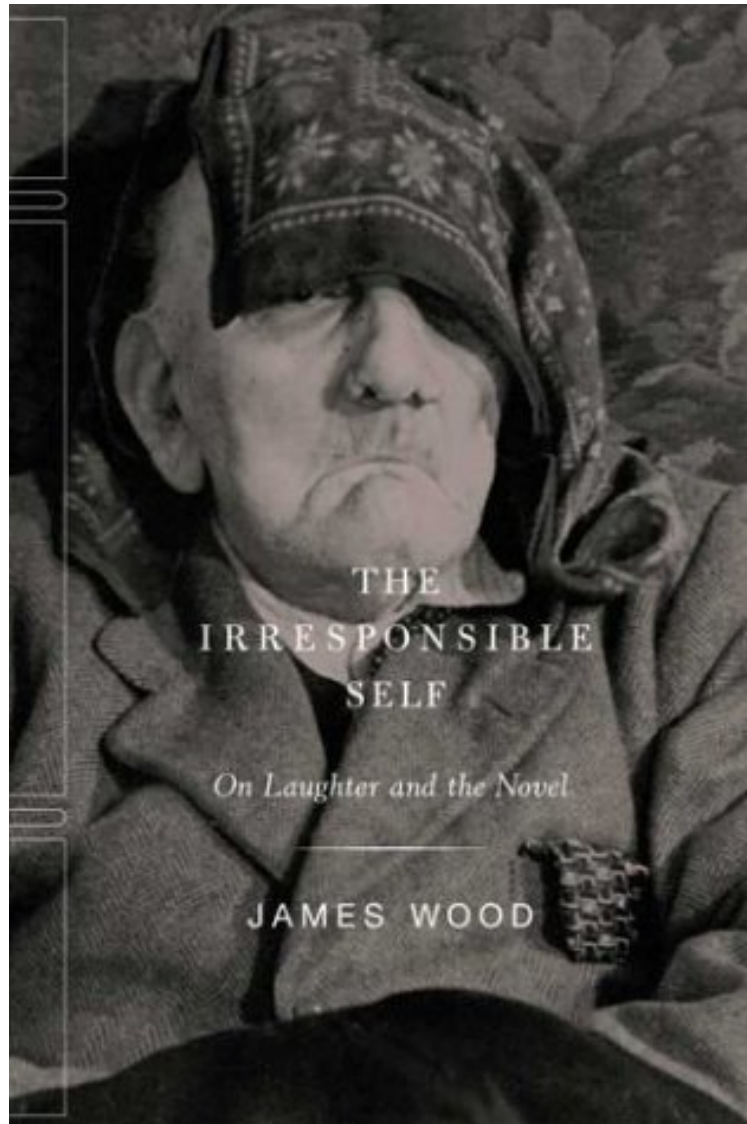


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The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel

James Wood

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James Wood : The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel:

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helpful. Five StarsBy KGExcellent service and book.

James Wood's first book of essays, *The Broken Estate*, established him as the leading critic of his generation, one whose judgments "are distinguished by their originality and precision, the depth of reading that informs them, and the metaphorical richness of their language" (Harper's). Its successor, *The Irresponsible Self*, confirms Wood's preeminence, not only as a discerning judge but also as an appreciator of novels, with a special interest in the ways they make us laugh. In twenty-three passionate, sparkling dispatches, he defends what he calls "secular comedy"- human, tragicomic, forgiving, bound up with the very origins of the novel -against the narrower "religious comedy" of satire and farce, which is corrective, punitive, and theatrical. Ranging over such crucial comic writers as Cervantes, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Waugh, Bellow, and Naipaul, Wood offers a broad history of comedy while examining each chosen writer with his customary care and intense focus. This collection (which includes Wood's much-discussed attack on "hysterical realism") is indispensable reading for anyone who cares about modern fiction or criticism today.

From Publishers Weekly Still writing with magisterial sweep and terrific intensity, Wood (*The Book Against God*) in this newest collection of review-essays celebrates the indeterminate voice of comic narrative, which "replaces the knowable with the unknowable, transparency with unreliability," enabling the reader's sympathies without directing them. This voice aids the development of secular modernity, part of a "comedy of forgiveness" in which morality, no longer the voice of divine law, itself partakes of the foibles and variances of human temperament. Starting inevitably with Shakespeare and Cervantes, Wood offers up assessments of individual (male) writers who in one way or another exemplify Wood's principle, including Dostoyevski, Tolstoy, Italo Svevo, Giovanni Verga, Joseph Roth, Henry Green, Bellow. Oddly juxtaposed with this late 19th- to mid-20th-century sequence is a group of rather bilious reviews of a more recent generation of fiction, which Wood never deigns to call postmodern. His tone ranging from respectful reservation (about J.M. Coetzee) to outright contempt (for Tom Wolfe), Wood hammers vigilantly at the failure of intellectual, cultural and political motives to make good fiction. Unlike American culture-warriors, Wood takes his sharp ear and deep convictions straight to the work itself, carefully explaining the structural, formal and tonal weaknesses of what he calls "hysterical realism," revealing his distaste for journalism and pop culture but never advancing it. Most compelling is the way his own style swells and contracts with his subject matter, blithely metaphorical in praising Bellow, earnest and lucid in sorting out Jonathan Franzen or Zadie Smith, sarcastic in attacking Rushdie. Still, meaner spirits will await Dale Peck's *Hatchet Jobs*, also due in June. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. From Booklist Literary critic Wood doesn't simply assemble collections of random writings but rather follows a line of inquiry in a series of essays that then forms an intellectually exhilarating whole. In *The Broken Estate* (1999), he wrote about how art came to be viewed as sacred. Here, Wood, a class act on the mastheads of both the *Guardian* and the *New Republic*, considers comedy in literature, particularly the emergence of a new form of humor engendered by the psychological depth of the modern novel, "a kind of tragicomic stoicism which might best be called a comedy of forgiveness." This coalesced along with the unreliably unreliable narrator, a key figure Wood traces back to Shakespeare, whose transformation of the soliloquy, Wood avers, made possible the first streams of consciousness. Wood then writes with exquisite sensitivity and stirring acuity about two dozen diverse writers, including Coleridge, Tolstoy, Italo Svevo, Joseph Roth, Bellow, Coetzee, Rushdie, Franzen, and Monica Ali, in sterling essays as voluptuous in style as they are clarion in thought. Donna Seaman Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved Praise for James Wood's essays: "Brilliant. . . famously rigorous. . . [Wood's criticism is] profound, searching and bogglingly learned." --Daniel Mendelsohn, *The New York Times Book* "[Wood's] literary criticism has been the most fruitfully polemical of recent years ... [Wood is] unforgiving of complacency, unsparing of triviality, and unrelenting in his assault on the half-formed or the overwrought." --Wyatt Mason, *Harpers's Magazine*