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## Putting the literary back into literature

John Kenny

### How Fiction Works

By James Wood

Jonathan Cape

194pp, £12.99

As an institutional discipline, the modern study of literature has increasingly developed Stockholm syndrome. Because it is a sorrowfully captive subject – or so has been the argument on and on until it has weakened – literary study seems always to have defined itself in subdued relation to other disciplines. We have had the philosophy of literature, the sociology of literature, the science of literature, and now we predominantly have – especially so in Ireland – the history or historicism or historiography of literature. These and similar modes and approaches continue to be valid.

Far from affording other regulative disciplines a mutable respect, however, it may be that the student of literature should at this stage be asking a couple of disobedient questions. What about the *literariness* of literature? Even allowing for the delights of interdisciplinary cooperation, what might we say that students of literature can free themselves to do that no one else takes the time to do?

It seems theory is largely to blame for the current domination of literary studies by varieties of history. Even though important messages from the array of theorists who have been attracted to literature over the past forty to fifty years should not be ignored, it is unfortunately true that in relaying these theories many of the messenger boys have frequently been given to flights of daftness, and so theory en masse has come to be mistrusted, if not outrightly discredited. But the bogeyman of dehistoricized theory should not frighten us away from the possibility that there are ways literary study can in good conscience declare itself free to be itself and not, in large or even small part, something else.

Step forward the gloriously titled Professor of the Practice of Literary Criticism at Harvard, James Wood, one of the foremost contemporary explorers of the specifically *literary* aspect of literature. It is salutary that we now have professors of critical “practice” as opposed to professors of critical “theory”, and Wood’s relatively young career thus far not only highly qualifies him for such a position but is its own argument for the reconceptualising of such posts. Wood is British born and educated (Eton, Cambridge) and made his name as a robust and forensic reviewer for the *Guardian* and the *London Review of Books*, but his rise as a truly stellar critic began when he moved to the US in the mid-1990s and began working at *The New Republic* where he could write the longer kind of journalistic review essays not so easily facilitated this side of the Atlantic. He has recently become a staff writer with *The New Yorker*.

While *The Book Against God* (2003), his single attempt to date at practising the novel genre which is his critical speciality, was not especially successful, his two collections of his essays and reviews, *The Broken Estate* (1999) and *The Irresponsible*

*Self* (2004), are widely admired and his name has already been added to the pantheon of the great journalistic critics.

*How Fiction Works* is Wood's first original book of criticism and it sees him develop many of the concerns of his reviews with a little more discursive depth and personal brio. Though reasonably short, the book is replete with ideas and these are rigorously focused, not on the novel as a mere pretext for the discussion of social or historical or gender contexts, but on the techniques novelists use to create the effect of the real (for which do not necessarily read *realism*) on the page. The book is modelled to some degree on Ruskin's "patient primer" for painters, *The Elements of Drawing* (1857), and Wood also likens his intentions to E.M. Forster's in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) and Milan Kundera's in his works on the art of fiction.

While he is careful not to perpetrate any of the horrors of specialist vocabularies and invokes at the start the figure of Virginia Woolf's "common reader", Wood's own favoured critical mode is suggested by the two theorists he keeps in mind, if not always close to heart, from the outset: the Russian Formalist, Viktor Shklovsky, and the French Formalist-Structuralist, Roland Barthes. Though Wood is much more accessible than either of these and seeks primarily practical answers to theoretical questions, over his ten chapters of short and very manageable numbered sections he deploys their talents for microscopic attention to textual form and their confidence in the perceptual heightening effect that literature at its best can have.

There are some stumbles along the way. Wood has a tendency to use words and rhetorical phrases that can seem more smart-alecky than conversational ("actually"; "in fact"), and he is particularly given to exclamatory appreciations ("What a piece of writing this is!"; "What an amazing opening!"). These things are arguably fine in themselves, but such mementoes of the Man of Letters are, rightly or wrongly, absolute anathema to the progressivism of modern criticism. To make the necessary inroads in imbalanced literary negotiations Wood should more carefully avoid handing ready ammunition to the watchmen (though of course it may be in pointing out, faux modestly, that "I have used only the books I actually own – the books at hand in my study – to produce this little book" he intends a clever inducement of debilitating apoplexy in the wrong kind of reader).

Other of Wood's fine old traditions are more worthy. In encouraging us to pause over just how a novel, as an aesthetic form chosen above others by an author, does what it does, he retains a convincing belief in the civilising effects of a literary education – literature, he insists, makes us "better noticers of life". With an astonishing range of reference, from the Bible and Cervantes, to Jane Austen and Beatrix Potter, to Coetzee and Updike, *How Fiction Works* is an effusive invitation for us not only to attend more to life's sheer vitality, its concrete "thisness", but also, so that we can help ourselves achieve such immediacy, to both read more and read more carefully. And there is such critical energy here as to help fiction readers happily burn the midnight oil for a long time to come.

In counterbalancing the overwhelming current tendency in literary studies towards analysis of content rather than workmanship, the overall spirit and implication of this book are as important as its direct statements. Wood helps us properly suspect anew that a work of literature might not be a window onto something else – in the way a different kind of text might be for a historian say – but is the window itself. Literary students and common readers alike can consequently feel free to suggest that a novel, because of its very literariness, does not have an empirically discoverable meaning or transparent correspondence with the actual. To insist it does might be as foolhardy a

contradiction in terms as to wonder why rich colours impede one's view through stained glass.

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