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LIFESTYLE

‘How Fiction Works’ by James Wood

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

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How Fiction Works

James Wood

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To call James Wood the finest literary critic writing in English today, as is commonplace, is to treat him like some sort of fancy terrier at Westminster. It both exaggerates and diminishes his importance. It exaggerates in its specious assignment of rank, an insult to Frank Kermode, Daniel Mendelsohn, Helen Vendler, Louis Menand and other fine critics. It diminishes insofar as its trophy is a consolation prize for being not only a dog but an ornamental one.

It would be better to say simply that Wood is among the very few contemporary writers of great consequence. There is, nevertheless, something to the desire to claim Wood’s incomparability. Not many people I know, upon returning home to find a new issue of the New York Review of Books, speed it open to discover without delay how Kermode has taken to the new Ezra Pound biography. But there is vast anecdotal evidence of subscribers to the New Yorker and the London Review of Books reading Wood’s essays huddled in entryways, coats and keys and umbrellas still in their hands. He has earned a rare and awesome cultural authority.

The question of how authority is earned is not incidental to Wood's work: He is interested in how authors achieve the brief dominion that is suspension of disbelief. His first collection of essays, "The Broken Estate," took as its theme literature's ascendance as part of the shift from religious obedience to secular autonomy. His project broadly conceived, then and now, is to describe how the fictive impulse replaces superstition with "discretionary magic," how novels rig up provisional structures of belief in the absence of sure foundations. Novels are open falsehoods that invite our trust; in return, they promise to reveal something about life. According to Wood's favorite formulation, fiction "schools its own truants." In "The Irresponsible Self," he writes: "Every great novel is published in a vacuum; it teaches the empty space around it. 'Nausea' and 'The Stranger,' for instance, are not great novels which successfully engaged with an existential culture, but great novels which taught a culture existentialism."

Wood's new book, "How Fiction Works," is his most sustained attempt to describe, in 123 numbered sections, how this instruction proceeds. His initial focus is on "free indirect style," whereby the narrator moves the story along through a character's voice such that "we see things through the character's eyes and language but also through the author's eyes and language. We inhabit omniscience and partiality at once." This is the essence of fiction-making: We readers know that an author has invented this character, but we also feel as though the character exists somewhere outside and beyond the author's invention. We are divided between what we know to be fake and what we nevertheless momentarily postulate as real. Good characters promise us that their invented freedom has meaning, and we react to them accordingly. (Wood, in this way, pretends to write about books while writing about life.)

When we reach a word that "belongs" not to the character but to the narrator, "we are reminded that an *author* allowed us to merge with his character, that the author's magniloquent style is the envelope within which this generous contract is carried." This contract's chief clause is that a novel is something you can at any moment put down. It is thus obliged to offer generous terms. As the burden of the novelist is to give her readers reason to keep reading, the burden of the untethered critic (as opposed to the

academic one, whose authority is institutionally granted) is to offer enough gratuitous pleasure and intelligence that he is taken seriously. Reading Wood, no matter the book under review, provides enormous pleasure; his prose is at once buoyant and momentous, his judgment swift with imperial grace. His sentences are terrifically animated: things “plump” or “float” or “quicken” in an “aspic” or a “welter” or a “surplus.”

On Biblical polysyndeton (a series of conjunctions, making for torrential sentences), for example: “Each new ‘and’ or ‘then’ moves forward the action like those old station clocks, whose big hands suddenly slip forward once a minute.” (This metaphor comes from W.G. Sebald.) Or on the quality of prose: “We have to read musically, testing the precision and rhythm of a sentence, listening for the almost inaudible rustle of historical association clinging to the hems of modern words, attending to patterns, repetitions, echoes, deciding why one metaphor is successful and another is not, judging how the perfect placement of the right verb or adjective seals a sentence with mathematical finality.”

Wood knows that authority’s grasp is tenuous; he is always auditioning. Critics accuse him of abusing his authority in his defense of parochial tastes. He is said to prefer “old-fashioned,” 19th century-style novels. This is nonsense. He has written with great admiration of writers as strange and varied as Norman Rush, Geoff Dyer and, more recently, the debut novelist Rivka Galchen. But this misapprehension is partly Wood’s own fault insofar as he stubbornly insists on rehabilitating the term “realism.” The final sections of “How Fiction Works” respond to two claims about the putative bankruptcy of “realism,” one from an American novelist, the other from a gentleman of the Internet. Wood’s first point sensibly advises that complaints about “realism” are usually just complaints about realist cliché; his second is that “realism” is not a genre at all but a “truthfulness” that “makes other forms of fiction seem like genres.”

The word “realist,” distended to cover writers such as Svevo and Kafka, becomes the compliment Wood chooses to pay to any work that creates what John Gardner once

called fiction's "vivid and continuous dream." But as the peroration of a vivid treatise about the ways successful books assert their right to a reader's belief, this feels like a superfluous polemic in a minor quarrel. The definition of "realism" is a wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it. Besides, "How Fiction Works" has already addressed this issue, in a brilliant response to the French critic Roland Barthes on the subject of detail's role in fiction. Wood's conclusion is that a well-deployed detail causes a reader to react both specifically (the virtue of any given thing is that it is no other thing) and variously (any given thing calls a wealth of associations to mind).

If there's a real argument with Wood, it's not that he champions a cramped conception of realism. It's that he, like everyone, is limited by failures of the imagination. The conditions sufficient to create fiction's vivid and continuous dream are more numerous than Wood allows. He writes, of a David Foster Wallace short story, that Wallace too fully inhabits the debased jargon of his character, a hack journalist. Wallace's narration is "hideously ugly, and rather painful for more than a page or two." Wallace has show-offily abandoned the author/character balance necessary to good free indirect style; his is a mimetic exercise in boredom.

But many truants find the Wallace schoolhouse charming. His readers are ready to submit to a teacherly authority based on, in this case, sheer cerebral firepower rather than on an ability to sustain the paradox of belief in invented characters. Wood's overarching view of novelists as secular spiritual guides -- interesting and largely right as it seems -- restricts him to too narrow an idea of fiction's vocation. It is as if he were a sleight-of-hand artist writing off the prodigious illusionist David Blaine for his lack of subtlety. These criticisms, of writers whose authority Wood rejects, would accord better with his wider aims if they were voiced as predictions: Wallace, he could argue, will likely lose our attention over time.

But Wood's blind spots are small terrains and are further dwarfed by the illuminations provided by his generosity and good faith. He once addressed Jonathan Franzen's complaint that a book tour and a large advance were "the consolation of no longer

mattering to the culture." Wood's essay explained to Franzen exactly how and why Franzen's work did and did not "matter," and part of his advice was that writers only ever matter if their work demands it. James Wood demands and requites. Even if it is too much (and not enough) to say that he is our finest critic, he, uncommonly, matters. *

Gideon Lewis-Kraus is a writer and critic living in Berlin.

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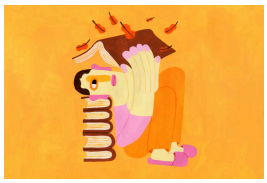
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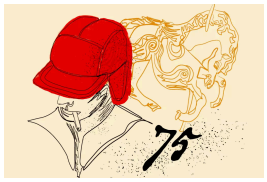
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