

James Wood, *How Fiction Works*, London, Jonathan Cape, 2008; pp. 194; RRP \$39.95 paperback; ISBN 978-0-224-07984-6.

To many, fiction writing seems to have an air of mystery about it, the result of divine inspiration impossible to unravel. Plenty want to read the genre, but far fewer want to study it, assuming that any kind of deconstruction of the settings, characters and events of their favourite stories and novels will 'ruin the magic'. This aura of inscrutability seems only ever to be attached to the arts, rather than other academic arenas such as law or biology. But good fiction writing, like the sciences, is the result of observation, experimentation, and a lot of hard work. It is largely conventional, it is quantifiable, and it can be lots of fun.

The ability to tease out exactly why one novel 'works' while another doesn't and the pleasures inherent in doing so are both illuminated wonderfully in the Harvard academic and literary critic James Wood's third non-fiction offering, *How Fiction Works*. Here Wood continues on from his two previous works, *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* and *The Irresponsible Self: on Laughter and the Novel* in his exploration of fiction and realism. Once again, Wood argues for fiction's ability to communicate 'the real [which] is at the bottom of my enquiries' (p.3), and all the following chapters interrogate how narrative voice, details, characters, consciousness, language and dialogue are made to seem 'real' in various works of fiction, most of them well known to the average reader of literature.

Wood balances two arguments throughout his study: firstly, that all works of fiction, even genres like fantasy or postmodernism, are anchored in 'the real'; and secondly, that a successful work teaches one how to read its *particular* reality. Obviously, 'the real' is a tricky concept, even if one believes a) that it exists objectively and b) that fiction has the capacity to represent it at all. Even for those who accept these two premises, what seems to one reader spot-on in the believability stakes may to another appear fake and tired. Wood is not prescriptive in his definition of what is realistic and what is not, but rather explains that realism is about 'liveness: life on the page, life brought to different life by the highest artistry' (p.186). This can be associated with a kind of dynamism, a continuous out-running of conventionality and boredom, of which he states that realism is always under threat. If something is alive on the page, even if it is impossible or improbable – in science fiction or magic realism, say – then it is realistic.

But what is 'alive on the page'? Wood prefers to provide examples as illustrations, pointing out a scene from *Madame Bovary* here or a line from *What Maisie Knew* there. The feature of free indirect style is returned to often, with success in uniting the character's idiom with the narrator's one of the hinges on which believability rests for Wood. This is consistent with his argument that fiction is based in the world and creates its own world: The reader must decide whether the narrator or character's use of language appears realistically balanced based on their knowledge of the world; once this is achieved, a new world is made out of the successful presentation of that character by that narrator.

Interestingly, Wood's writing itself has its own air of reality in the way in which his arguments are presented. The conventional style of academic writing is eschewed, with each chapter less a series of paragraphs building upon one another to a conclusion and more a kind of amble through a garden of thought, with ideas begetting other ideas like a plant dropping seeds. Some sections produce just one germ, others are like a dandelion in a gale. This will not appeal to all readers, as the conversational language ('Emily *would* think this', p.132) and form may at first glance not appear sufficiently academically rigorous. However, to me Wood's structure and style makes the text more accessible and enjoyable: it is less like one is reading a prescriptive interrogation of beloved literary works (as those who consider fiction writing to be 'magical' may fear) and more like listening to the ruminations and digressions of a particularly convivial and articulate lecturer (which, by all accounts, Wood actually is).

Of course, like the novels Wood examines in detail, *How Fiction Works* is not perfect. While each chapter is grounded in the exploration of reality Wood signals in his introduction, strong links are not really made between this preoccupation and fiction proper until the final chapter, and so to make each argument hang together in one's mind it is more fruitful to read it all in one sitting. Also, Wood's musings sometimes result in red herrings or

simply grind to a halt, which can be frustrating to readers. Finally, as stated, those who feel more comfortable in strict chapter structure and academic jargon would be advised to go elsewhere. But for those who love stories and who want a learned and passionate reader to muse for them upon 'how fiction works', you could not find a better text.

Brooke Dunnell
University of Western Australia