

Mister Monkey (Prose)

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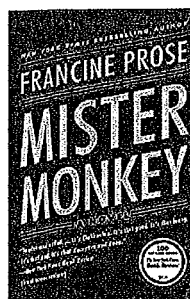
Mister Monkey

Francine Prose, 2016

HarperCollins

304 pp.

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Summary

An ingenious, darkly humorous, and brilliantly observant story that follows the exploits and intrigue of a constellation of characters affiliated with an off-off-off-off Broadway children's musical.

Mister Monkey—a screwball children's musical about a playfully larcenous pet chimpanzee—is the kind of family favorite that survives far past its prime.

Margot, who plays the chimp's lawyer, knows the production is dreadful and bemoans the failure of her acting career. She's settled into the drudgery of playing a humiliating part...

...Until the day she receives a mysterious letter from an anonymous admirer, and later, in the middle of a performance, has a shocking encounter with Adam, the twelve-year-old who plays the title role.

Francine Prose's effervescent comedy is told from the viewpoints of wildly unreliable, seemingly disparate characters whose lives become deeply connected as the madcap narrative unfolds. There is Adam, whose looming adolescence informs his interpretation of his role; Edward, a young audience member who is candidly unimpressed with the play; Ray, the author of the novel on which the musical is based, who witnesses one of the most awkward first dates in literature; and even the eponymous Mister Monkey, the Monkey God himself.

With her trademark wit and verve, Prose delves into humanity's most profound mysteries: art, ambition, childhood, aging, and love. Startling and captivating, *Mister Monkey* is a breathtaking novel from a writer at the height of her craft. (*From the publisher.*)

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Mister Monkey (Prose) - Author Bio

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Author Bio

- Birth—April 1, 1947
- Where—Brooklyn, New York, USA
- Education—B.A., Radcliffe College
- Awards—Pushcart Prize; PEN-America prize for translation; Guggenheim Fellowship
- Currently—lives in Brooklyn, New York

When it comes to an author as eclectic as Francine Prose, it's difficult to find the unifying thread in her work. But, if one were to examine her entire oeuvre—from novels and short stories to essays and criticism—a love of reading would seem to be the animating force.

That may not seem extraordinary, especially for a writer, but Prose is uncommonly passionate about the link between reading and writing. "I've always read," she confessed in a 1998 interview with *Atlantic Unbound*. "I started when I was four years old and just didn't stop.... The only reason I wanted to be a writer was because I was such an avid reader." (In 2006, she produced an entire book on the subject—a nuts-and-bolts primer entitled *Reading Like a Writer*, in which she uses excerpts from classic and contemporary literature to illustrate her personal notions of literary excellence.)

If Prose is specific about the kind of writing she, herself, likes to read, she's equally voluble about what puts her off. She is particularly vexed by "obvious, tired clichés; lazy, ungrammatical writing; implausible plot turns." Unsurprisingly, all of these are notably absent in her own work. Even when she explores tried-and-true literary conventions—such as the illicit romantic relationship at the heart of her best known novel, *Blue Angel*—she livens them with wit and irony. She even borrowed her title from the famous Josef von Sternberg film dealing with a similar subject.

As biting and clever as she is, Prose cringes whenever her work is referred to as satire. She explained to Barnes & Noble editors, "Satirical to me means one-dimensional characters...whereas, I think of myself as a novelist who happens to be funny—who's writing characters that are as rounded and artfully developed as the writers of tragic novels."


Prose's assessment of her own work is pretty accurate. Although her subject matter is often ripe for satire (religious fanaticism in *Household Saints*, tabloid journalism in *Bigfoot Dreams*, upper-class pretensions in *Primitive People*), etc.), she takes care to invest her characters with humanity and approaches them with respect. "I really do love my characters," she says, "but I feel that I want to take a very hard look at them. I don't find them guilty of anything I'm not guilty of myself."

Best known for her fiction, Prose has also written literary criticism for the *New York Times*, art criticism for the *Wall Street Journal*, and children's books based on Jewish folklore, all of it infused with her alchemic blend of humor, insight, and intelligence.

Extras

- Prose rarely wastes an idea. In *Blue Angel*, the novel that the character Angela is writing is actually a discarded novel that Prose started before stopping because, in her own words, "it seemed so juvenile to me."
 - While she once had no problem slamming a book in one of her literary critiques, these days Prose has resolved to only review books that she actually likes. The ones that don't adhere to her high standards are simply returned to the senders.
 - Prose's novel *Household Saints* was adapted into an excellent film starring Tracey Ullman, Vincent D'Onofrio, and Lili Taylor in 1993.
 - Another novel, *The Glorious Ones*, was adapted into a musical.
 - In 2002 Prose published *The Lives of the Muses*, an intriguing hybrid of biography, philosophy, and gender studies that examines nine women who inspired famous artists and thinkers—from John Lennon's wife Yoko Ono to Alice Liddell, the child who inspired *Alice in Wonderland*. (From *Barnes & Noble*.)
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Mister Monkey (Prose) - Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

Expertly constructed, *Mister Monkey* is so fresh and new it's almost giddy, almost impudent with originality. Tender and artful, Prose's 15th novel is a sophisticated satire, a gently spiritual celebration of life, a dark and thoroughly grim depiction of despair, a screwball comedy, a screwball tragedy.... It's gorgeous and bright and fun and multi-faceted, carrying within it the geological force of the ages. It's a book to be treasured. It's that good. It's that funny. It's that sad. It's that deceptive and deep.

Cathleen Schine - New York Times Book Review (*front cover review*)

Everybody involved in the show loathes it and with good reason. It sounds dreadful.... Prose has plenty of fun mocking her invented disaster, but her real interest is the web of people connected by Mister Monkey.... Like some earlier storyteller, Prose suggests that "all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." In a sense, we're all cast in what she calls "the collective nightmare of Mister Monkey," condemned to play out this ghastly farce of material existence. Masterful....a lovely tribute to the transformative value of imagination.

Ron Charles - Washington Post

[A] comic novel vastly more entertaining than the sad production of the children's musical, *Mister Monkey*, she so hilariously pillories.... Juggling multiple points of view, she presents an indelible cast of characters.... Some are reliable narrators, some self-deluding, but all intersect in surprising and remarkable ways.... In this strong, humane, and funny novel, Prose has treated us to an enthralling entertainment both on and off stage.

Boston Globe

Beautifully crafted, incisively written...Engaging and accessible...What elevates this novel is Prose's ability to let us see into the heart of each character, to render each so vulnerably human, so achingly real in just a few short paragraphs.

Minneapolis Star Tribune

Mister Monkey' Channels Disappointment.... [A] dark comedy about the mainly sad, disappointing lives of everyone involved in a woeful way-off-Broadway revival.... What's remarkable is how much wit and pathos Prose manages to wring from this wildly unpromising jumping-off point.... That said, I can't pretend that I was as taken with all the monkey business.... [Still, Prose] shares...her considerable talent for ventriloquy: She is the Meryl Streep of literary fiction.

Heller McAlpin - NPR

As absorbing and three-dimensional as each character is, the development of the