



A Changed Man

Francine Prose

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What is charismatic Holocaust survivor Meyer Maslow to think when a rough-looking young neo-Nazi named Vincent Nolan walks into the Manhattan office of Maslow's human rights foundation and declares that he wants to "save guys like me from becoming guys like me"? As Vincent gradually turns into the sort of person who might actually be able to do this, he also transforms those around him: Meyer Maslow, who fears heroism has become a desk job; the foundation's dedicated fund-raiser, Bonnie Kalen, an appealingly vulnerable divorced single mother; and even Bonnie's teenage son.

Francine Prose's *A Changed Man* is a darkly comic and masterfully inventive novel that poses essential questions about human nature, morality, and the capacity for personal reinvention.

A Changed Man Details

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From Reader Review A Changed Man for online ebook

Mrs. McGregor says

Summary: A Neo-Nazi named Vincent Nolan wants to turn around and "save guys like [him] from becoming guys like [him]" by helping World Brotherhood Watch raise money and awareness. At the helm of WBW is holocaust survivor and well-known author, Meyer Maslow, who befriends Vincent. In the process, Vincent bunks up with a single mom Bonnie and her two boys, Danny and Max. This is his "hideout", since his former buddies from ARM (Aryan Resistance Movement) are after him because they "want revenge".

In a nutshell: I don't recommend it.

If you can imagine a cheesy, gooey, unsatisfying ending to this story, it will be far worse than what you can think up. The "change" they blab on and on about in this book is neither dramatic, interesting, or at all moving. And all the stuff before the end is pretty anti-climactic. I wish boredom was the worst thing about this book.

The most action in the first 200 pages of the book is an allergic reaction to a walnut. I shit you not. I couldn't make this up. The big, huge struggle this former Nazi has while trying to assimilate to the "real world" is trying to avoid all the stuff that he's allergic to.

These threatening ARM guys they mentioned Vincent worrying about constantly didn't show up till 3/4 of the way through the book, and even then it was only one ARM guy, and Vincent just beats the crap out of him. Then he hides out for a while, his tail between his legs, and a few days later, emerges triumphantly to "save the day" and deliver the graduation speech at Danny's high school's graduation. Because, he's a really great role-model, beating guys within an inch of their lives and all. Which, by the way, is the "deal" Bonnie and Vincent make to get Danny out of trouble with the assistant principal when he writes a paper about Hitler that the school's administration worries could be "slightly homophobic". During the speech, Bonnie and Vincent realize they love each other and look forward to a new life. Hooey!

Finally, the most annoying thing about this book was that every single character spends a lot of time thinking about what other people are probably thinking about them. It's absurd. It would be okay for the first couple of chapters maybe, while Meyer Maslow, Bonnie, her two kids and the Nazi were all trying to size each other up, but you know, by page 100 or so it gets a little old.

Emily says

I really wish there was another, alternative rating system on GR such as Positive, Negative and Neutral. This book would receive neutral. This is my first Prose book and I happened to pick it up on audio at a good price, which is what prompted me to partake in Prose's work.

It is good to read that she has other, better books because this book on its own would not prompt me to be a huge fan of her writing.

This story seemed to be such an interesting concept after reading the quick synopsis on the audio book cover. Once I got into the book though the promise faded and kept fading until by the end I was just glad to be

finished.

The reason I would not give it a negative is because I did make it all the way through the end with a desire to know how it might all turn out but I was not sitting on pins and needles until I could get through it.

The story line fades and gets more and more ridiculous and predictable as it goes on. I kept finding myself waiting for more, expecting more and than being disappointed. At the very end of the book I actually rewound and went back a bit to make sure that I had actually heard it all correctly. The ending was the biggest let down of the whole book. The interesting concept just started to become fragmented and lacking in the substance that could have been built around the plot and idea.

This would be classified as a "if you have nothing else to read and this book is just sitting around" read for me.

John says

Thinking about this book, having finished reading it, kept me awake last night. Is that good or bad I wonder?

Vincent is the 'changed man'; but is he really? The reader must decide for her/him self. He is a skinhead with tattoos which include the SS lightning bolts and he recently belonged ARM (the Aryan Resistance Movement). He's also attended anger management classes. Anyway, our changed man walks into the offices of the Brotherhood Foundation which exists to spread love instead of hate, free political prisoners etc. It is headed by its creator, Meyer Maslow a Holocaust survivor. Vincent is here he tells Maslow to "help guys like you stop guys like me becoming guys like me".

I kept thinking about Dickens whilst reading this as he was the master when it came to exposing hypocrisy, cant and double standards. He would be in his element here: so many egos to trip over. Maslow for me is pure Dickens material and his Foundation is one big ego trip. His minions, who do much of the spade work, include the seriously neurotic Bonnie and the professionally egoistic publicity grabbing Roberta. A cynical lawyer watches in the wings to limit any legal liability which the Foundation may incur by over stretching itself in its pursuit of peace and love.

Vincent is welcomed by Maslow with open arms, recognising his tremendous potential as a born again human being for swelling the Foundation's coffers from would be donors. It works and the savvy Vincent lodges meanwhile with single mom Bonnie and her 2 teenage boys, sixteen year old Danny and his younger brother Max. Thank G.O.D. for Danny: I feel the human race stands some chance of surviving if there are more Dannies around. There's teenage angst and anxiety a-plenty there but through his eyes we see all the "creeps" around him (his word, not mine; spot on mate!)

The book is set in a world of political correctness gone mad and Danny is suspended from his school because of his essay on Hitler which his teachers view through their pc prism and find it to be horribly incorrect.

That's a flavour of what you'll be getting if you read the book. Telling you more might spoil any fun. There is fun here and some good writing:

" Irene's sort of attractive. She's got that European Marlene Dietrich thing going. Part queen, part drag queen. Your vulnerable dominatrix. Sexy for an older woman.....a smile rehearsed to take maximum advantage of the point to which her face has been tightened . All that money, all that pain, to make former beauties like Irene look like the dolls they played with as little girls."

It is a page turner but it is too long and the phoney world it inhabits is grossly irritating. I hope it's meant as a pastiche, Dickens style, on the part of Francine Prose. If not, I begin to understand the Donald's take on fake news!!

Jane Roper says

I admired the way Prose tried to get inside the minds and hearts of four such different characters -- a (former) white supremacist, the neurotic fundraising exec. who hosts and befriends him, her teenage son, the eloquent and sometimes self-absorbed head of the non-profit organization at the center of the book.

However, I'm not sure she succeeds entirely, especially in the case of the white supremacist. I would have liked to go a few steps deeper (and darker) into his history, his motivations, his intentions, etc. The fact that he was only very briefly and almost unintentionally part of a white supremacist group made it easy for him to become "a changed man." And his motives for leaving weren't entirely noble, either.

But we don't ever really get a sense of whether or not he or anyone around him realizes this; that his transformation, while fortunate, isn't a true transformation. Adding that extra layer of complexity, questioning and unconscious denial would have made this a more satisfying read.

Elizabeth says

An enjoyable read that doesn't quite make it all the way. The main problem is that Vincent, the "ex-Neo Nazi," never seems to have been a Nazi in the first place. Just a tagalong. Other than using the word "Rican" he doesn't seem to have a hateful or even non-PC bone in his body. So it's hard to buy into his transformation. Or is that part of the satire? Hard to tell. The other problem is that this novel is set in episodes in the spring and summer of 2001. I kept waiting for 9/11 to roll around. Again, was the timing a deliberate statement, an act of satire? I have to believe so, although I don't think it's a spoiler to say that 9/11 doesn't play an actual role in the novel. But why set the reader up that way?

Lauren says

Such a bummer.

Riding a high after Francine Prose's "Reading Like a Writer", I picked up this book -- which I had been seeing on independent booksellers' tables for a while. I had hoped to enjoy it as much as I enjoyed her book on reading/writing because I thought she offered really keen insights on the subject.

However, I was pretty disappointed by this book. It wasn't that it was a bad book or poorly written. But it was long and sprawling... and just felt a little careless to me. I like writers who seem to think a lot about their prose, whose every sentence or line of dialogue seems well thought-out. And this book just wasn't like that. Even though it probably wasn't, it seemed like it had been written quickly. And... I tried to find in this book

the elements she talks about in "Reading Like a Writer" (e.g. well-crafted dialogue) but I couldn't really...

The book felt a bit like some of the other casual sprawling novels I've read recently -- Kate Atkinson's "One Good Turn" and Ayelet Waldman's "Love and Other Impossible Pursuits". They weren't taut or exquisitely written, but they were entertaining. "A Changed Man" just wasn't entertaining me enough to justify the 20-page-a-night pace I was sustaining.

Moving on...

Stabitha says

A Changed Man begins with an ex-white supremacist walking into a human rights organization's office to offer his services: he wants to "help guys like me from becoming guys like me." The subject matter allows Prose to flex her satire muscles, which by this point are quite developed. In this case, the focal point of her attack is a human rights organization. I don't know how she's going to one-up herself after this one. Ten years ago, in *Hunters and Gatherers*, she targeted goddess-worshipping new agey ladies. Five years ago, in *Blue Angel*, she chose a riskier subject: sexual harassment and p.c. language limitations on the college campus, likely to remain a touchy subject for years to come. And now she's picked a human rights organization; can a cow get much more sacred?

Prose allows four main characters to narrate: Vincent, the ex-neo-nazi, Meyer Maslow, the wealthy leader of the World Brotherhood Watch and a holocaust survivor, Bonnie, the organization's (Jewish) fund-raiser who takes Vincent into her home, and Danny, Bonnie's 16 year old son. The juxtaposition of Meyer and Vincent is excellent. The competitive, yet respectful, nature of their relationship is unveiled at their first meeting. Both men roll up their sleeves to reveal their tattoos: Meyer's serial number given to him by Nazis and Vincent's Waffen-SS bolts (Hitler's elite guard's symbol). Meyer's written several inspirational books (which influenced Vincent's departure from the white supremacist lifestyle, or so he claims), the most recent of which is lagging in sales. Meyer knows Vincent's presence within the organization could bring much-needed funds to the World Brotherhood Watch, and guiltily thinks that it could also help his book sales. Meyer's a charismatic leader who can get people to do whatever he wants. Danny thinks his mother's been brainwashed by him: he's actually convinced her to let the former neo-nazi live with them until they can find him an apartment. Bonnie is so obsessed with being a "good person" that she submits to Meyer's demands. Soon, we discover that Vincent has a certain charm that Meyer hates to admit he envies. As Vincent sells his "changed man" story like a brand, the press, wealthy donors, and even Meyer's wife eat it up. Meyer's jealousy grows, followed by more guilt. One of my favorite Vincent-Meyer moments is when Meyer steals one of Vincent's ideas to use in one of his trademark inspirational speeches. The two men form just one of the many interesting dyads in the book.

As we're getting into the characters, we're treated to some biting satire. What I like so much about this book is that the characters are so interesting and real and their stories so engaging that you forget the primary purpose of the book is satire. I think it's more fulfilling and less didactic than straight-up satires that don't concentrate on character development or pace. I do want to share two examples though. The first one is when Vincent is giving a speech at a fund-raising dinner. When he tells the audience about how he was taught to "hate," the crowd gasps: hate has become a four-letter word. Prose understands how ideology affects language. (My mom used to send me to my room if I used the word "hate"). Vincent goes on to tell a simple story that's meant to symbolize his complicated conversion. He and his cousin had gone to a Korean man's greenhouse, intending to hurt the man. Vincent remembers aloud that they referred to him as a "Korean mother..." and decides not to use the word in such company. He realizes that the audience is disappointed, so he says it: "Korean motherfucker." The crowd loves it; it's so transgressive and thrilling. The other

example I'd like to mention is when Danny gets in trouble at school for a paper he wrote on Hitler. This harkens back to *Blue Angel*'s attack on the academic gutting of free speech. After talking with Vincent, Danny writes a paper that suggests Hitler's suppressed homosexuality may have informed his evil. He is promptly booted from school. Just putting homosexuality and evil in the same sentence is grounds for hanging. I love that she manages to make her points within a solid story.

From the very beginning, we know Vincent's white power friends could find him at any moment. This point of tension propels the book and I ate it up like a bulimic at a buffet. I think I just puked all over the keyboard. I'll wrap it by simply suggesting you read it.

Maureen says

After reading *Blue Angel*, I was disappointed with *A Changed Man*. It was entertaining and kept me interested, but also kept me wondering what was missing from making it great instead of just OK. Part of it was a matter of believability and another that I found none of the characters wholly likable. That they were all so habitually self deprecating didn't help either.

It did inspire me to ponder what the important part of a person is. Is it the inner person, their thoughts and feelings that they do not share? Or is it all about one's actions, even if they greatly conflict with the inner self? It was Vincent Nolan and Meyer Manslow's characters who embodied this contradiction and made me wonder how differently the other characters would have reacted to them were this contradiction more apparent.

Alison says

I kind of feel the same way about this book as I did about the other Francine Prose novels I have read. Sharp writing, lots of funny/poignant moments, fully realized, idiosyncratic characters ... but I wasn't totally into it, for reasons I can't quite put my finger on. I'm relearning the art of reading on public transportation, and this one made me a bit uncomfortable with its crazy racist characters spouting invective on every page.

Manik Sukoco says

In "*A Changed Man*" Prose succeeds in doing what every writer hopes in how she takes you into a foreign place and gives you a glimpse of life from another viewpoint. Her book is at once both optimistic and pessimistic: she shows a neo nazi who seems to change for the better and a world known Holocaust survivor who has made a tidy living off of his fame who seems to care little for those closest to him.

I can't quite put my finger on it but her writing is kind of 'in a hurry.' Not stripped and raw like a Hemingway novel but more jerky and always moving, like you're always running. The technique works well, though, to keep the story moving, and to keep you in the middle of the confusion surrounding the protagonist. And confusion is in the middle of most of the story: confusion about motive, about relationships, and about telling yourself the truth. In the end, like a made for TV movie, the confusion falls away and everyone finds their place in the world. It's a bit formulaic but works. Ironically I don't really think anyone in the book 'changed.' Certainly not the protagonist. His foray into the Aryan Nation was mostly a trade for breakfast and a place to sleep. None of the other characters change, either, except that they all seemed to come a bit more to grips with their innate wants.

Still, it's an excellent read that I really enjoyed.

J213 says

My problem with this book is not exactly that it's essentially a hokey Lifetime movie, a.k.a. a corny cheeseball romantic pseudo drama, so much as the subject matter was toned down to a largely PG incarnation. Granted, movies like *American History X* are on the opposite end of the spectrum and possibly more violent than reality, but even the middle ground is much more than your average person wants to see or even know about. This book uses that sub-culture in a much too safe way and dare I say, irresponsibly.

A Changed Man is about a neo-Nazi skinhead on the run from his cousin and thugs from a Nazi and bigoted "organization" and goes looking for refuge from its polar opposite: an internationally reknowned peace organization run by a Holocaust survivor. Remarkably, they take him in even though the place is not a shelter or welfare group or anything of that nature. Nope, he just walks in and before he leaves, has a heart-to-heart with the founder and somehow convinces them to let him join.

From then on, the story gets alarmingly predictable. A love interest develops, his past confronts him and everything wraps up all nice and cute and neat at the end. Even the very end you could see coming a mile away.

The thing is that during the entire story, you come to understand that the guy never really bought into the whole Nazi philosophy to begin with and only did it to fit in. It's practically spelled out for you over and over by the author, right from the beginning actually. The other problem is that with the threat of his past catching up with him looming, nothing has been set up to make you think that anyone is in any real danger and as it turns out, no one is. It's an entirely benign sequence of events focused more on the female co-star and their eventual fall for each other than actually depicting a violently bigoted and hateful Nazi-sympathizer realizing how wrong he's been this entire time and doing a 180 and truly meaning it. So in a sense, *A Changed Man* really cheapens and quite possibly gives people a very wrong impression on what these people are like and are capable of.

This book is basically, "Timid single mother with incredibly low self-esteem falls in love with phony skinhead." Whatever.

Martha says

Vincent Nolan leaves the Aryan Resistance Movement and seeks refuge (and a job) with the humanitarian organization World Brotherhood Watch. The rest of *A Changed Man* follows Vincent's growth and the people around him with mostly internal monologues. The characters' perceptions of each other and themselves play a huge role as these vastly different people try to understand each other.

Francine Prose made these characters into incredibly believable human beings. It is especially impressive when you consider the wide range of personalities--30ish former neo-nazi, 70-year-old Holocaust survivor, 40ish single mother, 16-year-old high school student.

A Changed Man presented flawed human beings from all kinds of backgrounds as they were thrown together in this sweet, funny, and engaging story. Fascinating characters in a fantastic book.

Alexia says

It would actually be 3.5 stars. The book was not perfect but I liked it and it was a fast read. What really struck me was how Prose examined the good and bad of all of the characters from Vincent to Meyer to even Danny and Joel. I loved the Dickens reference in regard to Meyer. No character was one-dimensional and the book made you think.

Sacha says

I've read two other books by Francine Prose (Blue Angel and The Peaceable Kingdom). This was pretty different. Reminded me a lot of Nick Hornby's How to Be Good, but not as funny. The story is basically that an uninspired Neo-Nazi sees the light while on Ecstasy and decides to throw himself at the mercy of and in service to an Elie Wiesel-like character. It feels not nearly as dark as her other stories, in fact it isn't dark at all. I liked it in spite of that.

Bruce says

Prose has sensitive ear for free indirect discourse and for dialogue. Her language quickly had me engaged. Her characters are complex, each highly individual but also believable— Vincent Nolan, Meyer Maslow, Bonnie Kalen, her sons. I was at first more impressed by their emerging complexity than by any significant change they were each undergoing, at least until the second half of the novel. Each had ghosts and was full of neuroses. It was initially hard to know whether Nolan was “legit.” Was he really someone who is trying to change his life? Or was he faking it, ready to go back to the neo-Nazi life he had been living? And, if he was really as lukewarm and marginal to the Aryan Resistance Movement as he implied, than was his new direction very significant after all?

I had several questions as I arrived at the mid-point of the novel. Is it plausible that someone as apparently fearful of being targeted for revenge by the ARM as Nolan implies that he is would be willing to be such a public figure for the World Brotherhood Watch? Is something not adding up about his story and his intentions?

Vincent increasingly seems genuine, and Bonnie, who has been giving him a room in which to stay, is obviously becoming more emotionally involved with him. But as the story progresses, things are obviously going too well. The neo-Nazis have not yet caught up to Vincent, even as he is getting more publicity, and some sort of crisis is bound to occur in Bonnie and Vincent's relationship. To this point, Prose has primarily been working at establishing a kind of stability after the initial destabilizing occurrence of Nolan's appearance, and now is the time to introduce complications that threaten to shatter the success of what has been happening. Eventually, one suspects, all will turn out well, but first there needs to be some crisis, some challenge that threatens to undo all the apparent progress.

And the crisis finally arrives when Raymond, Vincent's cousin and ARM leader, from whom Vincent stole a truck, drugs, and money when he left the ARM to change sides, learns through the media where Vincent is and what he is doing. And one wonders whether Raymond may seek revenge by going after Bonnie rather than Vincent directly. There seems to be no good way for this crisis to be resolved.

But it does get resolved. So what if the ending is a little sappy. At least it's believable. And the message of the novel is good, and it's honest. Change is possible. And we are not in this life alone. Prose has created a novel that is entertaining, engaging, and has more substance than much of contemporary fiction. She also provides interesting insights into the white supremacy movement. I would be willing to read more of her work.
