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A Changed Man Reading Guide

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A Changed Man Reading Guide

Introduction

When a Neo-Nazi and a Holocaust survivor come together, the whole world changes.

Or maybe not. Maybe only part of the world changes. But something is going to change. There's no avoiding that.

When considering whether *A Changed Man* is a "peace book," it helps to have an idea of what kind of peace we're talking about. Is it world peace? Peace between nations? Racial peace? Inner peace? All of the above? We also need to ask: what defines peace? And how do we know peace has been achieved?

Assessing the impact of localized change is the very premise of Francine Prose's novel *A Changed Man*; 2006 winner of the Dayton Literary Peace Prize. Prose promotes ideas of peace through the connection forged between two unlikely characters. The work captures audiences through the use of a simple and understandable writing style, while describing intricacies of variety among both individuals and groups of people, understanding, and interpersonal relationships, which comprise the main staples within the novel. This story of on-the-surface opposites coming together to increase the overall magnitude of world peace through small interactions between two or a few people, and then later expanding the interactions to include a great number of people, through the incorporation of mass media, inspires readers to contemplate how they might promote peace in daily life, or on a larger scale.

Prose incorporates a vast array of descriptive characteristics in order to ensure that *A Changed Man* reflects a variety of characters from varying cultures, educational backgrounds, age groups, and socioeconomic statuses. The characters resonate, because they are familiar. Some readers may see parts of themselves in the characters of Bonnie, Meyer, Danny, Vincent, or even in Raymond.

A Changed Man suggests that the first steps towards peace are made through understanding or trying to understand people that differ from ourselves. Prose articulates this idea by creating characters with varying socioeconomic backgrounds and exploring how these factors influence their decisions and viewpoints. Bonnie, divorced mother of two teenagers, Jewish, and extremely passionate about her work, has a much different viewpoint from Vincent, an ex-Neo-Nazi whose past life and occupation took an unexpected dip. The teenager, Danny has a widely varying viewpoint from Meyer Maslow, a man in his seventies. The addition of these characters provides various readers with characters whom they can identify with in their real-world experience. Prose also uses these varying backgrounds and dynamic characters to explore the concept of stereotyping and challenge ethnocentrism as personal growth and change becomes evident in the characters.

Understanding is a major step towards peace, and an important part of the book: understanding other races, cultures, worldviews, personalities, backgrounds, and ultimately, people.

By giving the reader a view from each character's perspective, each character's way of thinking and why he or she thinks that way starts to become clearer. This does not benefit the characters but it does benefit the reader. It causes the reader to realize that if the other characters in the book could see why this character acts the way they do, they would better understand each other. This understanding would lead to better acceptance and an end to conflict, and eventually to peace between the characters. On a grander, worldwide scale, this translates to an end to war and violence. Freedom from war and violence around the world is why the essence of peace is important. World peace happens one step at a time. *A Changed Man* depicts world peace by changing one person at a time.

This book's overarching theme that perhaps peace does not come from the extraordinary "miracles" of peace corporations, but instead from the extraordinary miracle of one human being understanding and accepting another human being is a powerful one, and it puts the power to produce peace in the hands of individual readers. That is where you have to begin if you want peace. Once there is peace between individuals then there can be the great world peace. *A Changed Man* is a book about exactly what you'd expect from the title: change. Not the type of change that causes the entire world to change at once, not even the type of change that affects an entire school or city, but the type of change that happens internally, one person at a time. Or, as Meyer Maslow says, "one heart at a time."

Discussion Questions

Characters

These questions are directly related to major characters in the novel in order to further engage readers with the lives and ideas being expressed in Prose's novel. Readers may need to go back and re-explore passages to gain new insight into character actions and outcomes. Thinking through these questions may encourage readers to look at the characters in a different light.

1. Do you think Vincent Nolan is actually a changed man? At what point do you think he changed, if at all?
2. Throughout the novel Meyer Maslow is plagued by a passage sent to him from *Bleak House* describing Mrs. Jellyby, a compulsive do-gooder who neglects her children. At the end of the novel it seems that Minna was the one who sent the passage to him. Why do you think Minna would send this excerpt to Meyer? Why do you think that the passage had the effect that it did on Meyer?
3. Do you think that Meyer will actually fly across the world? Does it matter? Do you think his reasons for doing so are noble?
4. Why do you think Meyer had such a strong reaction to finding Bonnie in his bed?
5. Do you think Vincent will keep or remove his tattoos? Should he be encouraged to or erase them or keep them?
6. What do you think happens to Raymond after the end of the novel? Do you think it would have added any significance if Raymond had made another appearance after the Chandler incident?
7. Do you think Vincent will continue on a path of righteousness or will he be tempted to return to his path of hatred and discrimination? What is a path of righteousness?

Novelistic Elements

*These questions have been designed to open readers' eyes to the complex methods of writing at work within *A Changed Man*. The reader will have to take into account aspects of how the novel was written, structured, and worded to understand some of the deeper ideas at play in-between the lines. By answering these questions the reader should gain a more clear idea of why Prose wrote *A Changed Man* in the style that she chose.*

8. Are Joel and Lorraine important to the plot of the novel? What about the thematic content of their characters? How would the book be different if Francine Prose had excised their roles in *A Changed Man*?

9. The novel opens with two epigraphs. The first is from the chorus to the song "A Changed Man," by The Fatback Band. The second is a short section of the novel *Middlemarch*, by George Elliot, reading, "I have a belief on my own, and it comforts me.....That by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don't quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil- widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower," How does your thinking about these epigraphs change after reading the book? Are they appropriate for the subject matter?

Listen to: "[A Changed Man](#)" by The Fatback Band

10. Consider the role of the media in Prose's novel. From The Chandler show, to *People Magazine*, to Amazon.com it seems that today's social network factors heavily into Prose's central ideas. Do you think media had a positive role in the novel? Ask yourself if the characters would have been able to evolve in the same way without the media presence throughout.

11. Prose uses story structure very carefully in *A Changed Man*. Readers are constantly jumping from the perspectives of several very different characters as they read, never letting them stay with one character for very long. Why do you think that Prose constructs her novel in this way? Do you think that Vincent is really the central figure in the story? Could Prose's story structure have a deeper meaning in terms of peace?

12. Is Vincent's transformation from neo-Nazi to a nationally known activist for human rights plausible? If so, what makes it plausible? If not, where does the novel fail in this regard?

13. What do you think the significance, if any, was behind Meyer and Vincent comparing their tattoos? What did this passage add to the book?

14. Do you think that Danny having his own sections in the novel was necessary or should he have been more of a secondary character such as Max? What was his function?

Broad Ideas

The following questions address ideas and expressions much broader than simple character or reading analysis. Here the readers will take their own personal views into account when discussing A Changed Man and the ideas behind it. By exploring these thoughts the reader may gain insight into their own reactions to the novel.

15. Which character do you think actually creates the most change? Why? Do you think that this had a positive effect?

16. Was Danny's paper actually homophobic? Was the possibility of Hitler being gay an important factor in his impact on the world? Or was Prose exploring something else with this episode?

17. Do you think that Vincent's, or to a greater extent Raymond's, social issues stem from race relations or economic inequalities? Do you think the two are really separate issues?

18. Think about how Prose portrays the Brotherhood Watch organization. Do you think they are effective in helping make the world a better place? Do you think that Prose is trying to

communicate something about charity organizations in general or does she simply use a fictional one as a sounding board for her characters? If you think the latter than why would Prose chose to reference the Wiesenthal Foundation in her novel?

19. Did Brotherhood Watch take advantage of Vincent Nolan by employing him as their spokesperson? If so, what do you think their motive in doing so was? Does their motive make taking advantage laudable?

20. Do you think that Vincent will stay in the lower economic class now that he's a Changed Man? Do you think Vincent's experiences at Brotherhood Watch will change any other aspects of his life?

21. Is it okay to laugh when Danny compares Meyer Maslow to a "Jewish Charlie Manson"? Is it supposed to be offensive?

Peace

These questions directly address the "peace" aspect of the novel as well as Prose's and her readers ideas about peace as well.

22. Despite being centered around a organization devoted to world peace, Brotherhood Watch, there are a lot of ugly elements at play in *A Changed Man*. Prejudices, manipulation, and even a bloody fist fight weave their way into Prose's supposedly peace-centered words. Do you think that this novel is an accurate representation of the search for peace? Is Prose really trying to set an example of the search for peace or is she offering a critique?

23. Based on the novel, do you think Francine Prose believes world peace is a realistic goal to pursue?

24. Do you think the novel addresses the question of which should be more important to an individual: inner peace or world peace?

Francine Prose Online

Below is a compilation of interviews with and videos about Francine Prose. In the videos, she shares her thoughts on reading, art and media, and her novel *A Changed Man*.

Francine Prose on Reading

Here Francine Prose gives advice to readers and writers alike. In her book, [*Reading Like a Writer*](#), she discusses "reading carnivorously" and paying attention to the content of what you are reading. Many wonder how to become a successful writer and Prose's answer is simply to read. Below is a link to an NPR interview with Prose about *Reading Like a Writer*.

In this series, Prose gives a lecture explaining why it is so important to read, and study the books that you read, if you wish to become a good writer. She explains how her interest in reading began when she was young and she didn't care if it was a "good book" or "bad book" by

literary standards, she just loved being in the world of the book. In this five part series ([Part 1](#)) ([Part 2](#)) ([Part 3](#)) ([Part 4](#)) ([Part 5](#)) Prose captivates her listeners with an eye opening look into how to read literature and develop skills that can be transferred to writing.

Francine Prose on Art and the Media

In this interview, Francine Prose briefly covers a myriad of topics, though the primary topics of discussion are art and the media. She expresses her belief that good art has a consoling quality to it, and that literature itself has a way of portraying what it means to be human, as well as countering narcissistic tendencies in certain readers and to make one “aware that someone else has a reality.” However, she talks about the lines between fiction and nonfiction, and the perils of when those lines occasionally blur for the audience.

While she describes herself as a “news junkie” who has a “television addiction problem,” Prose also takes issue with the blurred lines between news and entertainment and laments depictions of human suffering as entertainment.

- [Adams, Cara Blue. Conversation with Francine Prose. *Southern Review* 46.3 \(2010\): 376-384. *Literary Reference Center*. Web. 23 Sept. 2014.](#)

Francine Prose on *A Changed Man*

In this [interview](#), Francine Prose talks about *A Changed Man*. Prose discusses her inspiration for the book and the logic behind the characters. She is asked about her interactions with readers while she wrote and explains if she meant to “push their buttons.” Prose also speaks about how she wove American themes into the book.

Additional Videos

In this interview, Francine Prose discusses, as the title suggests, the [things that keep her up at night](#). These range from the personal mundane, to the larger world issues. For Prose, writing serves as a distraction from these issues, as well as a tool to combat what she perceives to be the saturation of false information fed to people in their daily lives. She believes that in a culture of ubiquitous “propaganda,” reading literature can help individuals understand and appreciate the common humanity in one another. This brief interview focuses on revision and perfectionism: [Words and Wine: Francine Prose](#)