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Thomas Bunting while neglecting his philosophy Ph.D., still unfinished after seven years, is secretly writing what he hopes will be his masterwork--a vast atheistic project to be titled The Book Against God. In despair over his failed academic career and failing marriage, Bunting is also enraged to the point of near lunacy by his parents' religiousness. When his father, a beloved parish priest, suddenly falls ill, Bunting returns to the Northern village of his childhood. Bunting's hopes that this visit might enable him to finally talk honestly with his parents and sort out his wayward life, are soon destroyed.

Comic, edgy, lyrical, and indignant Bunting gives the term unreliable narrator a new twist with his irrepressible incapacity to tell the truth.

The Book Against God Details

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Author : James Wood

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From Reader Review The Book Against God for online ebook

Martin Spellman says

James Wood has had an enviable career learning how to appreciate books and then reading and writing about them for a living: Durham Cathedral School, Eton College, Cambridge Uni, Chief Literary Critic of the Guardian, Senior Editor at the New Republic in Washington DC, currently staff writer at the New Yorker and he is only 47. But he basically always writes about himself and the academic/journalistic world he lives in. If only I could take my experience banging and bending two-motion selectors for Post Office Telecommunications, where I spent the best years of my life, to the bank.

In this, his only novel so far, his protagonist is 'Thomas Bunting', unsuccessful academic and pathetic loser -- a reverse of Wood's own career. Bunting has wasted seven years trying to finish his unspecified, PhD dissertation and is now further time-wasting, putting together a so-called 'Book Against God (BAG)' a bit like Casaubon in Middlemarch. He has also managed to marry a concert pianist called Jane, who is providing their income. The problem with this book is that it is a load of middle class chitter-chatter, where what conflict there is exists as a clash arguments and ideals rather than action. Bunting would not survive long in the real world: putting bills behind the mantle clock does not stop creditors coming after you. Who would borrow £1000 from a loan shark to repay £5,424 over two years? Nothing comes of this as it might do: it is just left dangling at the end. He gets by on the 'dole' but there has been no dole for many years but 'Job Seekers Allowance'. You only get this for 6 months, you must have 12 months National Insurance contributions, and must have been made redundant. You get nothing if you leave a job voluntarily -- people like James Wood have never known this world. Bunting has left his packer/porter job at Harrods but can also fall back on his rich, art-dealer, Uncle Karl in Chelsea. One way or another his impossible lifestyle is maintained. Why a concert pianist would want to marry such a loser is one question and didn't he have some inkling that she would be practising in the flat? But he has qualms about having children which he avoids by non-ejaculating in unprotected sex (and he is supposed to be an educated man!) In reality Jane would get pregnant anyway and have to stop work for a while thus intensifying the need for work. This would put Bunting in a real fix and lead to some action but all we get are little snits and meaningful conversations all the time, flaunting his erudition. It is well-written, as you would expect, but unconvincing, although I don't think he intended it to be. Incidentally the poem he quotes 'My soul there is a country Far beyond the stars' is 'Peace' by Henry Vaughan (1621-1695)

Justin says

James Wood is probably as successful as a "literary critic" gets having become a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, and released a few well-received books of essays. *The Book Against God* is the Brit's only novel and it kind of reads like it's written by someone who has studied the craft of literature very, very hard. While not quite laborious, Wood's prose is certainly studious, and his story of an intellectual failure struggling to come out from his father's shadow hearkens back to the comedies of manners popular in the Victorian Age. (Admittedly, I'm talking out of my ass here a little bit with these references; in actuality, all I know is that Wood's book feels distinctly "British," and when I think of writings that feel British I think of either Jane Austen or Shakespeare, and since this certainly ain't Shakespeare I'll compare it to Austen and call it a Comedy of Manners. What did Austen write again?)

Wood positions his protagonist, Thomas Bunting, an overeducated slacker who can't seem to finish his PhD, against Bunting's father, an overeducated lovably pompous priest involved in what seems like a perfect

marriage. In doing so, he manages to communicate a lot of interesting ideas about faith and atheism without making his characters into talking heads. Thomas, a nonbeliever, simply has to show up at his father's house and argue with all of his friends and close family. Viola: interesting points emerge. Thomas is also a chronic liar, apparently (though Wood tells us this fact repeatedly he never really demonstrates it very clearly with actual action), and this flaw has cost him his beloved wife, Jane. The book doesn't reach for much, plot-wise, but simply depicts him struggling to recover from his separation with Jane, his failure as a true intellectual, and the death of his father. In it's own quiet way it's a very strong piece of writing, and yet also not all that memorable, I think because it's very, VERY quiet with almost zero explosions throughout. I'm getting bored right now as I write about it, and yet I liked it. Though I'm not sure I'd recommend it.

Jessie says

I am enjoying this so much! It's like reading my husband's mind, with the bonus of being able to put it down when I'm tired..

Nicole says

No one really likes this book except for my father and myself, but I'm quite fervent about it. It's a serious and funny book, and if you happen to find the perambulations of middle-aged British pseudo-Anglican religion-drowned atheists engaging, it's for you.

Melody says

I found the protagonist inaccessible and the prose too studious to be enjoyed. It simply didn't work for me on any level.

Marguerite says

Thomas Bunting, the main character of James Wood's novel, is a compulsive liar, self-absorbed sponge and the epitome of arrested development. His reason for being, apart from smoking, drinking and lying around idly, seems to be to build a case against God that also is a case against his father, a parish priest. Woods' book is entertaining and quite funny in places, but it's really a story about love and redemption/loss in the end. It's also a reflection about untruths:

"We can't schedule the consequences of our lies."

"There are liars who will tell you that they were pleased to be forced to confession, that as soon as they began to tell the truth it bubbled up wantonly from their mouths. I am not one of those liars. Caught, I tell another lie to hide the first. I surrender a lie with great unwillingness and feel instantly nostalgic, once it has gone, for the old comfort it offered me."

"That curious ecstasy I felt when I lied was the ecstasy of freedom. I became unknowable, unaccountable at

the moment I lied. The difficulty was that I was always tempted into further risk. For it's not truth that is bottomless, but untruth."

There also is wisdom about faith:

"Belief and unbelief are not absolutes, and not absolute opposites. What if they are rather close to each other."

"I'm probably moving towards the idea that since religion is a human creation, and its form is man's, then ... everything in it is at least as true as we are."

Robert Wechsler says

Better than I'd expected, and yet it was lacking something. The writing was good, and Wood's handling of ideas was excellent. What seemed to throw a blanket over it all was the protagonist. Why did he have to portray an atheist as so unappealing, so lacking in everything: personality, courage, energy, cleanliness? It was sort of like loading the dice.

Selena says

Alas, couldn't get past the first few chapters.

Gronk says

A strange book - beautifully written but futile. The main character is not only unlikable, he's completely uninteresting. Why did I continue? Wood's prose is genuinely interesting. He'd be a great story teller if he had a story worth telling.

Kathryn says

After slogging through this point, I still don't know what the point was.

BlackOxford says

An Educated Failure

I have no idea what to make of this book. It is apparently pointless, written in deadeningly tedious prose about marriage, religion, and the neuroses of the English middle class. Woolf's introspection without insight; and Murdoch's thought reduced to triviality. Yet James Wood is a brilliant literary critic whose nuanced understanding of texts matches anyone's. How can that person have written and published this book?

The protagonist, Tom, is a neurotic, hapless, puerile slob with poor personal hygiene. He also lies as impulsively as Donald Trump, particularly to his wife, until she gives him the boot. His response is to complain in the manner of Harry Enfield's petulant teenager, Kevin, about her unfairness.

Characters pop in and quickly out of the narrative with no apparent purpose. The dialogue is stifling in the extreme:

"Are you all right, Tommy? You know we all care about you." The words fell like instantly evaporating rain. 'Oh good, it's nice to know that you all care about me,' I said, with excessive bitterness. 'You're being unpleasant again.' 'And you are being less than sensitive.' 'This isn't the place for this.'" It goes on for pages like this.

The story is held together by an undisclosed horrid and life-changing event on Christmas Eve. Turns out the effort of getting to the reveal is entirely wasted. The big event is about as trivial as a weather report in the New Testament. Tom's spiritual journey, implied in the title, is equally trivial and the book leaves him exactly where he started.

There is much philosophical and theological name-dropping throughout, to no point whatsoever. Silly opinions flow constantly at pub meetings, dinner parties, and family get-togethers. *"'No,' replied Max. 'I'm not going to church. But I think as I get older that no one is really ever an atheist. Everyone believes.'" And "My intellectual hero is Martin Luther. I don't think that needs further justification. My spiritual hero –well there are so awfully many, but I will nominate Father Brown, in the marvellous old Chesterton stories. And my moral hero: Winston Churchill." Yes, and...?*

So, a mystery wrapped in an enigma. Clearly fiction is not Wood's metier. But this book is so bad I find it difficult to judge his other work with my former enthusiasm (See: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>)

Jessemy says

You know, it's rare to read a book that gets stronger toward the end. And it's rare to find a book with characters arguing earnestly about religion. I liked this book a lot. He writes about the same world as Barbara Pym, though decades later, the gentle death of the Anglican church. The main character, Tom, is not redeemable, which was frustrating for me, after all the plot difficulties he wades through.

Heather says

Lost interest in this book. Quit halfway through. Main character is unappealing (lazy, loser PhD candidate living off his girlfriend) pace too slow, plot without sufficient conflict.

The American Conservative says

"This novel is an unexpected delight. The Book Against God reads almost as if Evelyn Waugh were alive again, and had decided to write in his graceful, fluid prose about one of Walker Percy's heroes: the distracted, contemporary sons of comfort whose search for religious meaning is indirect, halting, and

thoroughly believable. Wood speaks in the voice of Thomas Bunting, a youngish, intellectual skeptic religiously obsessed with disproving the existence of God. Bunting is not a conventional unbeliever. As the son of a jovial, learned, and blissfully confident Anglican vicar, Bunting wrestles continually with God—leaving his dissertation to molder, ignoring his beautiful wife, forgetting to bathe, smoking incessantly, and spending his days ensconced with stacks of theological works, scribbling refutations in a notebook. The latter he calls his “Book Against God,” or “BAG,” which he intends to craft into a comprehensive critique of Christian faith—a counterpart to the grand apologetic Pascal once hoped to write.'

Read the full review, "Prodigal Son," on our website:

<http://www.theamericanconservative.co...>

Marvin says

A hard book to assess from the wise and articulate book critic for The New Republic. Preoccupied with religion & religious arguments (mostly against), with quite a bit about music as well (the main character's wife is a professional pianist), by one of my favorite critics, it's a book that ought to have been intensely interesting. Unfortunately, the main character is so incredibly (and I use this much overused--& misused--word advisedly) selfish & immature that it was hard to care much about what happened to him or what he thought or believed, a critical flaw for this book. And despite some very interesting passages, similar religious arguments were handled with much more depth--and, at the same time, better integrated into an engaging narrative--by Jill Paton Walsh, in *Knowledge of Angels*.
