary People*, a weeper and former bestseller by Judith Guest about a “dysfunctional” family recovering from a teenage son’s suicide attempt.

Neither has heard a teacher suggest that he read Kafka, though one might suppose that teenagers might enjoy the transformative science-fiction aspects of

The Metamorphosis, a story about a young man so alienated from his “dysfunctional” family that he turns—embarrassingly for them—into a giant beetle. No instructor has ever asked my sons to read Alice Munro, who writes so lucidly and beautifully about the hypersensitivity that makes adolescence a hell.

In the hope of finding out that my children and my friends’ children were exceptionally unfortunate, I recently collected eighty or so reading lists from high schools throughout the country. Because of how overworked teachers are, how hard to reach during the school day, as well as the odd, paranoid defensiveness that pervades so many schools, obtaining these documents seemed to require more time and dogged perseverance than obtaining one’s FBI surveillance files—and what I came away with may not be a scientifically accurate survey. Such surveys have been done by the National Council of Teachers of English (published in the 1993 NCTE research report, *Literature in the Secondary Schools*), with results that both underline and fail to reflect what I found.

What emerges from these photocopied pages distributed in public, private, and Catholic schools as well as in military academies, in Manhattan and Denver, in rural Oregon and urban Missouri, is a numbing sameness, unaffected by geography, region, or community size. Nearly every list contains at least one of Shakespeare’s plays. Indeed, in the NCTE report, Shakespeare (followed closely by John Steinbeck) tops the rosters of “Ten Most Frequently Required Authors of Book-Length Works, Grades 9–12.”

Yet in other genres—fiction and memoir—the news is far more upsetting. On the lists sampled, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* are among the titles that appear most often, a grisly fact that in itself should inspire us to examine the works that dominate our children’s literary education.

First published in 1970, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is what we have since learned to recognize as a “survivor” memoir, a first-person narrative of victimization and recovery. Angelou transports us to her childhood in segregated Arkansas, where she was raised by her grandmother and was mostly content, despite the unpleasantness of her white neighbors, until, after a move to St. Louis, eight-year-old Maya was raped by her mother’s boyfriend. 10

One can see why this memoir might appeal to the lazy or uninspired teacher, who can conduct the class as if the students were the studio audience for Angelou’s guest appearance on *Oprah*. The author’s frequently vented distrust of white society might rouse even the most sluggish or understandably disaffected ninth-graders to join a discussion of racism; her victory over poverty and abuse can be used to address what one fan, in a customer book review on Amazon.com, celebrated as “transcending that pain, drawing from it deeper levels of meaning about being truly human and truly alive.” Many chapters end with sententious epigrams virtually begging to serve as texts for sophomoric rumination on such questions as: What does Angelou mean when she writes, “If growing up is painful for the South-

ern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is rust on the razor that threatens the throat”?

But much more terrifying than the prospect of Angelou’s pieties being dissected for their deeper meaning is the notion of her language being used as a model of “poetic” prose style. Many of the terrible mysteries that confront teachers of college freshman composition can be solved simply by looking at Angelou’s writing. Who told students to combine a dozen mixed metaphors in one paragraph? Consider a typical passage from Angelou’s opaque prose: “Weekdays revolved on a sameness wheel. They turned into themselves so steadily and inevitably that each seemed to be the original of yesterday’s rough draft. Saturdays, however, always broke the mold and dared to be different.” Where do students learn to write stale, inaccurate similes? “The man’s dead words fell like bricks around the auditorium and too many settled in my belly.” Who seriously believes that murky, turgid, convoluted language of this sort constitutes good writing? “Youth and social approval allied themselves with me and we trammelled memories of slights and insults. The wind of our swift passage remodeled my features. Lost tears were pounded to mud and then to dust. Years of withdrawal were brushed aside and left behind, as hanging ropes of parasitic moss.”

To hold up this book as a paradigm of memoir, of thought — of literature — is akin to inviting doctors convicted of malpractice to instruct our medical students. If we want to use Angelou’s work to educate our kids, let’s invite them to parse her language, sentence by sentence; ask them precisely what it means and ask why one would bother obscuring ideas that could be expressed so much more simply and felicitously.

Narrated affably enough by a nine-year-old girl named Scout, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the perennially beloved and treacly account of growing up in a small Southern town during the Depression. Its hero is Scout’s father, the saintly Atticus Finch, a lawyer who represents everything we cherish about justice and democracy and the American Way, and who defends a black man falsely accused of rape by a poor white woman. The novel has a shadow hero, too, the descriptively named Boo Radley, a gooney recluse who becomes the occasion for yet another lesson in tolerance and compassion.

Such summary reduces the book, but not by all that much. To read the novel is, for most, an exercise in wish-fulfillment and self-congratulation, a chance to consider thorny issues of race and prejudice from a safe distance and with the comfortable certainty that the reader would *never* harbor the racist attitudes espoused by the lowlifes in the novel. We (the readers) are Scout, her childhood is our childhood, and Atticus Finch is our brave, infinitely patient American Daddy. And that creepy big guy living alone in the scary house turns out to have been watching over us with protective benevolent attention.

Maya Angelou and Harper Lee are not the only authors on the lists. The other most popular books are *The Great Gatsby*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Catcher in the Rye*. John Steinbeck (*The Pearl*, *Of Mice*

and *Men*, *The Red Pony*, *The Grapes of Wrath*) and Toni Morrison (*Song of Solomon*, *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*) are the writers—after Shakespeare—represented by the largest number of titles. Also widely studied are the novels of more dubious literary merit: John Knowles’s *A Separate Peace*, William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, and Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, *Dandelion Wine*, *The October Country*, and *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. Trailing behind these favorites, Orwell (*Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*) is still being read, as are the Brontës (*Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*).

How astonishing then that students exposed to such a wide array of masterpieces and competent middlebrow entertainments are not mobbing their libraries and bookstores, demanding heady diets of serious or semi-serious fiction! And how puzzling that I should so often find myself teaching bright, eager college undergraduate and graduate students, would-be writers handicapped not merely by how little literature they have read but by their utter inability to read it; many are nearly incapable of doing the close line-by-line reading necessary to disclose the most basic information in a story by Henry James or a seemingly more straightforward one by Katherine Mansfield or Paul Bowles.

The explanation, it turns out, lies in how these books, even the best of them, are being presented in the classroom. My dogged search for reading lists flushed out, in addition to the lists themselves, course descriptions, teaching guides, and anecdotes that reveal how English literature is being taught to high school students. Only rarely do teachers propose that writing might be worth reading closely. Instead, students are informed that literature is principally a vehicle for the soporific moral blather they suffer daily from their parents. The present vogue for teaching “values” through literature uses the novel as a springboard for the sort of discussion formerly conducted in civics or ethics classes—areas of study that, in theory, have been phased out of the curriculum but that, in fact, have been retained and cleverly substituted for what we used to call English. English—and everything about it that is inventive, imaginative, or pleasurable—is beside the point in classrooms, as is everything that constitutes style and that distinguishes writers, one from another, as precisely as fingerprints or DNA mapping.

The question is no longer what the writer has written but rather who the writer is—specifically, what ethnic group or gender identity an author represents. A motion passed by the San Francisco Board of Education in March 1998 mandates that “works of literature read in class in grades nine to eleven by each high school student must include works by writers of color which reflect the diversity of culture, race, and class of the students of the San Francisco Unified School District. . . . The writers who are known to be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, shall be appropriately identified in the curriculum.” Meanwhile, aesthetic beauty—felicitous or accurate language, images, rhythm, wit, the satisfaction of recognizing something in fiction that seems fresh and true—is simply too frivolous, suspect, and elitist even to mention.

Thus the fragile *To Kill a Mockingbird* is freighted with tons of sociopolitical ballast. A “Collaborative Program Planning Record of Learning Experience,” which

I obtained from the Internet, outlines the “overall goal” of teaching the book (“To understand problems relating to discrimination and prejudice that exist in our present-day society. To understand and apply these principles to our own lives”) and suggests topics for student discussion: “What type of people make up your community? Is there any group of people . . . a person (NO NAMES PLEASE) or type of person in your community that you feel uncomfortable around?”

A description of “The Family in Literature,” an elective offered by the Princeton Day School—a course including works by Sophocles and Eugene O’Neill—begins: “Bruce Springsteen once tried to make us believe that ‘No one can break the ties that bind / You can’t for say-yay-yay-yay-yay-yake the ties that bind.’ He has since divorced his wife and married his back-up singer. So what are these ties and just how strong are they, after all?” With its chilling echoes of New Age psychobabble, Margaret Dodson’s *Teaching Values through Teaching Literature*, a sourcebook for high school English teachers, informs us that the point of Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* is “to show how progress has been made in the treatment of the mentally disadvantaged, and that more and better roles in society are being devised for them [and to] establish that mentally retarded people are human beings with the same needs and feelings that everyone else experiences.”

An eighth-grader studying Elie Wiesel’s overwrought *Night* in a class taught by a passionate gay-rights advocate came home with the following notes: “Many Jews killed during the Holocaust, but many *many* homosexuals murdered by Nazis. Pink triangle—Silence equals death.”

It’s cheering that so many lists include *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—but not when we discover that this moving, funny novel is being taught not as a work of art but as a piece of damning evidence against that bigot, Mark Twain. A friend’s daughter’s English teacher informed a group of parents that the only reason to study *Huckleberry Finn* was to decide whether it was a racist text. Instructors consulting *Teaching Values through Teaching Literature* will have resolved this debate long before they walk into the classroom to supervise “a close reading of *Huckleberry Finn* that will reveal the various ways in which Twain undercuts Jim’s humanity: in the minstrel routines with Huck as the ‘straight man’; in generalities about Blacks as unreliable, primitive and slow-witted. . . .”

Luckily for the teacher and students required to confront this fictional equivalent of a minstrel show, Mark Twain can be rehabilitated—that is to say, revised. In classes that sound like test screenings used to position unreleased Hollywood films, focus groups in which viewers are invited to choose among variant endings, students are polled for possible alternatives to Huck’s and Tom Sawyer’s actions—should Tom have carried out his plan to “free” Jim?—and asked to speculate on what the fictional characters might have or should have done to become better people and atone for the sins of their creators.

In the most unintentionally hilarious of these lesson plans, a chapter entitled “*Ethan Frome: An Avoidable Tragedy*,” Dodson warns teachers to expect resistance to their efforts to reform Wharton’s characters and thus improve her novel’s outcome: “Students intensely dislike the mere suggestion that Ethan should have

honored his commitment to Zeena and encouraged Mattie to date Dennie Eady, yet this would surely have demonstrated greater love than the suicide attempt.”

Thus another puzzle confronting college and even graduate school instructors—Why do students so despise dead writers?—is partly explained by the adversarial stance that these sourcebooks adopt toward authors of classic texts. Teachers are counseled “to help students rise above Emerson’s style of stating an idea bluntly, announcing reservations, and sometimes even negating the original idea” and to present “a method of contrasting the drab, utilitarian prose of *Nineteen Eighty-four* with a lyric poem ‘To a Darkling Thrush,’ by Thomas Hardy.” Why not mention that such works have been read for years—for a reason!—and urge students to figure out what that reason is? Doesn’t it seem less *valuable* to read Emily Dickinson’s work as the brain-damaged mumblings of a demented agoraphobic than to approach the subject of Dickinson, as Richard Sewall suggests in his biography of her, on our knees? No one’s suggesting that canonical writers should be immune to criticism. Dickens’s anti-Semitism, Tolstoy’s overly romantic ideas about the peasantry, Kipling’s racism, are all problematic, and merit discussion. But to treat the geniuses of the past as naughty children, amenable to reeducation by the children of the present, evokes the educational theory of the Chinese Revolution.

No wonder students are rarely asked to consider what was actually written by these hopeless racists and sociopaths. Instead, they’re told to write around the books, or, better yet, write their own books. Becky Alano’s depressing *Teaching the Novel* advises readers of Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* to construct a therapeutic evaluation of its suicidal heroine (“Do you think she is ready to go home? What is your prognosis for her future?”) and lists documents to be written as supplements to *Macbeth* (a script of the TV evening news announcing the murders; a psychiatrist’s report on Lady Macbeth, or her suicide note to her husband; Macbeth’s entry in *Who’s Who*, or his obituary).

How should prospective readers of Anne Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl* prepare? Carolyn Smith McGowen’s *Teaching Literature by Women Authors* suggests: “Give each student a paper grocery bag. Explain that to avoid being sent to a concentration camp, many people went into hiding. Often they could take with them only what they could carry. . . . Ask your students to choose the items they would take into hiding. These items must fit into the grocery bag.” A class attempting to interpret an Emily Dickinson poem can be divided into three groups, each group interpreting the poem based on one of Freud’s levels of consciousness; thus the little ids, egos, and superegos can respond to the Dickinson poem according to the category of awareness to which their group has been assigned.

Those who might have supposed that one purpose of fiction was to deploy the powers of language to connect us, directly and intimately, with the hearts and souls of others, will be disappointed to learn that the whole point is to make us examine ourselves. According to Alano, *The Catcher in the Rye* will doubtless suggest an incident “in which you felt yourself to be an ‘outsider’ like Holden. Why did you feel outside? What finally changed your situation?” Stephen Crane’s *The Red*

Badge of Courage should make us compare our anxieties (“Describe an event that you anticipated with fear. . . . Was the actual event worth the dread?”) with those of its Civil War hero. And what does *The Great Gatsby* lead us to consider? “Did you ever pursue a goal with single-minded devotion? . . . Would you have gained your end in any other way?” Are we to believe that the average eleventh-grader has had an experience comparable to that of Jay Gatsby—or F. Scott Fitzgerald? And is it any wonder that teenagers should complete these exercises with little but contempt for the writer who so pointlessly complicated and obfuscated a personal true story that sixteen-year-olds could have told so much more interestingly themselves?

I remember when it dawned on me that I might, someday, grow old. I was in the eleventh grade. Our marvelous and unusual English teacher had assigned us to read *King Lear*—that is, to read every line of *King Lear*. (As I recall, we were asked to circle every word or metaphor having to do with eyes and vision, a tedious process we grumbled about but that succeeded in focusing our attention.) Although I knew I would never ever resemble the decrepit adults around me, Shakespeare’s genius, his poetry, his profound, encyclopedic understanding of personality, managed to persuade me that I could *be* that mythical king—an imaginative identification very different from whatever result I might have obtained by persuading myself that my own experience was the *same* as Lear’s. I recall the hallucinatory sense of having left my warm bedroom, of finding myself—old, enraged, alone, despised—on that heath, in that dangerous storm. And I remember realizing, after the storm subsided, that language, that mere words on the page, had raised that howling tempest. 30

Lear is still the Shakespeare play I like best. I reread it periodically, increasingly moved now that age is no longer a theoretical possibility, and now that its portrayal of Lear’s behavior so often seems like reportage. A friend whose elderly boss is ruining his company with irrational tests of fealty and refusals to cede power needs only six words to describe the situation at work: *King Lear*, Act One, Scene One.

Another high school favorite was the King James Version of the Book of Revelation. I don’t think I’d ever heard of Armageddon, nor did I believe that when the seals of a book were opened horses would fly out. What delighted me was the language, the cadences and the rhythms, and the power of the images: the four horsemen, the beast, the woman clothed with the sun.

But rather than exposing students to works of literature that expand their capacities and vocabularies, sharpen their comprehension, and deepen the level at which they think and feel, we either offer them “easy” (Steinbeck, Knowles, Angelou, Lee) books that “anyone” can understand, or we serve up the tougher works predigested. We no longer believe that books were written one word at a time, and deserve to be read that way. We’ve forgotten the difference between a student who has never read a nineteenth-century novel and an idiot incapable of

reading one. When my son was assigned *Wuthering Heights* in tenth-grade English, the complex sentences, archaisms, multiple narrators, and interwoven stories seemed, at first, like a foreign language. But soon enough, he caught on and reported being moved almost to tears by the cruelty of Heathcliff's treatment of Isabella.

In fact, it's not difficult to find fiction that combines clear, beautiful, accessible, idiosyncratic language with a narrative that conveys a complex worldview. But to use such literature might require teachers and school boards to make fresh choices, selections uncontaminated by trends, clichés, and received ideas. If educators continue to assume that teenagers are interested exclusively in books about teenagers, there *is* engaging, truthful fiction about childhood and adolescence, written in ways that remind us why someone might like to read. There is, for example, Charles Baxter's precise and evocative "Gryphon." And there are the carefully chosen details, the complex sentences, and the down-to-earth diction in Stuart Dybek's great Chicago story, "Hot Ice."

If English class is the only forum in which students can talk about racism and ethnic identity, why not teach Hilton Als's *The Women*, Flannery O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge," or any of the stories in James Alan McPherson's *Hue and Cry*, all of which eloquently and directly address the subtle, powerful ways in which race affects every tiny decision and gesture? Why not introduce our kids to the clarity and power of James Baldwin's great story "Sonny's Blues"?

My suspicion is that the reason such texts are not used as often as *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is precisely the reason why they *should* be taught—that is, because they're complicated. Baldwin, Als, and McPherson reject obvious "lessons" and familiar arcs of abuse, self-realization, and recovery; they actively refute simplistic prescriptions about how to live.

Great novels can help us master the all-too-rare skill of tolerating—of being able to hold in mind—ambiguity and contradiction. Jay Gatsby has a shady past, but he's also sympathetic. Huck Finn is a liar, but we come to love him. A friend's student once wrote that Alice Munro's characters weren't people he'd choose to hang out with but that reading her work always made him feel "a little less petty and judgmental." Such benefits are denied to the young reader exposed only to books with banal, simple-minded moral equations as well as to the student encouraged to come up with reductive, wrong-headed readings of multilayered texts.

The narrator of *Caged Bird* is good, her rapist is bad; Scout and Atticus Finch are good, their bigoted neighbors are bad. But the characters in James Alan McPherson's "Gold Coast" are a good deal more lifelike. The cantankerous, bigoted, elderly white janitor and the young African American student, his temporary assistant, who puts up with the janitor's bullshit and is simultaneously cheered and saddened by the knowledge that he's headed for greater success than the janitor will ever achieve, both embody mixtures of admirable and more dubious qualities. In other words, they're more like humans. It's hard to imagine the les-

son plans telling students exactly how to feel about these two complex plausible characters.

No one's suggesting that every existing syllabus be shredded; many books on the current lists are great works of art. But why not *tell* the students that, instead of suggesting that Mark Twain be posthumously reprimanded? Why not point out how convincingly he captured the workings of Huck's mind, the inner voice of a kid trying desperately to sew a crazy quilt of self together from the ragged scraps around him? Why not celebrate the accuracy and vigor with which he translated the rhythms of American speech into written language?

In simplifying what a book is allowed to tell us—Twain's novel is wholly about racism and not at all about what it's like to *be* Huck Finn—teachers pretend to spark discussion but actually prevent it. They claim to relate the world of the book to the world of experience, but by concentrating on the student's own history they narrow the world of experience down to the personal and deny students *other* sorts of experience—the experience of what's in the book, for starters. One reason we read writers from other times or cultures is to confront alternatives—of feeling and sensibility, of history and psyche, of information and ideas. To experience the heartbreaking matter-of-factness with which Anne Frank described her situation seems more useful than packing a paper bag with Game Boys, cigarettes, and CDs so that we can go into hiding and avoid being sent to the camps. 40

The pleasure of surrender to the world of a book is only one of the pleasures that this new way of reading—and teaching—denies. In blurring the line between reality and fiction (What happened to you that was exactly like what happened to Hester Prynne?), it reduces our respect for imagination, beauty, art, thought, and for the way that the human spirit expresses itself in words.

Writers have no choice but to believe that literature will survive, that it's worth some effort to preserve the most beautiful, meaningful lyrics or narratives, the record of who we were, and are. And if we want our children to begin an extended love affair with reading and with what great writing can do, we *want* them to get an early start—or any start, at all. Teaching students to value literary masterpieces is our best hope of awakening them to the infinite capacities and complexities of human experience, of helping them acknowledge and accept complexity and ambiguity, and of making them love and respect the language that allows us to smuggle out, and send one another, our urgent, eloquent dispatches from the prison of the self.

That may be what writers—and readers—desire. But if it's not occurring, perhaps that's because our culture wants it less urgently than we do. Education, after all, is a process intended to produce a product. So we have to ask ourselves: What sort of product is being produced by the current system? How does it change when certain factors are added to, or removed from, our literature curriculum? And is it really in the best interests of our consumer economy to create

a well-educated, smart, highly literate society of fervent readers? Doesn't our epidemic dumbing-down have undeniable advantages for those institutions (the media, the advertising industry, the government) whose interests are better served by a population not trained to read too closely or ask too many questions?

On the most obvious level, it's worth noting that books are among the few remaining forms of entertainment not sustained by, and meant to further, the interests of advertising. Television, newspapers, and magazines are busily instilling us with new desires and previously unsuspected needs, while books sell only themselves. Moreover, the time we spend reading is time spent away from media that have a greater chance of alchemically transmuting attention into money.

But of course what's happening is more complex and subtle than that, more closely connected to how we conceive of the relation between intellect and spirit. The new-model English-class graduate—the one who has been force-fed the gross oversimplifications proffered by these lesson plans and teaching manuals—values empathy and imagination less than the ability to make quick and irreversible judgments, to entertain and maintain simplistic immovable opinions about guilt and innocence, about the possibilities and limitations of human nature. Less comfortable with the gray areas than with sharply delineated black and white, he or she can work in groups and operate by consensus, and has a resultant, residual distrust for the eccentric, the idiosyncratic, the annoyingly . . . individual.

What I've described is a salable product, tailored to the needs of the economic and political moment. What results from these educational methods is a mode of thinking (or, more accurately, of *not* thinking) that equips our kids for the future: Future McDonald's employees. Future corporate board members. Future special prosecutors. Future makers of 100-best-books lists who fondly recall what they first read in high school—and who may not have read anything since. And so the roster of literary masterpieces we pass along to future generations will continue its downward shift, and those lightweight, mediocre high school favorites will continue to rise, unburdened by gravity, to the top of the list.

.....

Questions for Discussion

1. Francine Prose states, "Traditionally, the love of reading has been born and nurtured in high school English class" (para. 1). Do you think this is generally the case? Describe your experience on this subject.
2. What does Prose mean when she writes, "[B]y concentrating on the student's own history they [teachers] narrow the world of experience down to the personal and deny students *other* sorts of experience—the experience of what's in the book, for starters" (para. 40)? Do you agree with Prose's statement? Why or why not?
3. What is Prose implying in the following statement about what she calls the "new-model English-class graduate": "But of course what's happening is more complex and subtle than that [seeing books as unconnected to advertising], more

closely connected to how we conceive of the relation between intellect and spirit” (para. 45)?

4. Whom does Prose blame for this state of affairs? Does assigning blame affect the cogency of her argument?
5. This essay was written in 1999. Do you think Prose would or could make the same argument today? Why or why not?

Questions on Rhetoric and Style

1. Discuss three appeals to ethos in this essay. What different roles, or personae, does Prose use to establish her ethos?
2. Prose’s opening paragraph includes such words as *appalled*, *dismal*, and *dreariness*—all with negative connotations. Why does she start out with such strong language? Does she risk putting off readers who do not share her views? Why or why not? What other examples of strongly emotional language do you find in the essay?
3. Prose makes several key assumptions about the role and impact of reading literary works in high school. What are they?
4. What appeals does she make to logos?
5. Prose cites many different novels and plays. Does she assume her audience is familiar with some of them? All of them? Explain why it matters whether the audience knows the works.
6. According to Prose, “To hold up [*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*] as a paradigm of memoir, of thought—of literature—is akin to inviting doctors convicted of malpractice to instruct our medical students” (para. 13). Do you agree with this analogy? Explain your answer. What other examples of figurative language can you find in this essay?
7. Toward the end of the essay (paras. 35, 39, and 43), Prose uses a series of rhetorical questions. What is her purpose in piling one rhetorical question on top of another?
8. Would Prose have strengthened her argument by including interviews with a few high school students or teachers? Why or why not?
9. According to Prose, why are American high school students learning to loathe literature? Try to find at least four or five reasons.
10. Does she propose a solution or recommendations to change this situation? If she does not offer a solution, is her argument weakened? Explain your answer.

Suggestions for Writing

1. Prose is highly critical of the quality of both *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. If you have read either, write an evaluation of her criticism of the book. Pay particular attention to the quotations she selects; is she setting up a straw man—that is, an argument that can be easily refuted?
2. Prose is skeptical of the practice of using literary works to teach values. Write an essay in which you support or challenge her position. Be specific in your references to novels, plays, or poems.

3. Prose writes, “Great novels can help us master the all-too-rare skill of tolerating—of being able to hold in mind—ambiguity and contradiction” (para. 37). Select a novel you know well, and explain the “ambiguity and contradiction” at its heart.
4. Collect the required reading lists from several schools (or classes) in different geographical regions, and compare and contrast them. Are there differences in quality as well as quantity? Are any of the books Prose discusses included on them? Do the books appeal to boys as well as girls? Is there opportunity for choice? Write an essay analyzing these lists from Prose’s point of view.

