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The Boston Globe

CRITICAL FACULTIES

The elegant assassin

How an Englishman in Somerville is becoming the most feared man in American letters



(Getty Images)

By Christopher Shea | August 26, 2007

THE BLOOD PRESSURE of some of America's leading novelists no doubt just shot up: James Wood, The New Republic's famously stringent book critic -- scourge of John Updike, Toni Morrison, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo -- has jumped to The New Yorker, giving him a much wider audience for his coolly incendiary literary sermons.

For a hiring that followed a familiar pattern -- small, good magazine to big, good magazine -- Wood's move caused an extraordinary stir in literary circles. At The New Republic, his immensely learned, barbed essays, utterly unbowed by conventional wisdom, earned him an ardent following and the ire of novelists who failed to meet his standards.

Wood is controversial partly for his unusually clear (his detractors say crabbed) ideas about what a great novel is -- or, rather, isn't. He is especially set against "hysterical realism," his

coinage for books that attempt to convey the raucousness of contemporary life through outlandish proliferating plots, allegory, bizarre coincidence, and high irony. In other words: Pynchon, Salman Rushdie, much of David Foster Wallace, the first two Zadie Smith books, and half of "The Corrections," by Jonathan Franzen.

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He is not indirect in his criticisms. The Nobel Laureate Morrison's novel "Paradise," Wood pronounced a few years back, "is a novel babyishly cradled in magic. It is sentimental, evasive, and cloudy." DeLillo's "Underworld," he has written, "proves, once and for all, or so I must hope, the incompatibility of the political paranoid vision with great fiction."

Even his detractors concede that such takedowns are the fruits of a love for the novel -- of a certain sort. But what does it mean that the most storied magazine in American history has aligned itself with a critic who essentially rejects the premises of a broad swath of contemporary American fiction?

"I think he just doesn't get America," says Lindsay Waters, executive editor for the humanities at Harvard University Press, invoking the argument that a messy, sprawling country demands comparable novels. With Englishmen now installed as prominent fiction critics at The New Yorker and The Atlantic (Christopher Hitchens), "It's like being in America in 1830, before Emerson arose. We still need to declare our independence."

John Leonard, a book critic at Harper's and television critic for New York magazine, said in an e-mail that while he's determined not to start an intramural sniping session among critics, given the market pressures hurting literary criticism as a whole, he is also "tempted to suggest that not appreciating either Don DeLillo or Toni Morrison suggests that maybe you are tone-deaf to the American language as she is written."

The hiring is a striking vote for intellectual rigor over magazine breeziness. Ben Schwarz, the literary and national editor of The Atlantic, says he approached Wood several years ago about moving to The Atlantic, although both parties decided the time (or fit) wasn't right. The decision by David Remnick, The New Yorker's editor, is a smart one, he thinks, but not without risks. "For every reader who is going to buy The New Yorker because Wood's essays appear in it," Schwarz says, "there will be some others who flip through it and alight on a paragraph of Wood's and think the magazine is too highbrow."

Wood says he wants to influence literary culture on a grander scale (The New Yorker's circulation is 1.1 million, compared with 62,000 for The New Republic), and also felt a creeping staleness. "I did have the sense I was reviewing the same authors again and again -- Rushdie, Roth, Updike," he said in a phone interview that interrupted a vacation on Martha's Vineyard last week. (Potential-awkwardness alert: Updike has had The New Yorker as his playground for half a century. Wood has been brutal toward his recent work, indicting him for intellectual slackness.)

At The New Yorker, Wood will now be writing shorter pieces, more often (though he will stretch out at times, too) -- a dozen a year. "That presumes a different kind of book," Wood says. "It presumes I will try to find a writer producing his or her second or third book, preferably someone unknown to New Yorker readers."

Wood grew up in an evangelical family in Durham, England -- worshipers quaked and spoke in tongues at his church -- but his faith migrated from God to the novel in his teenage years, at private school and then Cambridge. There, he met the aspiring novelist Claire Messud, the author most recently of "The Emperor's Children." Wood opted for the Guardian newspaper over a doctorate, rising to chief literary critic in his mid-20s, when he caught the eye of The New Republic. He lived in Washington for six years, and then followed Messud to Amherst in 2001, where she briefly taught. Harvard hired him in 2003.

Now married, the literary couple live in Somerville's Union Square with their two young children.

Wood, 41, has always hovered intriguingly between academia and journalism -- a space that can be lonely and vexing. Leslie Epstein, director of the creative writing program at Boston University, says he tried to interest the English department chairman in hiring Wood, before Harvard did, but that the chairman retorted that Wood was a mere journalist. (The then-

chairman, James Winn, denies that account of "what must have been informal and private conversations that allegedly took place eight or nine years ago" and says he has great respect for Wood's writing.)

Shortly after Harvard hired Wood, members of the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought -- Saul Bellow's onetime home -- approached him to apply for a position that could have led to lifetime tenure. After some preliminaries, Wood decided to keep his part-time Harvard and New Republic posts. These came with no guarantees.

"I was always impressed by that," says The Atlantic's Schwarz.

During his years at The New Republic, it was not just his ferocity in defense of his vision that stood out (he was also publishing in the London Review of Books and, sometimes, The New Yorker), but also the range of his thought, captured in his essay titles: "Half Against Flaubert," "Toni Morrison's False Magic," "Dostoevsky's God," "Salman Rushdie's Nobu Novel." (Nobu is a hip New York restaurant; Wood said the book "exhausts negative superlatives.")

His voice was compressed, knotty, hyper-erudite, sometimes hilarious. Wood called the British author Zadie Smith's second book, "The Autograph Man," "a flailing, noisy hash of jokes, cool cultural references, pull-quotes, lists and roaring italics. It is like reading a newspaper designed by a kindergarten."

Wood lauded Saul Bellow as an ideal, and championed the lesser-known writers W.G. Sebald, Norman Rush, and Alan Hollinghurst. He also managed to produce a novel, "The Book Against God" (2003), that received mixed-to-good reviews, despite all the knives awaiting it.

The job change will answer one criticism that has dogged him -- the suggestion that, however talented, he was a hatchet man for the editor Leon Wieseltier, whose literary pages at The New Republic manifest delight in popping reputations. "Somehow TNR got the best people," the literary magazine N + 1 wrote in its debut issue, in 2004, "and encouraged their worst instincts."

Wood rejects the idea that he did anyone else's bidding or that there is something wrong with being tough-minded. "I do think that a good part of being a critic is to press hard on texts, especially when the rest of the culture isn't doing so very often." But now we'll have a better sense of his true instincts, independent of one magazine.

And the idea that he doesn't "get" America, in all its weird glory? "Look, we all live in America. We are all aware of its weirdness. But how mimetic does fiction have to be about this weirdness -- how much does it have to reflect this weirdness? And how distinct is this weirdness from the weirdness of 20 years ago?" Amid postmodern tumult, "people are still dying around us, having children, making friends. Without wanting to make fiction domestic in a dreary, writing-workshop way, you do feel a lack of these experiences in fiction."

He does sound tired of at least the reputation of being a scold. "I do think the job of a critic is to try to find some kind of vital current in the literary culture," he says.

He did that at the New Republic, too, he insists, but now he's fishing more intensely in the flood of new work. "I've been trying to keep up, but I've been aware of things passing me by, so I want to rectify that."

Yet this will hardly be a rebirth: Wood has penciled in reviews of the new Roth novel, two new translations of "War and Peace," and a translation of the Psalms, by Robert Alter.

Wood's fans and detractors are now watching with excitement, curiosity, and consternation to see where things might go. Mark Greif, co-editor of N + 1, says, "My own fantasy is that The New Yorker will release him to write about all the other things his talent may allow him

to write about. You do wonder what would happen if they said, 'Go take a trip to Europe and tell us what you see.' What would happen if James Wood wrote about TV, or rock 'n' roll? I'm told he is a great fan of Keith Moon, the drummer for the Who."

It's true. "Remember, I grew up with Bellow," Wood says. "If you love Bellow, you love exuberance and stylistic showing off. That is exactly my complaint against someone like Rushdie. It's not style, it's all noise. He doesn't hit the drums like Moon hits them."

Christopher Shea's column appears regularly in Ideas. E-mail criticalfaculties@verizon.net. ■

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