Conversations with Crosby: Francine Prose on Humor and the Humanities
July 21, 2021
Transcript

0:02

Great. Well, I am Elizabeth Holtan, I'm the head of Communications at the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Again, I want to thank you so much for joining us today in what is now our fourth event in the Conversations with Crosby series, featuring our IMLS Director, Crosby Kemper and some very special guests.

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And, today, we're very fortunate to have with us, novelist, writer and a woman of many credentials as Crosby will share, Francine Prose, for what promises to be a really exciting discussion. And, before I turn it over to Crosby, to say a few more words, just a couple of housekeeping items. This event is being recorded and we will share it on the IMLS website and YouTube channel. So, on those pages that you have on the IMLS website, you can go back and we'll post the YouTube recording on that page. So, you can see it, rewatch it, and share it. And we welcome you to ask any questions you liked via the question box. There's also the chat box that we can see if you have any technical issues or you want to just shoot us a note. But, for the questions there's that special question box. You can submit them at any point during this hour of conversation we'll keep an eye on them and post them to Crosby and Francine for a Q&A discussion near the end of the hour. So, with that, I'll hand it over to Crosby to introduce Francine and what they'll be talking about.

1:35

Great. Thank you very, very much, Elizabeth. And Francine, thank you so much for doing this. I think the world knows that you've written 30 plus books? Novels, Novellas, short stories, criticism, biography. You're an essayist, an advocate - you're the former President of PEN and writer-in-residence at Bard College, not too far away from where you are located in upstate New York, doing your gardening and Candide-like, in this best of all possible worlds at the best of all possible times. So, thanks for leaving the garden in and joining the conversations.

2:19

One of the things I love about your writing is that you have characters, protagonists and the folks that they encounter. Swensen, the professor in *Blue Angel* or Vincent Nolan the converted, we hope converted neo-nazi, who are self-contradictory, self-questioning, ambiguous, and very humorous, sometimes self-humorous, humorous about themselves, rather, complicated, tragic, sometimes characters. And now you've published *The Vixen* and *The Vixen's* about the Rosenberg's and yet it's also a funny, witty look at the at the mid-fifties, early fifties. Mid-fifties with the CIA and the Rosenberg's and Roy Cohn wandering through. How do you get away with that? How do you do that? What's that all about - the humor, in particular?

3:16

Well, I've been thinking a lot about that. In the class that I'm teaching at Bard in the fall, and I taught a class in the prison in Eastern Correctional Facility last spring. And both classes kind of wound up, being about sympathy, about how a writer creates sympathy for character. And one of the things that students were talking about was the way in which, in some of the texts, I was teaching, humor made you sympathetic to characters in a way you might not

normally be. Now, I mean, I'm only speaking for myself. I mean, that is, I find humor to be a very sympathetic quality. I mean, I am sure there are people who think it's the quality of the devil, and they have a completely different attitude, But that's my own feeling. So, when I'm writing characters who are complicated but I want us to feel a certain kind of interest in and sympathy for, humor is one of the ways that I try to kind of, you know, create that aura around the character.

4:27
So, it seems to me that a word that occurs in a couple of places in your essays, in particular, is the word forgiveness. And it seems to be one of the things that you do brilliantly with these characters is they're either self-aware or they're becoming self-aware. And sometimes it's the humor, their sense of humor, about not only themselves, but other people. And the mistakes that they, or these folks that they're gathering with, mistakes that they all make. Their sense of humor about it, allows them to become more self-aware. And, maybe that's the, you know, in the German, the German term *Bildungsroman*, that that's how they build their lives. It's by recognizing themselves, and they can only do that, because they have a sense of humor about it. You could do that as an author, because you have a sense of humor about them.

5:20
Yeah, I mean, exactly. I mean, there's scenes. There's a scene in *The Vixen* where our hero goes to have lunch with this very sort of sad disappointed poet whose book is not going to do well. And I like to write scenes, which are so excruciating, that they're funny. They're just so awful, that they're funny. Because I think, I don't know, I just think it's a good idea to acknowledge that things like that happen. I mean, because, basically, I just think, we’re flawed creatures, we’re just flawed creatures. We’re not perfectible. And once you, once we learn to live with that, I can't help but think it would make us nicer to each other.

6:07
I thought you were going to talk about the lunch that Simon, our hero has with his Uncle Mattie who's a literary critic and, and sort of a sort of a sell-out, but who also has some witty things to say. He’s very condescending to everybody else but has some witty things to say. And your character, Simon, and you, the author, are making fun of Uncle Mattie during the whole lunch. But then slowly but surely, it also becomes very humorous about Simon because he's getting drunk while, you know, he's trying to distance himself while he’s discovering the not very nice things, which he already knew, about his uncle. And it's a wonderful scene in which Simon can barely stand up at the end - the waiter has to help him out.

6:57
Yeah, the uncle’s monster, the uncle’s a monster. I mean, we've all met these guys, they're all about knowing everybody in the room. And then trash talking the person that they've just been friendly to. I mean just horrible people. But my first editor, who at least that restaurant is based on, was nothing like that. He was a wonderful person. But, at the end, the scene where Simon falls over because he isn't used to drinking, that’s what happened to me. I mean, that was my first lunch with my first editor. This was in the seventies, and I hadn't been a drinker in college. I just didn't know what to order. I just didn't know. I mean, the way it happens in the novel, I ordered a whiskey sour, and my editor was just horrified, that anyone would and then we split a bottle of wine, and I fell over. But I was trying to write about the seventies, which was like, the fifties in a way. Which was, you know, people, men,

in particular, were judged by what they drank - by what they drank and didn't drink - and to order whiskey sour was like the worst thing you could possibly do.

8:14

Right. So, one of the things I wanted to talk about is the arts and humanities in the life of museums, and libraries, and in the nation. And you wrote a piece four years ago in *The Guardian* about the humanities, and what was happening, particularly focused on the university world, in which universities were dismantling philosophy departments, humanities majors were floating away, administrators were getting big salaries to administrate, god knows what. And you particularly defended the humanities based on the idea that the humanities teach critical thinking. And the question I want to ask you about that, is, it seems to me that the phrase, critical thinking, is probably the single most misused phrase in our intellectual world. It frequently is anything but critical, it's almost never self-critical. And that's one of the things that has affected the humanities is that we don't use the humanities to truly open our minds up to real criticism, which is always an expansion of the mind. And what did you mean by critical thinking or what constitutes critical thinking?

9:36

Well, it's so interesting you're saying that because as you say it, I realize there are many, many ways in which you can understand that phrase. In a way, I just mean thinking. I mean that is, I mean, you know the humanities: philosophy, history, all of it so complicates your sense of the world that it gives you a way of, or of human beings, or of human nature - it gives you a way of, what do I want to say, of processing information that you're getting, Or figuring out what might be true in what you're hearing. Which has never been more important. I mean, it just gives you a way of sorting through the unlikely or, you know, even paying attention to language. I mean, you know, for several years at Bard, one of my students' out of class assignment was to read the same story in three different newspapers and to write about the way language was used just to spin in a very simple story. So, even, you know, even the way in which humanities makes us more thoughtful, attentive to the world, is incredibly useful.

10:54

There are two things here that I think are interesting. Number one, you used the phrase in *The Guardian* piece, tolerating ambiguity, which is kind of I think what you do with your characters is, you don't really tolerate ambiguity. You embrace it and you analyze it and you use it and use it for humor, but you also use it for understanding. And then the second thing, in that, and you have so much fun with this in your writing, particularly in your criticism, is that the notion of foreign languages are a discipline, and the study of anything in depth in the humanities can be a discipline, and there are rules in a discipline. And you have a lot of fun with rules, which we really like and need. At the same time, you talk about Chekhov and more than once, you obviously are Chekhovian, you talk about teaching a class and telling them about the rules of writing. And then each step along the way you read another Chekhov story in which he violates those rules. That the rules are out there, but we need to violate them regularly or at the best, you know, if you're Chekhov, you get to violate them.

12:11

Yeah, well, sure. Although, you know, Chekhov really is a deep well, I mean, you can keep going back because there's so much there. And for example, speaking again, just returning to sympathy. I mean, he has this famous quote in one of his letters, where he says, you

know, it's not the writer's job to judge our characters but just to portray what kind of people they are. Because he's written a story about these horse thieves and whoever he’s writing to says, you know, you didn't say how horrible they were. And Chekhov says, oh, I just have to show you what kind of people they are, and what their tastes are, and what their passions are, etcetera, etcetera, okay. I've been quoting this for years, you know, it seems like such a great quote, blah, blah, blah. And it occurred to me like a couple of months ago that I had never read the Chekhov story about the horse thieves. I've been like blah, blah blah about what he says about the story, but I haven't read the story. So, I go and read the story and the story - there is nothing redeeming about these characters. I mean, they are completely - they are so judged, There's nothing decent about these people. So, I don't know, it just made it all the more interesting. I mean, here, he was saying there are no rules of a certain kind, but he was making another kind of rule and then breaking even that one in the story because that was the way he saw the characters.

13:42
Right. So, you know, one of the things you say in light of Chekhov, you have an essay on clarity. And, you know, the thing that Chekhov does with clarity, he's the most lucid of all writers, is it reveals character. And so in essence, the judgement is there in the reporting, if you will. He makes the judgement not by telling you, but by showing you the character.

14:15
Yeah, I mean, sure. I mean, maybe this sounds simple minded, but I think it's important to be understood. You know, on the other hand, I mean, there are writers who are very like Beckett, for example, I mean understanding Beckett or Joyce, it takes a lot more work than it does or Proust, it takes a lot more work. But I think the main thing, you know, when I'm dealing with students, I don't teach writing, but I teach - they have to write an essay every week. I'm just saying look at this sentence and see if someone could understand what you're saying, Which seems to me so basic about writing and so often ignored.

14:58
Yeah, understanding, I think is a word that's frequently missing in our dialog, the critical dialog in the humanities, we’re all are always looking for some kind of silver bullet variable in the in the world that will teach us everything we need to know and understanding is a little more complex than that.

15:20
So, you know, I want to talk about museums, of course. Museums play a major role in your characters’ lives and a lot of stories and novels. They're constantly visiting museums, encountering paintings, but you've also written eloquently about a couple of museums. In particular, I'm thinking of your book about Anne Frank and the Anne Frank Museum, and your book about Peggy Guggenheim and her creation of a series of art galleries. And then finally, the museum in Venice. You have in your book *What to Read and Why,* you have 10 reasons that the arts are important. You have an essay, *10 Reasons That the Arts Are Important.* And, all those relate, it seems to me, to the museum world. In your book about Anne Frank, there's a section about the museum, and you describe the museum. And one of the interesting things to me is the sort of portal effect that the recreation of the museum, they re-established the bookcase that had to be moved for them to get into the space, the annex, the attic space, where the Franks lived. You describe that and then you describe the annex to the annex, which is the foundation. And you describe all the things that they're

doing. Then, you describe your disagreement with Cynthia Ozick on the importance of the outreach efforts of the museum. Talk a little bit about the importance of that museum, what it means, and whether or not it is in any way, cheapened by the activities. You talk also about the movie, and the play, and all of that. What's the meaning of the museum? Why should we go see it?

17:37
Well, it's physical proof that a certain thing happened. Well, it's physical proof. I mean, what happened in that house, happened in that house and it happened for a reason. It happened because the family had to hide for their lives there and to save their lives and it's important to see it. And, also, it's, you know, it’s kind of reasonable in its portrayal. I mean, I've seen Holocaust Memorials that are so over the top and off putting for that reason, but it's not elaborate. And it’s, in as far as it's possible with zillions of people walking through all the time, faithful to the events that transpired there.

18:26
So, you know, Cynthia Ozick says that the Museum divorces Anne Frank, and the movie and the play too, I guess, but the museum and all the things that they're doing. You write about her sense that Otto Frank, you know, her sense that Otto Frank indulged people's identification with Anne Frank too much. But then it divorces her from not merely the tragedy, but the horror of the Holocaust. It becomes a teenage romance story, in essence. But you don't have that, you don’t buy that reaction?

19:14
No. I mean, only a very stupid teenager would not ask how she died so young or why she died so young or why she was in that attic in the first place. I mean, it's not, you can't really reduce it to a love story and, also, you can't hold an institution or a book responsible for the use that's been made of it. I mean, if you were going to hold the Bible responsible for every horrible, biblical film that had been made, you know, you'd have to…. It's not the diary’s fault and it's not the museum's fault. Also, you know, I mean, I know what she's talking about, but I think so what, you know. I mean, one of the things, I don't know if they're still doing it, but one of the things they were doing was they had these traveling exhibits of, you know, Anne Frank’s diary with placards and quotes and so forth and they take it to various places in the world. So, they took it to Argentina and the victims of the Dirty War and the perpetrators of the Dirty War. Both came together to look at the exhibit and to talk. Which is a good thing. I mean, whether or not this made any lasting change, I don't know, you know, but, I can't see how that's harmful. And I can't see how that's betraying the horror of the Holocaust to use it to possibly make one situation slightly better.

20:39
And I agree with you. And you know, what I was really getting at is in your *10 Reasons That the Arts Are Important* you talk to two of the reasons: one is they move us and there's no question, the story of Anne Frank, the diary, the story, the museum. I've been there too. It's a moving experience. There's a traveling Auschwitz exhibit right now, happens to be in Kansas City, and I went through that, and she's there and it is a moving experience. But then the other, the other question, you make the statement as a question, does it make us better? Do the arts and humanities make us better? And so there's this question in the Anne Frank book about her statement, about finding in her diary the goodness in human beings even as she's going through this incredible experience, of course, this is before she goes to

Auschwitz. And, of course, that's actually taken out of context a little bit. She doesn't actually - she talks about the horrors before and after that statement. But you do feel that there's a potential for appeal to the best in human nature that comes out of experiences like this.

22:02
You know, experiences, yes. I mean, art, I don't know, You know, my own experience has been that there are certain things you read that you actually think, I'm going to be a better person. But I've also noticed that it doesn't last for very long. I mean, it's good for us, it's good for like 45 minutes, you know. It's good until somebody cuts in line in the supermarket and, you know, whether or not you've read Dostoevsky's....speech the night before - it doesn't make you less irritated.

22:36
So, you know, later in your list of 10, there's another, that's almost kind of the same question, but it's really, it's a little subtler. It's, I'm going to paraphrase I think now, does it help you understand human beings, goodness, and maybe evil. And that, it seems, to me, the clear question. The clear answer to that is yes.

23:01
Yeah. Oh Absolutely.

23:05
It may not help us act better, but it helps us. It helps us analyze it better.

23:12
Or know it exists or know certain things exist. Or know, you know, know the way certain things have been happening all the way through history and they happen. And you know, there's certain recurrent patterns in human behavior that you can go back, and maybe I said this, but I've was reading a lot of Plutarch this winter, can reading of his lives about, you know, why I continue to teach the classics, because, shockingly, people's relationships to, take just one thing, power, whereas complex, and twisted, and noble, whatever, complicated, back in the first century AD, BC, as they are now. I mean, it's just the same things repeat themselves. So, I just think that's, it's useful to know. It's useful to know. I mean, it’s learning.

24:01
It’s helpful to know. So, now shifting gears entirely to Peggy Guggenheim. So, you wrote a biography of Peggy Guggenheim and she’s led a fascinating life and she was directly engaged and responsible for the promotion of a lot of modern art. Her galleries in New York and elsewhere. And then eventually the museum in Venice, which, of course, you spend a lot of time on. She's kind of, you make her into, you know, we’re really interested in all her lovers and her sex life and all that, but you make her into a kind of heroic figure going through her life and persisting in this in understanding, promoting modern art. And it really came through to me that she and the museum were an important thing in the history of modern art. And the one thing I want to ask you about is her relationship to beauty. It seems to me that I was relatively recently in the museum. And one of the things I was startled by was I felt there was a Peggy Guggenheim esthetic in the museum, something that the nature of the things that she collected, the lines were very important to her - strong lines and the mixture of the lines with color. and the portal to the museum and the garden and the sense that it's got a certain scale which is much smaller than most modern art museums. Which surprised me. My previous memory was not that - that it was larger than it was. And that

beauty was important to her. You know, she comes across, as, in telling the life, as this hard, heroic character and maybe sad in some of her emotional complexity. Right?

25:59
Well, you know I always thought that her favorite piece, I mean she doesn't say this, but the way she was, was Brancusi's Bird in Flight, you know, which is just pure line, pure line. I mean, you know. I kind of in a way when I was finishing the book, I thought I'd written it backwards, because I'd been to the Guggenheim collection years ago. And then I wrote most of the book and then I went to the collection again. And I was so blown away by what she collected and also, she saved this stuff, you know. It was like, because she got it out of Europe right before, the Nazis who hated that kind of art invaded France. So, she was just buying up all this stuff and putting in crates with her laundry and sending it back to New York or it just would have disappeared somewhere. So, I mean, her collection is amazing. And she had this incredible eye. I mean, you know, people, I don't know, I mean, I've heard people say people who know her talk about, well, a very famous art critic said to me, oh, she was so stupid. But I don't think she was stupid, I think she was really smart. And then people say, oh, she just had a very good sense for her advisors to know because Duchamp told her what to buy and a series of investors, blah blah..... But I just think, she was, she had a real eye. She had a real eye and that was her life. I mean, that was her passion and plus she was funny, speaking of humor. Her memoirs are hilarious. She has this kind of weirdo drawl tone and even when things are just horrible, I mean, she's very, very good. She's a very good writer.

27:50
So, I'd like to you to talk a little bit about the experience of a museum and, not any and all museums, but particularly important experiences that we sometimes have and many of your characters have.

28:05
There's a moment at the end of the *Goldengrove* where Nico, the heroine, our teenage heroine, goes with her father, who she's had a very rocky relationship with, on their pilgrimage to see Garlandio's, sorry, I'm getting this backwards. To Fra Angelio's Last Judgement. And it's, you know, it's a wonderful scene because it's sort of the moment she grows up in a way in what she sees that there's so many things in this painting. And somehow, you know, it unites her with her father. There are experiences like that throughout your writing.

28:58
Well, I've been to a lot of museums, Crosby. I mean, I'm married to a painter. I write about art. I love looking at paintings and I love museums. I mean, I just love museums. There's some, obviously, I love better than others. But, when we would travel a lot, we would never not go to the museum, independent. And sometimes it didn't matter, I mean, of course, the great museums, you know, the Prado and the Louvre, and blah blah. But then also some little French provincial museum, where they had like 100 Dutch flower paintings in the same room. I didn't care. I mean, it's just interesting, you know. I love the smell of museums, and the furniture polish, or whatever, and so forth. So, and then there are great museums. I mean, there are two museums in Sicily, that Scarpa designed, which are just, I don't know the best that a modern museum could be, I think.

29:52
You did an interview with an author, Doon Arbus, a little while ago in an event last fall about her novel, *The Caretaker,* in which there's a sort of similar thing to Albert Barnes, and the Barnes Collection that her character is involved in. But in this, you quote Philip Guston, There's a great quote from Philip Guston, which you relate to writing. She relates to writing, but it seems to me, it is about the ultimate museum experience in which you, as a writer /painter, he's obviously talking about that painting, you know, when he gets going, he eliminates the sense of the outside world and then he eliminates a sense of character, ultimately eliminates a sense of himself. And that's when he knows he's really engaged, and it seems to me that that's the great museum experience. And some of your characters have museum experiences like that. There's a short story called *Garlandi Owen*, in which our heroine, and again, with father has a deep experience with the Garlandio painting. And it seems to me that, you know, that we've all had that experience. Anybody who loves museums, anybody who loves art, has had the experience of having something that takes you out of yourself so far, that you don't even know you're there. You're in the painting or you're in the sculpture or the exhibit is taking you away.

31:32
Yeah, when I was a kid, I really believed. And we had art books around the house, I mean we had some art books around the house. And I really believed that if you did, I semi-believed, let me put it that way, that if you looked at a painting long enough, you could get in it. And, in fact, there was some, there was, you know, get inside it. I mean, there were some one of these Omnibus, British, sort of semi ghost films, you know, they made films in the thirties and forties that had several British short stories. One was about horror stories. And one was about a guy that goes into a painting in a museum and that was like my favorite thing. So, I think part of me has always, you know, I understand that doesn't happen now, but part of me feels that way. I mean, you can just look at a painting and keep seeing more and more things in it and that's not a bad way to pass time.

32:22
Well and one of your other 10 Reasons for the Arts is time travel. And it's a little bit like that experience you've just described, the thirties British movie, with it, you know, going into a painting. We're in somebody else's story and the story can be gripping and can take us away. We were talking earlier about Thomas Cole paintings. I mean, you know, there's his History of Empire series of paintings. and they're all engrossing paintings. And you feel like you're there with them just as civilization rises and civilization falls all in the same place. And you recognize the landscape. And you begin to think about our own times and where are we in the decline and fall. But it seems to me that it is time travel, that we go to a museum for the same reason that we read a great book or even a good book that's just engrossing, is to take us away from ourselves, take us into another place, to visit somewhere else. Somewhere else, it seems to me, is the great thing about museum going and reading a great book.

33:49
And writing a great book or writing a book period. I mean, it’s just you're not yourself. I mean, that was, that's, as I said. That's the point of the Philip Guston quote, where he says, fine, if you're lucky, you leave the room. So, you're just not, you're not present, and something else is kind of poring through you in some, I don't know what, mysterious, interesting way.

34:15
You also talk about the power of shock. That's one of your 10 Reasons for the Arts and Humanities. What's the good, you know, there's a lot that's shocking in our world today. I mean, we've been we've been given a whole series of shocks over the last couple of years. Political shocks, the racial shocks, the pandemic shock, And, you know, our concern about inequality and think things like that. All shocks to our system. What can the arts do with shock that can help us through this?

34:54
Well, it can get better. I mean, it's always shocking when it gets, you know when art itself gets better. And it can make you, it can make you see things in a new way or see art in a new way. I mean, you know, one of my favorite art exhibits I ever went to, speaking of museums, was the Guggenheim had a 1900 show curated by Robert Rosenberg, and it started with all these, like it was all 1900, right? So, it started with all these kitschy genre scenes, I mean these horrible, you know, 1900 sentimental realist, and then you went up and went up and at the end there's, Cezanne, Gauguin, and Van Gogh, and all done at the same time, and it's shocking. And it can kind of restore your sense of like something, really different happened, something really different happened. And, I think it changed how people saw the world around them, or color, or light, or plans, or so forth. So, it's good every so often.

36:00
It seems to me that one of the powers of the traveling exhibit, the famous painting, whether it's a Mona Lisa, or whatever, going to visit the Egyptian exhibit, the permanent Egyptian Hall, whatever it might be, is that it provides an opportunity for conversation, conversation with the person you may go with. You've got, you have some funny comments about guided tours and the, you know, the promotion of the recorded tour and that sort of thing. You've got one guided tour of hell which is an actual guided tour in one of your novellas to Auschwitz.

36:47
Yeah, speaking in which, maybe it was the Auschwitz Exhibit you mentioned earlier, but at some point, there was an ad. There was some Auschwitz exhibit in a museum downtown, I'm not sure, exactly. And there was an ad for it on the sides of busses in the city. You'd be crossing the street and the bus would go by that said, Auschwitz, it's like, oh, my god, you know. No, I really, I hate guided tours, I just hate guided tours. I hate them more and more. I've been on many, many interesting ones, but there's so many that aren't interesting. The last few I've been I've just like had to flee in the middle. So that anxiety is you know....

37:23
It seems to me that one of the great things about going to a museum is going to a museum exhibit, or permanent exhibit, or just going to see one painting, or one thing that you love - going with someone, going with your spouse, or going with your best friend and talking about it and experiencing it and experiencing somebody else's experience of it.

37:51
Yeah, when I was writing, when I was writing art criticism for the Wall Street Journal, I would go with Howie, my husband, and I would just write down everything he said and that would be the article.

38:03
Yeah, of course, Howie’s an artist. And, you know, with the guided tour, the, you know, the thrusting that, upon you. Not to mention, you know, sort of, you know, the Met pioneered, and everybody else has joined in with the Blockbuster exhibit and, you know, the store at the end as, you know, everybody's goal to buy tchotchkes related to the exhibit. And the leisurely stroll, which is hard to do now that you've got 10,000 people in the same room with you, but the leisurely stroll and the conversation, the sort of, pristine aspects of museum are difficult to come by these days.

38:47
I know, it's different. Well, I don't, like, honestly, I don't like the timed ticket thing. Because it just changes the whole experience. I mean, you can’t. You know, if you're in a city, you can't say, oh, let's go to the blah, blah Museum of Art. And look, I mean, now you have to know in advance, and do a thing on your computer, and so forth and it just, it's different. I mean, I understand the reasons for it, I get it. But, you know, that alone changes to the experience. And, also, you know, I think, in a lot of places, the museums shut down because of COVID. And now, I mean, there's certain things that I noticed it just seemed like they were done by people had too much time on their hands, and now it's going to revert back to some other, but, you know, just unnecessary, you know fiddling with collections in ways that don't seem inspired, especially.

39:40
Well, of course, you know, every new curator has to come in and do something, something new. That's the nature of the game, and the Museum of Modern Art, I notice, you know, that about every decade, they have to redo everything completely. And they’re not alone in feeling the necessity of doing that. But whether or not they improve things, and obviously over the years there is lots of disagreement about that. So, one notion that I get from reading Francine Prose is the notion of a kind of pilgrimage to certain paintings, certain places. If the pandemic is over and you can go anywhere you want, is there a place that you would want to go, a museum you'd want to go to? A place of art, that you would want to go to that, that speaks to you over your lifetime?

40:50
Now, that I haven't been to? Or that I would? Well, you know,

40:57
Well not even necessarily one you haven't been to. Sure. But I'm just wondering if, there, you reach a certain stage where you want to revisit some things too just as rereading - you talk about rereading and, you know, the things that you reread become important. Do you have the same experience with museums and artwork?

41:20
I want to go, if I could go anywhere, I want to see the monasteries in Georgia. I mean, I'm really into fresco painting - medieval, fresco painting. And a friend of mine just did this, and I've been reading about it, and they have these incredible monasteries was still paintings from the 13th Century. I mean, I saw some of them and I've been, I've been really, into Byzantine Art for quite a while now. So, like I went to, to Northern Greece just to look at the Byzantine Art Museum.

41:50
I can’t remember where I saw, but I was looking at some of these in Turkey that are essentially monasteries in caves.

42:02
Yeah, and Georgia, too. Yeah, I don't know. Those places appeal to me more and more. I mean, there are plenty of museums, I love, but I don't know with museums, the thing of the crowd. I mean, I twice went to go see the Alice Neel Museum show at the Met, and there were like huge lines it was like a camp, I just can’t, you know.

42:28
Well, that does tell you something about the end of the pandemic that, I mean, Alice Neel, I think, is a wonderful, a wonderful painter, but you know that she would be that popular. At this stage is really interesting from a lot of different points of view, but, it does tell you the pandemic is in many people's minds is.....

42:53
I’m knocking on wood, Crosby. I just knocked on wood. So, yeah.

42:58
You know, you talk about the Garlandio painting in one story and you talk about the Fra Angelico and Hieronymus Bosch at various moments, is there one painting in the world that that speaks to you, or does this change over time? Now you want to go and visit the Georgian monastaries.

43:21
Yeah, I mean, there's some, you know, all sorts of things. I mean they're speaking churches. I mean, there are a lot of mosaics that I would go back to again and again, just because they were designed in such, like Santa Maria, or go up and sit in various parts of Sicily. Because they're designed in a way that the light hits them at certain times of day, and various parts of the mosaic, of the gold mosaic. And that's, like, you can watch it, for 24 straight hours, you know, Because it's so big. So, there are places like that, I mean. And I'd like to go to, you know, my taste in art, or what I love most has changed from time to time. But, for a long time, I’ve loved Sienese paintings, I mean, speaking of not being someplace else. So, it would be nice to go to Siena and just spend a day, days, just whole days looking at Sienese art.

44:26
I notice in your book on Caravaggio, you were able to make a link that I'd never seen in Caravaggio before, mainly because I haven't seen that much of Caravaggio. The Nelson here in Kansas City has got a really great Caravaggio, but with Naples and Rome and Malta and Sicily, with the various places that he lived frequently for very short, short periods of time with the street life and also, with the time of his life, the various ways he plays with light and darkness. It seems to me that that one of the great things that you are able to pull out of a painter and painting is their ability, which is your ability as a writer as well, to pay attention. The art of paying attention. And so much of our museum going is walking quickly to get through the exhibit to say, you've been through the exhibit to see it, instead of standing in front of that one painting, or that one, whatever the medium is, that work, and absorbing it, and, paying attention. And it's a problem, I think, in the contemporary world with everything that’s going on. Media, social media, the internet, et cetera. We have lost the ability to pay attention.

46:05
Well, you know the only reason I can write about art at all is because I can describe what I see. And that seems to me pretty basic, and that was the only reason I thought I could write the Caravaggio book because there was a great biography of him, of Caravaggio by Helen Langdon that had already been written, but she wasn't, that wasn't her principal interest, was describing the paintings. I mean, it was more about what happened. So, and that just takes a long period of looking at the painting. You know, my model for writing about art, you know, because so much of writing about art is completely jargon written and unintelligible when you can't even begin. My model was Sister Wendy, remember this strange nun that lived in a little airstream. And she wrote these books, or, you know, she had a TV show, and she just described what was in the painting. She described what was in the painting, and it was. I mean, this was especially in the nineties and the two thousands, given how much writing about art was completely unintelligible. It was a revelation to me that that if you could just do that. So that's, you know, that's always been the way I've begun writing about art.

47:18
You, at one point in *Goldengrove*, you've got Nico standing in front of Fra Angelico's Last Judgement. And you have her thinking, she's standing there with her father, how astonishing that one painting could tell so many stories. That seems to me to be a great description of you, I feel, how astonishing it is how Francine Prose can tell all these stories, you know, and in so many different ways, and so many different modes. Do you think of yourself as a a storyteller in fiction and non-fiction, and the criticism?

47:53
I guess so, I mean, I'm pretty surprised myself, Crosby. So, you know the evidence would suggest that yes, the answer is yes.

48:11
Yeah, exactly. There's plenty of evidence out there that's true. You refer to yourself as you're talking about teaching writing and describing writing as a reporter and when you talk about Chekhov there's a there's an aspect of this where you seem to me to diminish the creativity of the imagination of what you do. Which is also true of Chekhov, he's not really just a reporter, he's crafted it. You know that new quote, the, I think it's the Lady with the Dog, the end of The Lady with the Dog, where his statement, that it's basically the ultimate statement about whether or not there are happy endings is that they've decided to get married. Is that Lady with the Dog? Where they've decided to get married and it's the beginning of the complications and the struggles.

49:09
Yeah, they realize that the hardest part was still before them, that's how it ends.

49:18
And, you know, creating the ability for us to understand the life beyond the story is an extraordinary thing that Chekhov is able to do and that you do. Just to sense that. So, I thought we might have some questions. Elizabeth, do we have any questions from the audience that you've picked out?

49:50

We do. We have a question from, Sophia. She's interested in learning more about, Francine, your Fulbright experience and if you had any culture shocks that had an impact on your writing?

50:05
Oh, yeah. Oh, that's so odd, because before we began, Crosby said we're going to talk about Yugoslavia. Well actually, that was my Fulbright experience. It was in the former Yugoslavia, excuse me, in the late eighties, just a few years before the war began. Yeah, it was shocking. I mean, it was, just the whole experience was fascinating and then later, shocking. Although, well, really not so much because. Because why? Because I traveled all over the country and there was, I mean, it didn't take a genius to pick up on the various tensions that were going on between different groups in the country, different nationalist groups. So then, you know, I mean, then the relation of shock, I mean, we all went to the bridge over Mostar, the 12th century bridge, You know, our kids were there, and then the shock of watching the news, and there was across the river. And then it wasn't there, it had gotten blown up in the wars. So it was one of those, startling - I was glad my kids saw that, and understood what had happened.

51:20
You have a list at the end of *Reading Like a Writer* of books you have to read immediately. And two of those books are Rebecca West books *Words Fall Down*, which I agree with you. I think it's one of the underrated Novels, and it's a wonderful, wonderful book. *The Black Lamb and Gray Falcon*, which is of course about what you're talking about or about the world that you're talking about. Which is I think a great, but problematic book.

51:56
Well, it's weird. It's a weird book because there are things going on that she doesn't tell you. But again, she was a great describer. I mean, I carried that book all around the former Yugoslavia. The book is like 800 pages long, weighs a ton. But speaking of medieval monasteries and churches, she would describe the churches near the Albanian border, and this was after 60 years, and her description was dead, accurate. I mean, the way the scaffolding that was set up. So, I would just read her description of a place before I got to the place and it was startling, you know, after half a century. How right on the mark she was.

52:43
There's another writer that writes about the same part of the world, Patrick Leigh Fermor, who, I also think is wonderful. And again, the description of particularly the religious, but both the sites and the people, their devotion in various ways is pretty extraordinary.

53:09
Another amazing one, you know, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, that's another one about Southern Italy that's just beautiful.

53:18
Right. Are there any more questions, Elizabeth?

53:23
Yes. We have one about escapism. You spoke about the great feeling of escaping into a book or painting. Do you see elements of escapism on the rise due to current events, or is this something you think has always attracted us to museums and libraries?

53:43
I don't know why that question makes me laugh. It's a really good question. Well, of course. I mean, you know, there's so many pressures and there's so many frightening, to be perfectly honest, frightening things going on. The, urge to escape, I mean, of course, it's always been - frightening things have always gone on. But the pleasure of just getting away from it, if even just in your head, for a certain period of time, would naturally be attractive.

54:16
Did it change, did the pandemic change, your reading habits at all?

54:20
Well, I changed my sleeping habits, which in turn changed my reading habits. I read more in the middle of the night. I mean it kept changing. I mean, for a while, I was so upset that all I could read was, were like, sort of domestic novels, written by women in the 1930s, taking place in the county-side. I mean, it was like, eating cream of wheat, but a little better than that for. Then, you know, then I would read biographies and so on. But finally, no. I mean, it's always been the same. Like, there are times when I've just read all the time, and then times, for some reason, I can't read for a while. And then I'll start reading.

55:02
Mine changed a little bit. I used it as an excuse to go back in and reread things that I had always considered were frivolous and now decided they weren't really frivolous like, PG Woodhouse. Who I think is a great novelist of manners at the end of the day. Also, I also tried reading, Anthony Trollope, *He Knew He Was Right*. I've started 3 or 4 times and I've finally gotten into the middle of it.

55:33
I can't read it. I can't read Trollope. Everyone's told me it's so great, and it has to be. Lots of people I respect have told me it's great. But I just keep bouncing out of it and I don't know why.

55:45
Well, I'm still stuck in the middle of *He Knew He Was Right*, I got that far, anyway, it's sitting on my bedside table waiting for me to pick it up again.

55:57
So, Elizabeth, any more questions?

56:01
We do. We're nearing the top of the hour and we have one last question for you. Though. I think you may want to spend a few more minutes on it. But it's related to the last one. And it says, in this age of information, when we are increasingly overwhelmed by digital content and misinformation, what role do books, or stories, and storytelling play in the future of American culture and society?

56:30
Wowie! Any other big questions out there? I don't know, I don't know. I mean, I just think, what do I think? I mean, they're not - here's what I think. They're not called humanities for nothing, you know. Humanity actually means something. It means our species and what it is that makes us the beings that we are. And I think, you know, I think that books can help remind us of that. I mean, it's something else. I mean, I understand the way in which our phones and news addiction is telling a certain kind of story. And books are still telling a

different kind of story, but it's a story. It's a kind of story that's been told for a very long time and we hope it's going to continue to be, because that's who we are as, again, a species, and I don't know, it's a comfort, a little bit.

57:33
That's your, I think, is reason number ten, or number nine, in your *10 Reasons for the Arts and Humanities* - is comfort or refuge. And we certainly all needed that and could use some more of it. So, my advice is keep reading Francine Prose and Francine Prose keep writing.

57:56
I'll try and do that, and everybody should. Thank you, Crosby, thank you so much.

58:04
Thank you. This has It's been a great conversation. As always. Thanks everyone, for listening and watching.

58:09
Thanks so much. And as a reminder, this conversation will be recorded and posted on IMLS dot gov. To close us out, we actually had one more late question. We would love to know more about Francine's frivolous reading to end on a light note. Francine if you want to share a couple things.

58:28
Oh, yeah, Well, I mean, for example, there's a writer named Dorothy Whipple, who wrote in the thirties and forties. And she writes these domestic novels and they're sort of like, watching really good masterpiece theater TV, but better than that. So, I read everything she wrote. And then for other reasons, I read, I had to go on. I reread with Molly Keane who is an Irish novelist from the fifties and so forth. Who is very, very funny - very dark, actually but very funny. So, I don't know, maybe frivolous was the wrong word. But they were just, they were amusing and distracting and, to be honest, all I could handle at that point, although Molly Keane, I could handle at any point

59:18
Yeah, she's a wonderful writer. I think she's being republished now.

59:22
Yeah, New York Review books, is publishing *Good Behavior*, which is her great, great novel, super fun, speaking of funny, I mean.

59:29
No kidding. Family Breakdown. Well, I guess is that it, Elizabeth?

59:41
That's it. Thanks so much everyone for attending and thank you.

59:44
Francine, Thank you.

59:46
Thank you. Thanks so much. Thank all of you.

59:47
Take care, everyone. Thanks.

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