



Reading Group Gold

The Book Against God

by James Wood

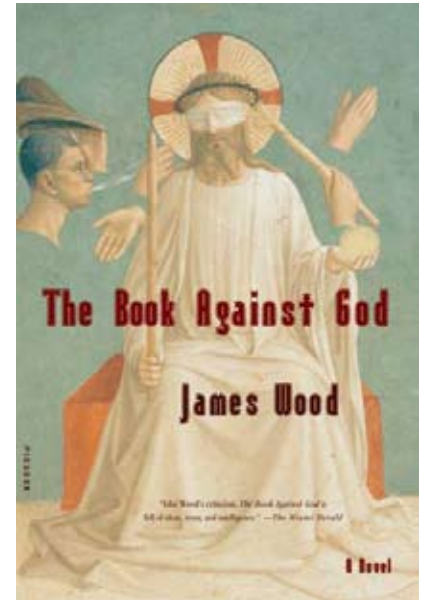
Reader's Guide Synopsis

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 hope 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.

Discussion Questions

1. The novel is narrated by Thomas Bunting, an admitted liar. Though he lies to those around him, exactly how unreliable a narrator is he? Do you trust his narration of his story?
2. Discuss how Tom's intellect gets in the way of his relationship to others? Could his father be considered an intellectual, and if so, how does he manage what his son is unable to do?
3. When referring to his father's death, Tom says that "we can't schedule the consequences of our lies." (p. 7) Do you think this implies that he feels responsible for his father's passing? Furthermore, how is Guilt a motivating force in the novel?
4. At one point, Tom seems to imply that if there is a god, he should feel guilt; at other points, he seems to imply that the pain and guilt of religious experience are somehow connected -- "Pain was not an argument against but for God." p. 55; "...the beautiful words from Revelation, my favourite in the Bible: 'And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be pain; for the former things are passed away.'" How much of Tom's own personal guilt and pain influences his beliefs about religion?



ISBN: 978-0-312-42251-6 | 2004



Reading Group Gold

5. What is “artificial” and what is “real” in *The Book Against God*? How is this connected to the way the novel connects atheism to Christianity?
6. If the novel describes a religious journey for Tom, where does this journey begin for him and where does it end? Where does his faith lie by the book’s close?
7. What similarities does Tom journey share with other literary religious quests, such as *Paradise Lost*, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, *Beowulf*, *The Odyssey*, or *St. Augustine’s Confessions*?
8. What does Tom believe in? See in particular Tom’s conversations with Timothy Biffen (p. 167) and Tom’s father (p. 220)
9. What is meant by “the ordinary celebrity of being alive,” mentioned on p. 238?

About the Author

JAMES WOOD was chief literary critic of The Guardian (London) and is senior editor at The New Republic. His first collection of essays, *The Broken Estate*, was published in 1999. He lives in Boston, Massachusetts.

Critical Acclaim for *The Book Against God*

“Wood writes like a dream...the novel is often wildly funny.”—*New York Times*

“Intellectually stimulating and amusing first novel [Wood] mixes serious questions of theology and family relationships so tactfully, cunningly even, that they go down as smoothly as the scotch Tom keeps hidden in the bottle under his bed.” —*Washington Post*

“Like Wood’s criticism, *The Book Against God* is full of ideas, irony and intelligence.” —*The Miami Herald*

“Wood, a distinguished British critic interested in the expansive 19th-century novel about big things like literature and faith, has written his own big-thing novel, his first, which has to do with literature and faith but is also, happily, laden with wit, forceful images and English eccentrics.” —*The New York Times Book Review*

“Intelligent, skeptical, occasionally tender in spite of itself, Wood’s novelistic persona reminds one of Nick Hornby or A.N. Wilson—fellow Brits who straddle easily the sorrow and hilarity of the human condition.” —*The Boston Globe*

“A small quiet novel, a piece of music for solo voice. That voice is often unpleasant, all too human, and rarely likable, and Wood’s success is in the degree to which he redeems those very qualities...a considerable artistic victory.” —*Harper’s Magazine*

“Wood proves himself to be a delectably witty writer...his dialogue is crisp and his characters irresistible



Reading Group Gold

while in his lush descriptions...every judiciously selected word carries emotional, moral, or spiritual weight.”
—*Booklist* (Starred Review)

“[Wood] has a genuine comic gift.” —*The New York Observer*

“Wood is the rare novelist able to dramatize the life of ideas and give it human dimension.” —*Publishers Weekly*

“[*The Book Against God*] seems designed to fascinate, irritate and disturb just about everyone from Karl Marx to Billy Graham. And whose beliefs couldn’t stand a little re-examining now and then?” —*The Times*

“The novel delight[s].” —*Philadelphia Inquirer*

“Wonderfully done...[Wood] is a tremendous talent.” —*The Buffalo News*

“*The Book Against God* isn’t stilted, safe or derivative; it’s real flesh and blood, rather old-fashioned, considering Wood’s tastes as a critic, with humor, passion and some serious flaws that strangely serve to make the novel more endearing.” —*The San Francisco Chronicle*

“*The Book Against God* impressed me enormously, with its intellectual liveliness, its metaphysical awareness and its subtle use of the unreliable narrator.” —Paul Binding, *Time Literary Supplement*

“[*The Book Against God*] had me smiling and sometimes made me laugh aloud...a book that I shall certainly re-read, for its comic realism, its warm intelligence, its lack of pretension.” —A.N Wilson, *The Daily Telegraph* (U.K.)