FUSE

A *BOMB* PODCAST

AUTHORS

Deborah Eisenberg & Francine Prose

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Deborah Eisenberg has published five collections of stories: Transactions in a Foreign Currency, Under the 82nd Airborne, All Around Atlantis, Twilight of the Superheroes and Your Duck Is My Duck.

Francine Prose is the author of twenty-one works of fiction, including Mister Monkey; Lovers at the Chameleon Club, Paris 1932; A Changed Man, and Blue Angel, a finalist for the National Book Award. Her works of nonfiction include Anne Frank: The Book, The Life, The Afterlife, and the New York Times bestseller, Reading Like a Writer.

Chantal McStay Welcome to FUSE: A BOMB Podcast. In each episode, we bring together artists across disciplines to discuss their work and creative practice. We've been taking this approach since 1981, delivering the artist's voice. Here's how it works. We invite a distinguished voice in visual art, literature, film, music, or performance for a conversation with whomever they'd most like to speak with. No host, no moderator, no interruptions, just two artists in conversation. In this episode, we're doing something a little different, revisiting a BOMB interview pairing from 1993 between Deborah Eisenberg and Francine Prose.

Francine Prose This is from our original interview in BOMB 1993: "Those moments when it takes over, and you hadn't meant it to go that way or sound that way, and you hadn't meant for them to be in that room or having that conversation, but there they are. That's the moment you pray for. When the character reveals that human life you didn't know about. You suddenly think, Oh, this goes deeper and is wider than what I imagined. And it's always such a thrill when that happens."

CM The two writers address the state of fiction twenty years later, the importance of foregoing safe characters, their candid take on the word process, and the 2015 PEN/Charlie Hebdo scandal.

FP Do you remember how we met?

Deborah Eisenberg Yes, I happen to. I had come to Iowa, The Writers Workshop, to visit. I was suddenly realizing that I had no job and was desperate for money. And much as I didn't want to teach, nobody was asking me to do anything else. So, Frank Conroy said, Well, come on out to visit. And I did do that. And you were there, and were characteristically sensitive and responsive to my degree of grief, anguish, and terror at the prospect of teaching. And you invited me out to lunch the next day, and we went out to lunch. And I said, I don't know how to teach, and Howie said, Don't make me laugh. And I thought, Oh, I guess I just learned how to teach. Do you remember?

FP I do remember, I remember a lot of that. I mean, first of all, I remember you showing up, 'cause I guess I'd read, *Transactions in a Foreign Currency,* I was a big fan, and you showed up to give the reading. I think we were there, wherever it was. And you were wearing a leather jacket. And I went, Wow, she doesn't look like anyone else that's been here cuz, cuz Iowa, you know, pretty vanilla when I was there. And immediately, I mean, I thought, not only is the work great, but she looks great. So we had a conversation, and then I remember that lunch. And I remember the conversation about teaching, but I also remember that afterwards, I thought, this is like giving a junkie her first shot of heroin. And I'm going to really feel badly about this later. And at times, I did, just because, I mean, I was

glad you had a job, but teaching is...

DE Well, from what I hear about heroin, teaching is not like heroin, so I think you can just drop that anxiety. (*laughter*)

FP I mean, the other thing, did I turn you on to computer Solitaire? That was the other thing I felt sort of similar and badly about?

DE Well that you can continue to feel badly about because I spend most of my life playing computer Solitaire?

FP Me too, me too. I know.

DE Do you remember anything about our original BOMB interview?

FP Did we do it on the phone?

DE No, we did not do it on the phone. We did it at your apartment. And I remember very clearly that Leon was practicing his saxophone. And we have so much in common, you and I, but we have temperamental things totally not in common. For example, you can write a million-billion things at top speed. I can write, I mean, in the time it takes me to write a grocery list, you've written a couple of novels. But I have an extreme aversion to noise. And you, I believe, can read with the television on, which seems like a miracle to me. And the fact that Leon was practicing was very congenial to you and very pleasant. And I thought, This is impossible. Of course, you would have heard it all the time every day because he played so much. And he was so good. I mean, he was a wunderkind but, but still.

FP Well, you know, I've always been grateful to my parents for allowing me to do my homework in front of the TV. They...because they were working all the time they didn't notice anyway, but I felt that it somehow did something to my brain which made that possible in a certain way.

DE No, obviously you're a neurological freak. I mean, I say that with

great admiration.

FP Okay, so here's what I remember. And and so you said that apparently my friends were saying that they didn't like the interview because you talked too much and you're supposedly interviewing me, blah, blah. Okay, but what I remember, and this may not be true anymore, because I don't hear myself. I mean, I still hear you. But, but what I remember was, at the time, the tonal quality of our voices was very similar. And whoever was transcribing the interview, called me up and said, I can't tell which one of you is speaking. And I said, Well just cut it wherever you want, you know, just like...

DE It doesn't matter. (*laughter*)

FP ...it doesn't matter, right? Yeah, she can ask the questions and go on or I can ask... So I, I always thought of it as kind of...I never noticed that you were talking a lot or I was, because I always assumed that it was just kind of a random assignment of who was saying what.

DE Could explain a lot. Yes.

FP So do you remember any short stories you read when you were younger that had a huge influence on you?

DE Younger is a long, long stretch. (*laughter*) But yes, I remember when I was really a child, my parents had on their bookshelf a remarkable edition of Katherine Mansfield stories. And it was remarkable in that, well it might actually be a first edition of one of the collections, but it was very tall, and the print was very large. And there were very, very beautiful line drawings. Of course, I had no idea what those stories were, but I read them over and over, and I still read them. So...

FP I have that edition of Katherine Mansfield.

DE Do you?

FP Yeah.

DE With drawings by Xenia Gray?

FP Xenia Gray? Uh huh. It's so beautiful.

DE It's so beautiful.

FP And those stories, well it makes sense that you would have loved it as a child because she writes about childhood better than anyone. And those, I mean, "Daughters of the Late Colonel" is one of the ones that we're talking about, right...

DE Absolutely it is. And for me, "Prelude," but, yes, "Daughters of the Late Colonel." I used to read that and sob and sob and sob. And it wasn't until I was in my late 20s that I realized it was completely hilarious.

FP I can't, you know...one of the things I keep trying to remember or understand when I was a kid was my absolute inability to make certain distinctions. I was a huge reader. But I didn't know what a short story was, and I didn't know what a novel was, and I didn't know what a good novel was, and I didn't know what a bad novel was. I just read everything, you know, I read the backs of cereal boxes, and I just was, you know, all I wanted was that being taken away, that etude.

DE That is something that one actually tries so hard to recapture, when you're writing, when one is writing, is the inability to make distinctions.

FP Yeah. And along with that, although I don't know why, but it just seems connected, was the weird feeling I had as a child and maybe you did too, which is that if I read a story often enough or looked at a picture, hard enough and long enough, I could be inside it. It was so porous like the...just the barrier between me, an actual human being, and a book, or me and a painting, and I, you know, I, I can remember it. I mean, I can't recapture it at all, but I can remember that feeling.

DE Well, I suspect you do recapture it in a sense. I mean, I think it becomes structured in. That's why people read...or look at things, is to meld with the thing, to incorporate, literally incorporate, put into your body, an experience that you have no other access to. And I suppose that that's one reason that I'm skeptical about the idea that children should read things that they understand or things that are quote unquote relevant because, really, one's life is built out of not understanding things, that's how you learn things. That's how you absorb experience. If you stuck to things that you understood, you would be an extremely reduced person.

FP And if you stuck to things that made you feel better and safer, and you don't...now, I mean, *Grimms' Fairy Tales*. If you were a second grade teacher and you read that story to your class, you would be in the principal's office by that afternoon...

DE Oh, you would be in leg irons.

FP (*laughter*) I mean, you know, they would, the children would be chopped up and fed to the parent, to the unsuspecting parent. Could you imagine? Now I loved those stories when I was a kid, I just loved them and it wasn't as if I imagined they were reportage or anything or prescriptions for how to behave. I just loved them. I mean and the idea that any kind of literature, children's or whatever, should be a prescription for how to behave – it's just so sick.

DE I think it's sick too, yeah. The idea that one ought to behave in a certain very codified way. This has really corrupted, I think, the idea, or at least contaminated the idea of reading and writing. It makes things quite difficult.

FP What do you mean? (*laughter*) I mean, how does that work?

DE Well, I've noticed in my classes, increasingly, that my students are very uneasy if characters behave badly; whereas, for me that's one of the pleasures of fiction, is that you can observe really terrible behavior and awful psychological apparatuses on the page. You don't have to live with those people. And it's a wonderful, wonderful

place to explore all kinds of unacceptable human feelings. But I notice increasingly that my students are made quite nervous by bad behavior and unacceptable human beings on the page. And they really long for exemplary characters, which seems quite...I find it very poignant that their need seems to be so urgent, but it's also very distressing to me that there's such a low threshold for wickedness, for cheesiness, for all kinds of awfulness. I don't understand it. I think maybe life is just so hard now that people want fiction to present, as you say, What? An exemplary life.

FP I mean, I find even in literature class my students are...they have a hard time with extreme emotions...

DE Yes.

FP ...of any kind. And, and the thing that really bothers me, I mean, is, is that they...is that love is a very—excuse this word—problematic question for them. And maybe I told you this, I was teaching Chekhov's "The Lady with the Dog." And, and I got my student response papers back and they were, you know, because I, the way you do, I have them write every week, and the words were like, infidelity, adultery, intimacy, blah, blah, blah, and out of fifteen students, I think two of them used the word love. And I went into class and said, You know what, this is one of the world's greatest love stories, how come no one will go near this word? And, and one of them said, I think I told you this, one of them said, Well, you know, I don't mean to insult you, but you're older than we are, and you probably have an experience of love, and I haven't, and I thought, didn't you go to high school? Like what? You know what, what's going on?

DE Yeah, didn't you have like, a pet rabbit, didn't you? I mean...

FP A goldfish. My god!

DE A goldfish, a turtle. But no, I think you're, you're right. Every morning, I wake up and listen to *Democracy Now*. And by the time the headlines are over, I'm ready to check into...

FP The mental hospital. I know.

DE Yeah. And it's a very, very painful and frightening time to be alive. And one thinks of one's students who are so unprotected and are underfunded by far and are going into a world of catastrophic climate change, catastrophic destruction of biodiversity, possible nuclear war. And I can understand...

FP Oh, I know, I know.

DE ...why they would have...

FP I know.

DE ...be very defended against any kind of emotion.

FP But thinking that the world is ending, would that make you more afraid of extreme emotion or seeking it more? I mean, just to have some kind of experience before the oceans boil over and etc, etc. I mean...

DE Well this is something I actually really want to talk to you about. We've both led full lives. I mean, I'm seventy-three and I know we have talked a bit about this, that the intensity of getting older, how intense one's emotional life is, it is like being a teenager.

FP Mhm.

DE But we were both born at what seemed to be, at least theoretically, the end of fascism. And here we are in a world where there's a tremendous resurgence of fascism and how absolutely terrifying it is. And I, I feel that, well, all of my friends who are my age, not that I have any other friends, but all of us, a few years ago, started to say to each other, do I feel like this because the world is about to end or do I feel like this because I'm about to end? But the intensity is so extreme, and I find that my pleasure in driving out here today and seeing the little green leaves was so acute that I could

hardly bear it.

FP Oh, I know. I know. No, that's certainly true. But you know, the only reason I don't check into a mental hospital every day is because I feel that they want me to so badly. It's sort of related to something I wanted to ask you, I mean, it might seem like a non-sequitur, but it really isn't. I don't know if you remember, but we used to talk about the strange way in which you would write something and then it would happen...

DE Yes.

FP ...or you would invent a character and you would meet that character. And I wondered if that was still happening as much to you, or...

DE You know, I don't know. But speaking of not being able to distinguish between things, I no longer really know who of my friends is still alive and who isn't. Everything seems porous. Everything seems like a semi-permeable membrane. And Wally, my sweetheart, and I sometimes don't remember who has had the experience and...

FP Mhm, mhm.

DE ...which of us had the experience and which of us has been told about it. And so I think the world, the mental world that I live in is now so populous, and we both had so many experiences, that it's as if one is just living in this ambient world of movement.

FP I mean, we should talk about this, even though it'll just make people hate us more than they already do.

DE People already hate me.

FP Oh my god, I still, I'm still getting hate mail because of the Charlie Hebdo thing.

[CLIP FROM *THE YOUNG TURKS*] The PEN America Gala is happening next month and Charlie Hebdo is set to win an award: the Freedom of Expression Courage Award. Now, there are a number of writers, six writers in particular, that are actually very upset about this. They believe that Charlie Hebdo should not receive that award because of some of the offensive covers that they've had in the past. Now one of those writers is a woman by the name of Francine Prose.

FP You know, as I said, every so often I still get an email saying like, you know, with every new attack, Are you happy now? Which is just so shocking to me, I mean...

DE Do you get an email with every white supremacist attack, asking you if you're happy?

FP No, I certainly do not, I certainly do not. Well.

DE So it's just the same Islamophobic, anti-Muslim thing that it, that it was. No...calm down, Francine. (*laughter*) There's no reason to be surprised at all.

FP I know, I know. But what surprised me and what did more damage than anything to me was discovering the impossibility of making what seemed like a very simple point clear to people who didn't want to hear it. And some part of me retained the naive belief that if you said something clearly enough, it would be understood.

DE Yeah, I certainly have shared that experience and continue to...I continue to be shocked that a very simple point was being made by us: we support free speech; we do not think that everyone who speaks freely ought to receive an award for what they say.

FP Exactly. (*laughter*)

DE It's very simple, very simple.

FP How much clearer, how much more clear than that could you possibly be?

DE But, but you're right. If somebody does not want to understand something, it's really easy to not understand something, apparently.

FP Yeah.

DE I mean, one of the things that's increasingly interesting to me about the human brain is, how limited it is, and how happily it ties itself into a pretzel at any given moment in order to not understand things.

FP Right, or adopts like six to seven things that it believes, and if the incoming information doesn't fit with those six to seven things then it just gets tossed out. It doesn't register.

DE Yeah.

So, in that interview we did about a quarter of a century ago?

FP Mm, about a hundred years ago.

DE About a hundred years ago. I think that you said something to the effect that fiction was a way to contemplate the worst thing that could happen, that it was a good way to go about thinking of that or imagining it. Is that still, do you think, part of your fiction?

FP You know, the trouble is, is that now the bar for worst that could happen has been raised so high that when, it often seems that when writers address that they wind up writing post-apocalyptic fiction, which I...most of which I don't really like very much. So I think that that, you know, the idea of the worst that could happen has so slowly or quickly, depending on how you look at it, escalated into the end of the world. Well, you wrote the...one of the stories in the new collection is set in the future. So you were thinking about it?

DE Yes. That's the question I think that must be, I speculate that it's looming over all fiction writers now: how do you write about this, this world we're living in with any kind of nuance? What is there to

say other than, Oh, god, this is just unbearable, this is terrible, this is absolutely terrifying? How do you go about making fiction out of the reality in which we live? And in my experience, fiction comes out of what's in your mind. That's all it comes out of. So how do you write about a world with no subtlety, in which what's called upon from you emotionally, is nothing subtle? As you said, it's just proving that you're not going to the sanitarium. (*laughter*) So...

FP For now, for now.

DE For now. So how do you write about it? And certainly with that story, it's very, very, very oblique. And most of the actual...that story is called "The Third Tower," and the most declared part of it is the title.

FP Mhm. I mean, subtlety becomes the problem because, as you say, it's all so in your face all the time, and, and, and so much of what we do is trying not to be too obvious about the thing that we want to say. And everything around us is so obvious and so, as you said, lacking in nuance. It's all, you know, everywhere.

DE Yes. And usually, I don't know what I want to say. I find out by reading what I write, that's how I know what I want to say.

FP
Right, of course. Of course.

DE It's that thing that's on the page. But now, I know what I want to say. Which is, Help, help. (*laughter*) Save us, save us. Send the lifeboats!

I sense that the editors would be happy if we spoke of the word process. So let's just do that.

FP Well, I can't bear it. I just can't bear the word process. I mean, for one thing, you know, I cannot, maybe you feel differently, but I cannot remember writing anything I wrote. I can remember little moments, but I cannot remember sitting there and writing this

or sitting there and...you know I can remember moments where something unexpected happened, maybe, and I was pleased, but very, very, very rarely. And for me, it's a lot like a dream. It's like having a dream, you know, writing. And so when someone says, What's your process? It's like saying, What did you dream last night? You know, you can kind of remember it, but you can't kind of remember it, and not only that, you know, only your nearest and dearest would you tell the answer to that question, since it's, finally, so boring. So you can't, you know, you can't really talk about it. And so then I think, because it's impossible to talk about process, and because people seem to want it, that you come up with a series of, of lies, basically, that you keep telling until...and to a certain extent you believe a little of it or none of it or something, because you can't, you can't remember how something began with a sentence and wound up being a certain number of pages long. I don't think, or I can't.

DE I certainly cannot. And not only can I not, and I think that's true of most writers, they are astonished to find that they've written something – I'm sure that's not true if you write mysteries or things that you have to plan out very carefully – but not only can you not remember, it actually doesn't apply to anybody else or any other piece of writing. And people ask, I believe, because they want to learn how to do the thing. But actually, you can't learn that way. You can't learn from what somebody else has done. Everybody who writes learns how to write, but you learn from the inside. And I think that the tremendous proliferation of writing programs has made people feel obliged to...I mean the academic model is threateningly in front of you at all times. So it's as if the information can be transmitted. You can learn how to do this by X, Y, and Z. Well actually, no, you can't. And it just seems preposterous to me to try to recapitulate in language, something that cannot be talked about. It cannot be talked about.

FP Right, right. It can't even, it can't be talked about. It can't be thought about, it can't be remembered, it can't be...it just happens!

DE It can't be communicated.

FP It can't be communicated. I've found that writing gets harder over the years, when it's supposed to get easier. I mean, I don't know why I think it's supposed to get...

DE Who said it's supposed...?

FP I thought it was. You know at the beginning I thought, This is so hard. It's gotta get easier. Boy was I ever wrong.

DE It's so hard, it can't be harder. (*laughter*)

FP Was I ever wrong?

DE Yeah, you were really wrong, you were really wrong.

FP And I don't know why. I don't know why it's gotten so much harder, but...

DE Well, let me hazard a guess, which is that you've, you've already done so many different kinds of things, and you don't particularly – I mean, I might be projecting, I don't like to repeat myself, I've no interest in being able to do something that I've once been able to do.

FP Right.

DE Also, I can't do things that I was once able to do. But I keep trying to go farther out towards the margins because there's nothing left for me in the center.

FP Right.

DE So, of course it gets harder and harder and harder. I mean, there is one thing that does get easier, which is simply putting together a simple English sentence, which is extremely difficult. To say what you mean is extremely difficult. That gets a little easier. That yields. But boy, nothing else does. I would not be able to manage if I didn't have Francine as a writer, as a writer and a reader, I meant to say reader, but both are true. But everybody does need readers. All

writers need readers. And that is one thing very much to be said in favor of writing programs, that young writers, less experienced writers, get readers, that you really need good readers. And I have several, maybe two, maybe three, who I show things to when I think they're finished. I cannot manage without Francine reading something that I've written.

FP And that's how I feel about Debbie, and I cannot manage with her. I can remember certain things you told me about certain books, which made me go back and look at them in a different way, and they would have been much worse, much worse if you hadn't said a certain thing that was enormously helpful.

DE Back at you. (*laughter*)

CM FUSE is made possible in part by the generous support of the Pannonia Foundation. This episode was recorded at Pioneer Works, a non-profit cultural center dedicated to experimentation, education, and production across disciplines. FUSE is produced by Libby Flores, Director of Audience Development and Digital Production at BOMB. It is co-produced and edited by Myra Al-Rahim and Sophie Kazis with production assistance by Ethan Primison. I'm Chantal McStay, Associate Editor at BOMB Magazine. Our theme music is "Black Origami" by Jlin. Additional music by Ray Suen and Ethan Primison. Be sure to subscribe to FUSE wherever you listen.