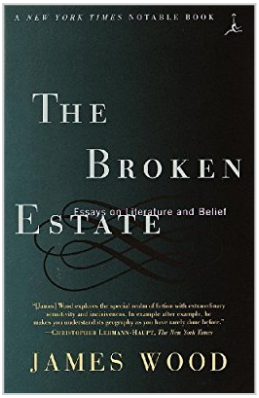

The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief (Modern Library Paperbacks)

By James Wood

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This book recalls an era when criticism could change the way we look at the world. In the tradition of Matthew Arnold and Edmund Wilson, James Wood reads literature expansively, always pursuing its role and destiny in our lives. In a series of essays about such figures as Melville, Flaubert, Chekhov, Virginia Woolf, and Don DeLillo, Wood relates their fiction to questions of religious and philosophical belief. He suggests that the steady ebb of the sea of faith has much to do with the revo-
lutionary power of the novel, as it has developed over the last two centuries. To read James Wood is to be shocked into both thinking and feeling how great our debt to the novel is.

In the grand tradition of criticism, Wood's work is both commentary and literature in its own right--fiercely written, polemical, and richly poetic in style. This book marks the debut of a masterly literary voice.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review
For James Wood, great fiction is always a venture into danger--a journey to the farthest shores. By extension, great criticism too should demand and risk all. And his first collection, *The Broken Estate*, does so again and again. Since Wood graduated from Cambridge in the 1980s and began reviewing for *The Guardian*, his name has been preceded by phrases such as *enfant terrible* and followed by adjectives such as *fierce*, *fearless*, and occasionally far worse. Few critics have such an urgent relation to their reading, and it is this, combined with his all-encompassing intellect and verbal velvet, that makes Wood so terrifying--and so tender.

In his introduction to *The Broken Estate* he writes, "The gentle *request* to believe is what makes fiction so moving" (*gentle*, as both adjective and verb, and its adverbial form, seem key terms), and this is what Wood is drawn to explore in the Russian greats and the English, European, and American moderns, among others. Many of these essays originally appeared in the *London Review of Books* and *The New Republic*, where he is a senior editor, but his book is far from a bundle of accident. Wood's contention is that in the mid-19th century, the "distinctions between literary belief and religious belief" began to blur (or, depending on the writer, shimmer), causing a crisis for the likes of Melville, Gogol, and Flaubert, and leading to "a skepticism toward the real as we encounter it in the narrative." I suspect, however, that some will head straight for the pieces on their literary loves and not be so concerned with Wood's overarching thesis, at least initially. No matter. Each essay also stands on its own, whether the author is positing Jane Austen as "a ferocious innovator" more radical than Flaubert, Melville as the ultimate linguistic spendthrift, or Gogol as "a defensive fantasist."

In a brilliant take on Virginia Woolf--Wood makes even the much-discussed new--he declares (admits?) that "the writer-critic, wanting to be both faithful critic and original writer," is caught "in a flurry of trapped loyalties." But he himself almost always works his way out of such snares, one of the many joys of this book. In his analysis of the several sides of Thomas More, for example, Wood first reads *Utopia* as a comedy but then suggests we read it "more tragically--not as a Lucianic satire but as a darkly ironic vision of the impossible." The aphorisms and aperçus come thick and strong. (Keepers of commonplace books should start a separate volume just for Wood.) For example, "Leslie Stephen acted like a genius but he thought like a merely gifted man." Or, "Hemingway has a reputation as a cold master of repetition, an icicle formed from the drip of style, while Lawrence is most often seen as a hothead who fell over himself, verbally." And he also has a gift for the telling domestic detail: Gogol "irritated others by playing card games he had invented and then changing the rules during play. He became rather selfishly involved with undercooked macaroni cheese, a dish he made again and again for guests." But Wood will dislike being complimented on his sentences as much as he claims Woolf did. His art, too, must be measured in chapters.

Wood is a great lover, and this makes him if not a great hater then one who gets hot under the critical collar, his ardor turning to irritation and intemperance in pieces on Morrison, Pynchon, and Murdoch. But in his finest discussions--among them one on Chekhov and another on late-20th-century treasure W.G. Sebald--he instantly quickens writers, books, and readers into being. *--Kerry Fried*

From Publishers Weekly
At a mere 33 years old, Wood has produced an unlikely and brilliant first book collecting his reviews (from the New Republic, where he is the full-time book critic, the London Review of Books and elsewhere). Neither a programmatic study nor a grab bag of occasional work, these 21 pieces give a compelling account

of modern fiction that is as conscientious as it is idiosyncratic, adducing a gallery of personal heroes (Herman Melville, Nikolay Gogol, Anton Chekhov, Virginia Woolf, W.G. Sebald), of more-or-less villains (Ernest Renan, George Steiner, Toni Morrison, John Updike, Julian Barnes) and of great in-betweeners (Thomas More, T.S. Eliot, Gustave Flaubert, Philip Roth). Like Woolf's reviews, which he praises eloquently, Wood's really are essays, the incisive, beautifully turned workings of a literary mind. Even before the final, title piece, which links Wood's childhood in an evangelical Anglican family to his religious preoccupations, the book reveals a reader whose prejudices are as interesting as his conclusions, and whose radical Protestant upbringing seems to have given him an acute outsider's feel for American fiction. (Wood's ornery critiques of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo do them more honor than most critics' praise.) Wood is least convincing when he codifies his tasteApretty much anything he likes he calls "realistic," whether it's Gogol's "Nose" or Woolf's interior monologuesAbut this is rare. One often wonders what Wood's take would be on writers absent from these pages, Anthony Trollope, say, or Leo Tolstoy, William Gaddis or David Foster Wallace, who seem temperamentally matched to his concerns. In other words, one wants Wood reading over one's shoulderAand for a reviewer, that may be the highest possible praise.

From Library Journal
In this collection of essays, Wood, formerly literary critic at The Guardian in London and now at The New Republic, probes the similarities and differences between literary belief and religious belief. Wood asserts that these distinctions became blurred around the middle of the 19th century, when the old estate (belief in the absolute divine truth of the Gospels) broke. At that point the Gospels began to be read "as a kind of a novel. Simultaneously, fiction became an almost religious activity." Looking at the work of a variety of writersAfrom Austen, Melville, and Woolf to Pynchon, Updike, and MorrisonAWood holds contemporary writers up to the history of the form. Wood provokes, entertains, and stimulates, whether you agree with all his conclusions or not. If cataloged with key-word-searchable contents, this collection would be very valuable to college students looking for paper topics. Recommended for academic and large public libraries.AMary Paumier Jones, Westminster P.L., CO

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Sybil Moore:

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