

## Critic explains 'How Fiction Works'

By **AMY HALLORAN**, Special to the Times Union  
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"I suppose I do want to change the way fiction is written," James Wood admitted during a recent phone interview. Although nursing a cold at his Boston home, his thoughts about writers and writing were typically sharp. Wood is known for having strong opinions about books, and is The New Yorker's literary critic and professor in the practice of literary criticism at Harvard.

He will speak Thursday at the New York State Writers Institute.

"I can try to get writers to pay greater attention to the things I think are important in literature: as much attention as possible to style and language, as much attention as possible to the creation of character, and commitment to seriousness," Wood said. "But then, of course, the critic isn't just communicating with the writer. That would be pretty boring if he were. You've got to face the reader, help the reader ideally to be a better reader."

Wood's writing about books is magnetic, and even, perhaps, charismatic. When he describes, in his critical work, how Tolstoy achieves characterization so successfully in "Anna Karenina," or the books Melville read and the letters he wrote as he was writing Moby-Dick, it is easy to get caught up in his feelings and logic. (Wood convinced me my reading time could be well spent with the canon -- or at least with his persuasive and educational criticism, which I found as engaging as great fiction.)

Wood's latest book "How Fiction Works" has just been released in England and will be released in America in June. This, his fourth book, differs from previous work, which includes two collections of critical writings, "The Broken Estate" and "The Irresponsible Self." He has also written one novel, "The Book Against God." Wood has taught a master class in fiction at Columbia's MFA program for three years, and the new book grew from these teaching experiences.

"Originally, I wrote it in chapters, each chapter about 5,000 words, sort of lecture-length chapters, one on narration and one on detail and so on," Wood said of the book, which his editor at Farrar Straus suggested was too lecture-like and might benefit from a more playful approach. "I was unsure at first, and I took his advice and started writing in numbered paragraphs and he was absolutely right. I suddenly felt much freer to move around and not always be logically correct in my arguments. I felt a bit more of a voice could come through. I think there's a bit more of me in the book than in my other critical books."

While the book has been dubbed a literary user's manual, Wood doesn't see the book as serving writers exclusively.

"I think it could be helpful to writers or aspirant writers," he noted, "but I should think also keen readers or students who are puzzled about some of the elements of fiction-making might go to it."

### Living by the pen

Wood considers Edmund Wilson, who also wrote for The New Yorker and The New Republic, V.S. Pritchett and Susan Sontag his mentors because, he said, "They lived by their pen, which for me was always a great romance, which is why I went into freelance literary journalism as soon as I left university and did not stay on to become an academic." Wood is fairly young, it seems, for his achievements. Born in England in 1965, his career began at The Guardian in London after he studied at Cambridge University. Wood began to write for The New Republic in 1996 and last year became The New Yorker's literary critic. As such, he jumped from a largely academic audience to a much broader reading public.

"'The New Republic' was more like writing for an academic journal," Wood said of the differences in writing for the magazines. "There was very little introductory, very little attempt at the preliminary or introductory, you just go straight on with it. Very occasionally (at The New Yorker) in making a reference to a writer you have to back up slightly and just explain who it is, even something as simple as adding a first name rather than just the last name of the writer. I think that's a modest adjustment to make for the price of getting the reader to come along with me."

### A third way

He will speak, partially, about this shift in audience on Thursday night; during the afternoon Wood will read from his fiction at a free afternoon seminar.

"I'm going to discuss the business of what it means to talk to a common reader and what a common reader is nowadays, in an America where fewer and fewer people read, and where there are enormous amounts of rival media," Wood said. "And what it means as a critic to negotiate a path between the academy on the one hand, and the most basic kind of reviewing on the other."

"Is there some third way which still has elements of instruction about it, but that is still aiming itself in the widest possible way at the widest possible audience? Let's talk about that a bit."

Amy Halloran is a freelance writer based in Troy.

Author talk

JAMES WOOD

What: The literary critic and author speaks about his work and contemporary literary criticism.

When: 8 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 28

Where: Assembly Hall, Campus Center, University at Albany uptown campus, 1400 Washington Ave., Albany

Also: Wood will read from his fiction at 4:15 p.m. Thursday in Science Library 340, UAlbany uptown campus.

Admission: Both events are free and open to the public

Info: New York State Writers' Institute, 442-5620; <http://www.albany.edu/writers-inst/>

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