

the nearest thing to
life



James Wood

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About the Book

In this remarkable blend of memoir and criticism, James Wood has written a master class on the connections between fiction and life. He argues that, of all the arts, fiction has a unique ability to describe the shape of our lives, and to rescue the texture of those lives from death and historical oblivion. The act of reading is understood here as the most sacred and personal of activities, and there are brilliant discussions of individual works – among others, Chekhov's story 'The Kiss', W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*, and Fitzgerald's *The Blue Flower*.

Wood reveals his own intimate relationship with the written word: we see the development of a provincial boy growing up in a charged Christian environment, the secret joy of his childhood reading, the links he makes between reading and blasphemy, or between literature and music. The final section discusses fiction in the context of exile and homelessness. *The Nearest Thing to Life* is not simply a brief, tightly argued book by a man commonly regarded as our finest living critic – it is also an exhilarating personal account that reflects on, and embodies, the fruitful conspiracy between reader and writer (and critic), and asks us to re-consider everything that is at stake when we read and write fiction.

About the Author

James Wood is a staff writer at the *New Yorker* and a visiting lecturer at Harvard University. He is the author of *How Fiction Works*, as well as three essay collections, *The Broken Estate*, *The Irresponsible Self* and *The Fun Stuff*, and a novel, *The Book Against God*.

Also by James Wood

NON-FICTION

The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief
The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel
How Fiction Works
The Fun Stuff and Other Essays

FICTION

The Book Against God

For C.D.M.

And in memory of Sheila
Graham Wood (1927-2014)

The Nearest Thing to Life

James Wood



JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

Art is the nearest thing to life;¹ it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot

George Eliot, 'The Natural History
of German Life'

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WHY?

I

RECENTLY, I WENT TO the memorial service of a man I had never met. He was the younger brother of a friend of mine, and had died suddenly, in the middle of things, leaving behind a wife and two young daughters. The programme bore a photograph, above his compressed dates (1968–2012). He looked ridiculously young, blazing with life – squinting a bit in bright sunlight, and smiling slightly as if he were just beginning to get the point of someone’s joke. In some terrible way, his death was the notable, the heroic fact of his short life; all the rest was the usual joyous ordinariness, given testament by various speakers. Here he was, jumping off a boat into the Maine waters; here he was, as a child, larkily peeing from a cabin window with two young cousins; here he was, living in Italy and learning Italian by flirting; here he was, telling a great joke; here he was, an ebullient friend, laughing and filling the room with his presence. As is generally the case at such final celebrations, speakers struggled to expand and hold the beautifully banal instances of a life, to fill the dates between 1968 and 2012, so that we might leave the church thinking not of the first and last dates but of the dateless minutes in between.

It is an unusual and in some ways unnatural advantage to be able to survey the span of someone else’s life, from start to finish. Such surveillance seems peremptory, high-handed, *forward*. Grief does not seem entitlement enough for the arrogation of the divine powers of beginning and ending. We are uneasy with such omniscience. We do not possess it

with regard to our own lives, and we do not usually seek it with regard to the lives of others.

But if this ability to see the whole of a life is godlike, it also contains within itself the beginning of a revolt against God: once a life is contained, finalised, as if flattened within the pages of a diary, it becomes a smaller, contracted thing. It is just a life, one of millions, as arbitrary as everyone else's, a named tenancy that will soon become a nameless one; a life that we know, with horror, will be thoroughly forgotten within a few generations, like our own. At the very moment we play at being God, we also work against God, hurl down the script, refuse the terms of the drama, appalled by the meaninglessness and ephemerality of existence. Death gives birth to the first question – *Why?* – and kills all the answers. And how remarkable, that this first question, the word we utter as small children when we realise that life will be taken away from us, does not change, really, in depth or tone or mode, throughout our lives. It is our first and last question, uttered with the same incomprehension, grief, rage and fear at sixty as at six. Why do people die? Since people die, why do they live? What is the point of a life? Why are we here? Blanchot puts it well in one of his essays; by exaggeration he conveys the stunned truancy of the apprehension: 'Each person dies,¹ but everyone is alive, and that really also means everyone is dead.'

The *Why?* question is a refusal to accept death, and is thus a theodicean question; it is the question that, in the long history of theology and metaphysics, has been answered – or shall we say, replied to – by theodicy, the formal term for the attempt to reconcile the suffering and the meaninglessness of life with the notion of a providential, benign and powerful deity. Theodicy is a project at times ingenious, bleak, necessary, magnificent and platitudinous. There are many ways to turn round and round the stripped screw of theological justification, from Augustine's free-will