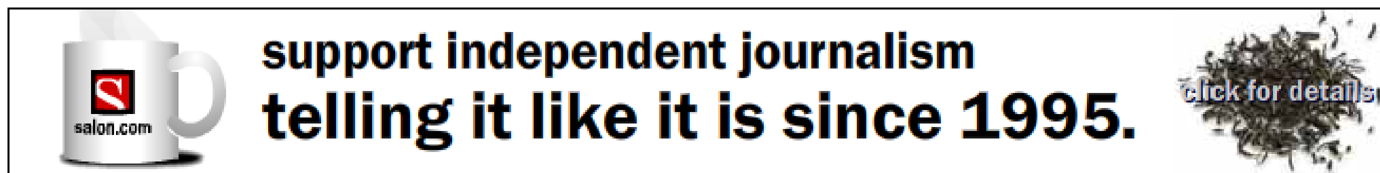

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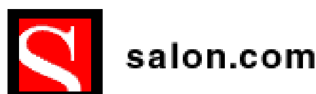

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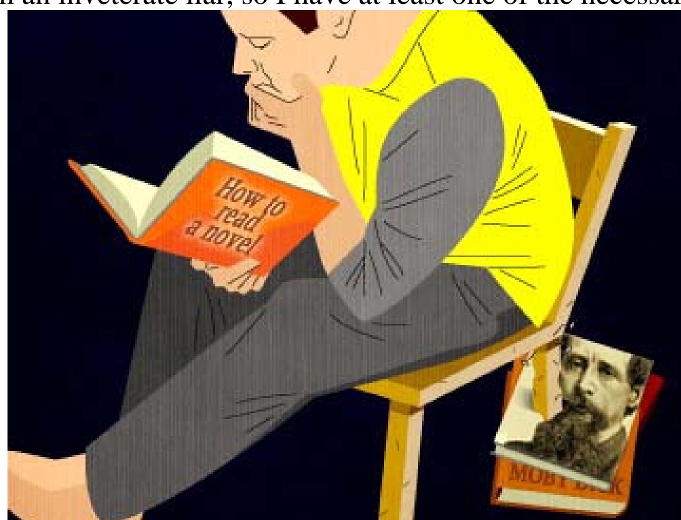
Think you know how to read, do you?

A new throng of authors wants to save literature from our nefarious English departments and teach us how to read their way. Now, class, pay attention.

By Tom Lutz

Mar. 08, 2007 | I am surprised that I am not a novelist. I am an inveterate liar, so I have at least one of the necessary skills. I love the novel as a form in as deep and devoted a way as any man loved any art, and writing novels is the only thing in the way of a life's work that I've ever really wanted to undertake. Still, I remain novel-less.



I have Jack Kerouac and Hunter Thompson to blame for my early misdirected energies. They encouraged me to believe that the essence of writing was the wild life that preceded it, to believe that I was doing the better part, and the most important part, of novel-writing by imitating them not on the page, but in the bars and on the highways. I realize now this was an error in judgment.

So, too, was my decision to get a Ph.D. in literature as a step toward the nice cushy professorship that would allow me to lay back and watch myself write novel after novel, with perhaps a collection of stories here and there. The graduate work and academic gigs that followed meant that I had to teach and write a bunch of other things, those publish-or-perish scholarly books and the requisite pile of articles full of words like "overdetermination," "supplementarity," "hybridity," "imbrication" and "polyvocality," words that produced the squiggly red underlines of my spell-checker and earned me the enmity of the very novelists and poets I wanted to join.

Francine Prose, for instance. In her latest book, "Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them," Prose rails against the FemiMarxiDecons in English departments that are destroying literature and everything holy. Students, she writes, are now discouraged from loving novels and instead are "instructed to prosecute or defend ... authors, as if in a court of law, on charges having to do with the writers' origins, their racial, cultural, and class backgrounds." Prose went to graduate school in literature herself briefly, she tells us, probably with the same idea I had, but she quickly bolted. She found that most of the teachers and students didn't share her love of books; it was hard, she writes, "to understand what they did love." And that was before the real fall, 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."

Prose is one of a new throng of authors bent on correcting this sad state of affairs, this horrible split between the writers and the critics that has riven every college and university in the country. Over the past 15 years, I taught an average of a semester a year at the University of Iowa, the home of the famous Writers' Workshop. When I started the writers were on the fourth floor and the critics on the third. I often had a Workshop student or two in my graduate courses, and I would bring the creative writing faculty in to meet my undergrads. By the time I left two years ago, that had long ceased. A durable and unbreachable wall had been erected between the writers and the scholars. They looked at each other not as allies in a common project, but as enemies. Now the Workshop has moved across campus and the divorce is final.

In the interest of full disclosure, let me say I have since gone over to the other side myself and teach in a creative writing program. But I still don't understand, frankly, why people hate literary scholars for having a professional vocabulary while remaining perfectly content with economists' using "devaluation" or philosophers' using "existentialist," or physicists' talking about a "projective Hilbert space endowed with the Fubini-Study metric." These days even Tucker Carlson uses "deconstruct" and George W. Bush has developed quite a fondness for "ideology," which half my dissertation committee rejected as jargon. So what's the big deal? Have there been excesses of obscurantism and pomposity? Yes, but as our literary writers have long known, from Laurence Sterne to Herman Melville to James Joyce to William Vollmann, sometimes nothing succeeds like excess.

What the writers always insisted was that people are better off reading Tolstoy than some yahoo from the University of Akron deconstructing Tolstoy, and who would disagree with that? Whoever it is, they seem to need a lot of convincing, because scads of authors have published books advising them to beware the snobs and schoolmarms in academia and look at "the text itself." The "how-to-read" genre is venerable, already well under way when Noah Porter published "Books and Reading, or What Books Shall I Read and How Should I Read Them?" in 1871. There is something odd, though, about the latest slough of anti-academic books offering to teach us "how to read." Perhaps it is the fact that they are written by academics like professor Prose of Bard College. But perhaps it is because most of these books are only masquerading as guides to reading. What each really offers is a series of explications of famous passages, much like, well, academic criticism.

Like professor Prose, professor Harold Bloom, in "How to Read and Why" (2000), has the same antagonists, albeit more legion. Like Prose, he upbraids wayward academic critics, especially those "who believe all of us to be overdetermined by societal history" and who "regard literary characters as marks upon a page, and nothing more." Huh? I've spent a horrendous amount of time in the halls of academe, and I've met some real numskulls, but never anyone who fits that description. "Marks upon a page, and nothing more"? What does that even mean?

I don't want to stir up the dying embers of the theory wars or the culture wars, but why do Prose and Bloom open their guides with attacks against these mythical creatures? Bloom has them organizing into "covens" of gender and sexuality and multiculturalism. These boogeymen and boogeywomen and boogeytransgenderedpeople have destroyed reading, Bloom argues, by destroying irony, and "the loss of irony is the death of reading, and of what had been civilized in our natures." Itself sorely lacking in irony, this kind of talk sets up a dire narrative in which what Bloom calls "the restoration of reading" is needed, not just because literature is worth saving, but because civilization is at stake. This is a somewhat whorish old story, pressed into all kinds of service over the last century and more, not always to the most savory ends.

To save civilization, Prose and Bloom turn to that New Critical mantra any seasoned reader first heard in English lit 101: "the text itself." The phrase is one that all the most crotchety English professors have used over the last 30 years to counterattack the critical rabble like me and my old pals who dethroned the old guard with our malevolent theories. The conceit that Prose and Bloom share is that these new kids (however grayed at this point) are all looking at something besides the text itself, by which they mean a book that is read without theory, without reference to other values, and without mediation of any kind.

It's worth noting that the New Criticism was in its own day the new kid on the block, and it was seen as a fairly outlandish, ridiculously over-theorized assault on civilized reading. It is J.E. Spingarn's 1911 "The New Criticism" that H.L. Mencken lampoons in "Criticism of Criticism of Criticism," suggesting that Spingarn has a theory simply

because "a professor must have a theory, as a dog must have fleas." Although Mencken likes Spingarn's basic idea that there should be no morality in criticism, he also thinks that it implodes. Once Spingarn has "stated his doctrine," Mencken writes, "the ingenious ex-professor, professor-like, immediately begins to corrupt it by claiming too much for it. Having laid and hatched, so to speak, his somewhat stale by still highly nourishing egg, he begins to argue fatuously that the resultant flamingo is the whole mustering of the critical Aves."

Over the next several decades, especially after John Crowe Ransom's New Criticism in 1941, New Critics made college students familiar with a long list of technical terms, like "metonymy" and "the intentional fallacy," and had professors policing reading as strenuously as any Marxian feminist could. It was, in effect, both rebellion and business as usual. "Every now and then," Mencken writes, "a sense of the futility of their daily endeavors falling suddenly upon them, the critics of Christendom turn to a somewhat sour and depressing consideration of the nature and objects of their own craft. That is to say, they turn to criticizing criticism." Plus ca change.

Professor and poet Edward Hirsch also runs up the flag for the work itself in "How to Read a Poem" (1999), though he is a bit less combative about it than Bloom. Hirsch claims that he lets "poems themselves" be his Virgilian guides: "I have gathered together many poems I have loved over the years and I have tried to let them show me how they should be read." This is, of course, personification, and since Hirsch is a poet, I suppose we can let him talk that way. He also tells a poetic story of decline: "Now there are many people who have become so estranged from the devices and techniques of poetry, from poetic thinking, that they no longer recognize what they are reading. Reading poetry is endangered, I suppose, because reading itself is endangered in our culture now. I need not cite the statistics."

Well, maybe he should. The fact is that more books are released each year, more novels are being published than ever before, and more copies are being sold. Not only that, but we are in the midst of an explosion of new small presses the likes of which we haven't seen since the 1920s. Poetry hasn't enjoyed such a wide audience since then, either. Just as happened in the music industry, the calamitous blockbuster mentality that has literary authors up in arms has resulted in the blossoming of new outlets, new distribution networks, new excitement that has nothing to do with big publishing. Anti-modern screeds against the current state of reading like Bloom's cannot account for all this new activity any more than they can account for the Harry Potter phenomenon.

This isn't to say everything is great. We've all heard how millions of filmgoing, TV-watching boobs are killing off whatever literature is left after the bad professors are done kicking it around. And we feel a little guilty. Isn't it true, after all, that I might read more if I didn't watch film or TV? Yes, probably. But then again, I drive 75 miles per hour, not Spingarn's 16, I don't play bridge, which takes an enormous amount of time, and what about the extra reading time I carve out by not having tea with the vicar? Iraq, global warming and the increasing gap between rich and poor aside, the state of things is not quite as dismal as these literary folk suggest.

If we look to the past these authors hold up as the golden age of the work itself, what do we find? In 1939, Mortimer J. Adler excoriated "those who believe that all their leisure time should be devoted to the effortless pleasures of the movies, the radio, and light romances." He didn't write "How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education" for such philistines, he says, and they "should not bother to read" it. "I am talking to the rest of us."

Adler spends the majority of his book describing how to do close reading, trying to understand the text as written. But Adler's peroration suggests that a liberal education through reading the great books prepares citizens for responsible freedom, and argues that "reading the great books has been for naught unless we are concerned with bringing about a good society," an attitude Bloom and Prose would ascribe to the nasty politicized professors of our day.

Long before the competition of movies and the radio, Yale professor Noah Porter worried, in 1871, about what Adler called "light romances" and the "young ladies" who "read themselves down into an utter waste and frivolity of thought, feeling, and purpose." This bad reading is not just a waste of time, but is actually morally degrading. "The trashy literature in which they delight, becomes the cheap and vapid representative of their empty minds, their heartless affections, and their frivolous characters." His "Books and Reading, or What Books Shall I Read and How Should I Read Them?" already identifies the same culprits as today's book pundits: commercialism and the

academy.

"The bookseller can tell them what books are popular and have a run, but this recommendation is of a doubtful character," he writes, so they need someone else to elevate their taste. Unfortunately his cronies in the universities have fallen down on the job, making his book necessary. "We hope also to give some direction to the taste, and this without the dry and formal precepts of the schools, or the captious and positive dogmatism of the professed critic."

Porter, like the later guides, seeks to create a community of readers, one that, like Adler's, will be elevated by what they read. This is a special community, and, as it does for Hirsch, Porter's imagined community has a spiritual as well as a temporal goal. The members of this community know, like Bloom and Prose and Adler, which few are the pearls in the ocean of books.

In fact, all of these guides seem more devoted to socialization than fulfilling their overt purpose; they are better for inducting people into the community of readers (or having them re-up), that is, than for teaching them how to read. They build community not by disseminating how to read, but what to read. Prose's subtitle is a case in point: Hers is a "Guide for People Who Love Books," but she obviously doesn't mean for people who love "Mein Kampf" or "The Turner Diaries" or even Michael Crichton. She means not just those of us who like books better than, say, radio, but those who like a certain kind of book. All this talk of reading only the book itself as the author intended it is balderdash if we are reading some hateful racist claptrap or some half-baked novel by L. Ron Hubbard.

The fact that "how to read" can never be uncoupled from "what to read" is underscored by these books' appendices. Porter's book attached "a Select Catalogue of Books." Adler adds a "List of the Great Books" (downgraded in the revised 1972 edition to "A Recommended Reading List"). Hirsch appends (along with a 25,000-word glossary of technical poetic terms) a reading list of poems from ancient times to the present, including representative selections from most continents and periods. Bloom organizes his book by the great authors; his section on plays has three chapters: Shakespeare, Ibsen, Wilde. Prose gives a list of "Books to Be Read Immediately."

The only books that do a better job telling people how to read than telling them what to read are Amy and Regina Wall's "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Critical Reading" (2005) and Thomas C. Foster's "How to Read Like a Professor" (2003). The Walls really do write, apparently, for idiots ("If you read into a story and find the hidden meanings, they are your own discovery and will hold a more valuable and deeper meaning for you"), and Foster is somewhat distressingly palsy-walsy, but they both do, in fact, describe the basic techniques used in literary reading as opposed to reading the TiVo manual.

Oddly enough, given all the anti-professorial talk in the rest, Foster thinks reading like a professor is a good thing. Nonetheless, what he really shows people is how to read like an undergraduate. When someone in a story goes on "a trip with a purpose," he explains, we should understand that that character is on a quest. When writers "are writing about other things, they really mean sex, and when they write about sex, they really mean something else." So he teaches symbolism. Mark Twain's Mississippi, Hart Crane's Hudson, and T.S. Eliot's Thames lead him to ask, "Do you suppose there's any chance of their rivers standing for the same thing?" This is all quite practical and straightforward and dreadfully reductive. I have an autodidact friend who loves this book, but he also loves sociobiology; that is, he loves the idea that the complexities of life, history and literature can be reduced to simple formulas and overarching explanations. He feels Foster has taught him how to read, and he now knows a quest when he sees one.

We might even say that Foster's success as a guide to reading makes the others' failure to do so look like a victory on another front. Prose seems to have a clearly analytic approach, organizing her book by the constituent parts of a novel, with most of the 11 chapters titled things like "Words," "Sentences," "Paragraphs," "Character" and "Dialogue." But she quickly loses focus in each chapter, and ends up with an only mildly organized tour through her own library, a series of almost random, but smart, insightful observations about literary classics. Bloom and Hirsch do the same thing; they discuss with gusto exemplary passages from novels, plays and poems, engaging with the works' brilliance in brilliant ways, and one has to feel a certain amount of thanks. We're not going to reread all those books, not to mention that some of them we've never read and never will. It's nice to be reminded of their genius, nice to have these amazing passages paraded before us. It's like having an extended conversation with a reader who

has a photographic memory, a keen critical sensibility, and a way with words. I call that fun.

John Sutherland is another great literary talker. He wears a great deal of learning and reading quite lightly, and in "How to Read a Novel" (2006) he talks to us common folk in a relaxed and engaging way. For whatever reason, perhaps because he is British, he has considerably less animus against his fellow academics than his American counterparts do. His book takes into account the non-New Critical academic studies of the last few decades, and he has no problem easing readers into a consideration of publishing history and copyright law as well as such classic postmodern critical texts as Roland Barthes' "S/Z."

Sutherland's antagonist is the "world in which millions of books are dumped in the marketplace at once," the "book glut" that threatens us with being "crushed by its sheer commercial and cultural weight." He does cite statistics, and the fact that some 10,000 novels are published each year (his number) fills him with dread; the fact that the backlist is more available than ever he finds an added imposition; the fact that it is easier to get any novel one wants quickly and usually overnight is somehow a problem; the idea that electronic versions of novels can jam whole libraries into a memory stick is cause for heightened anxiety.

One senses a distaste for modernity like Adler's in Sutherland's alarums, but he suggests that the real problem is that we can't know what we should read out of these endless possibilities. Thus, again, the call for his book, which is there to help. "How can we identify the 10 percent, or less, of fiction available that is not crap?" Sutherland asks, although even 5 percent would still leave us 500 novels a year, or from 50 to 100 times the average reader's tally.

This sense of information overload, like the glory days of the text itself, relies on a somewhat idealized past. I once wrote a book about the year 1903, trying to get a broad sense of the culture through reading as widely as I could. At some point, I realized that I had read a lot more of what was published in 1903 than anyone alive that year ever had, and yet I still had barely dipped into the ocean of books published between that particular January and December.

Sutherland suggests that the Victorians were assured of their literary taste, the book market was a reasonable size, and thus readers needed only the Times Literary Supplement or the Bookman and a good bookstore to know what "everyone" was reading and make a good choice. But in fact one can find literary journals already worrying in 1903 that there was too much going on for anyone to comprehend, announcing anxiously that the book glut had already arrived. Sutherland claims that only 5 percent of new novels now get reviewed, but he doesn't mention that almost as many novels are reviewed now than were published each year in the 1870s, when, as now, only a fraction were ever reviewed at all.

Sutherland wants to help those of us dedicated to novel reading keep our heads above the raging waters of the book flood, but he gives very little actual advice about how to decide what to read. He has many sections on how various marketing techniques affect our choices, but I kept wondering who he thinks we are if he needs to tell us that the choice between hardback and paperback editions may not be as hard to make if the hardback is heavily discounted. And for whom might it be news that we may not have to pay the full publisher's recommended price if we order online? Does anybody not understand that blurbs are not always to be trusted, or that sexy covers sell?

Maureen Corrigan, reviewing the book for the Washington Post, characterizes what is pleasurable about Sutherland's performance perfectly: "At his most genial, Sutherland embodies that literary persona the Brits affect so flawlessly: the raconteur who, fueled by a good fire and a tumbler or two of Glenlivet, can rattle on knowledgeably about books for hours." But as she also notes, he doesn't answer the obvious question: Given his insistence on the pleasure and value of reading novels, what are we doing reading his book? The back cover has a blurb written by the author himself: "This is a truly important book: no novel reader should travel the fictional road without it," signed "John Sutherland, critic and literary guide." This is an illustration of his point about blurbs, but its cutesiness is the flip side of his geniality. With world enough and time, and maybe a couple of tumblers of Glenlivet, Sutherland's book is worth reading, but it certainly doesn't tell me much about how to read a novel or why I should read Sutherland instead.

So we have a collection of books that don't do a very good job teaching people how to read, with a series of bogus antagonists and misleading titles. What might be the point? The better ones function as highfalutin Reader's Digests,

a way to get the pleasures and buzz of literary masterpieces in a fraction of the time required to actually read them. On the face of it, this is a kind of literary laziness, but I do the same thing with my iPod now, listening to 30 seconds of a tune, really loving it, before clicking onto the next. I had a half-hour commute for a while that would sometimes have me bumping through 150 tracks on my way in and another 150 on the way back.

One could bemoan the fickle, ADHD quality of such consumption or embrace the beauty of the collage that results. In either case, however, one can't help noticing that these how-to-read books offer a reading experience that is the diametric opposite of the way most argue we should read. They plead with us to read slowly, savoringly, appreciating the layers and layers of interpretive possibility, approaching the texts on their own terms, and certainly not in snippets. They all marvel at the great texts' uncanny ability to make much more out the whole than any Cliff Notes condensation could, than any collection of parts like the very ones they extract. Such contradictions make them ripe for being parodied, as, in fact, Adler's "How to Read a Book" was parodied by someone under the name of Erasmus J. Addlepate as "How to Read Two Books"; Addlepate has such chapters as "How to Read in Bed" and includes, on its list of Great Books, "What a Girl Can Make and Do" and "Light Gymnastics."

The recent book that does this questionable job the best -- the novelist Jane Smiley's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel" (2005). Smiley discusses the literary novel as a genre, the history of the form, and a dozen other basic topics, all admirably informed by literary history and literary theory. She is superbly well read and generous to her predecessors and compeers. After a book-length (269 pages) critical essay on the novel, she appends an even longer reading of 100 essential novels (109, really), one at a time. These are little jewels of observation and appreciation, mini-essays that give much the same kind of pleasure as the musings of Bloom, Prose and Hirsch, although given the nature of the task she takes on, she has less space for the kind of pleasurable lingering over beautiful passages that they do. It is, nonetheless, an impressive distillation of a life of reading.

Virginia Woolf, in "How Should One Read a Book?" (1932), declared that the "only advice, indeed, that one person can give another about reading is to take no advice, to follow your own instincts, to use your own reason, to come to your own conclusions." Every writer of how-to-read guides since has tipped his or her hat to some version of this obeisance to subjectivity, but none of them really believe it, do they, or why would they have written a guide? In the end, Dear Reader, these books themselves are part of that dread project: literary criticism written by professors. And they all beg the obvious question: Shouldn't we be reading something better?

-- By Tom Lutz

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