

## Nonfiction

## On moral grounds

Wayne Booth uncovers the good and evil in literature

**The Company We Keep:**

An Ethics of Fiction  
By Wayne C. Booth  
University of California Press,  
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When members of the Chicago City Council went over to the Art Institute last spring and seized a portrait of Mayor Washington in a garter belt, the alderman showed that they don't know much about art. But they know what they don't like; they don't like the dirty parts. Their experiment in criticism gave everyone a laugh, from Mike Royko on down.

Behind the laughter was a modern sentiment much beloved by professors: Don't get on your high horse about "Lady Chatterly's Lover" or the painting of Mayor Washington, you dope. Or, as Oscar Wilde first put it, "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all."

But wait a minute, says Wayne Booth, Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Chicago. Do we get off the moral hook so easily? Booth's long, sweetly written volume of literary and moral criticism says, No, we don't. Wilde is wrong, and the aldermen, in their way, are right. They may not know much about art or about anything else, but at least they know that if a book or painting is powerful, it has the power to do evil as well as good, and that good and evil are worth worrying about.

Booth's "evil" is not a matter of morality in the Watch-and-Ward sense, which usually turns out to have a lot to do with sex. In his thinking, morality is one's whole "ethos," to use the old Greek word—or, to use the old American word, one's character.

Books have their way with us. To read any story, from "The Goose Who Laid the Golden Egg" right up to Shakespeare, the reader must, at least for the moment, "embrace its patterns

of desire." When reading "Ulysses," say, we embrace for the moment "Joyce's implied notions of what women in general and Jews in general and Irish people in general are like; to say nothing of the insistent... elevation of artistic sensibility over all other human values."

Booth writes charmingly about hundreds of novels and stories and poems and advertising jingles from the ethical point of view. Understand, he doesn't slot them into categories of G, PG, R and X. Their effect on character is more complicated than that; it depends for one thing on who reads. A Disney movie can have a worse effect on the character of a 6-year-old than can free access to "The Story of O." Booth is trying to think seriously about the ethical effects, beyond the too-simple categories of the aldermen or the embarrassed silences of the professors. What makes his book a stunner is that no one else has thought of doing it.

Booth has noticed that books are try-outs of friends. After all, as you read this sentence you are magically thinking my thoughts. The writing says, Let's be friends. Booth's epigraph comes from Wallace Stevens' "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm"—in which "The reader became the book; and summer night/ Was like the conscious being of the book."

But does the book we read (and perhaps become) match Aristotle's definition of a good friend—a being who "has the same relations with me that he has with himself"? Answering that question is what Booth's ethical criticism is about and incidentally explains his title.

The company we keep, as our mothers told us, makes us who we are. If we keep company with rotten friends, we'll become rotten, too. Most people can't read the Marquis de Sade without damaging themselves, just as they would be damaged if they got together with him through the personals column for a little fun and games. Resisting such temptations is the "lifetime project of building the character of an ethical reader."

The professors have long admired a frivolous theory of morality: According to them and their sophomores, morality is a mere matter of taste, like the taste for chocolate ice cream. Hey, you're either for capital punishment or you're not; it's a matter of taste. What Booth is saying to his fellow professors, and anyone else who cares to listen, is: Get serious.

But Booth believes that being serious does not require being obscure, boring and somber. You have to pay attention, but the attention pays. For example, Chapter 13 is, as they say, worth the price of the book, a long conversation between the author and himself "that might get somewhere—not just a sharing of subjective opinions but a way of learning from one another about the ethical value of narratives."

Booth ran an experiment in ethical criticism on himself about writers he liked (Jane Austen and Mark Twain) and disliked (D. H. Lawrence, who he admits to calling once a "confused and pretentious little author"). Can their books be his good friends? He comes out with surprising results.

Maybe, he reckons, Austen can be faulted for presenting too persuasively a society in which all is well; maybe Mark Twain does deserve some harsh words for using Jim as a mere stage prop; maybe Lawrence is more than a sex-mad woman-hater. And the outcome matters for "real" life, "that part of life that we perhaps ought to call less real, since its friendships are often less concentrated, less intense, and less enduring than those offered by story-tellers." Nowadays, when Booth wants to remind himself "how it feels to grapple seriously with religious issues divorced from established answers," he rereads "pretentious little" Lawrence.

I don't want to fall into, as Booth puts it at one point, "a sentimental tone of over-praise for the works I like—as the weekly reviewers do at their worst." This book is a wonderful friend, but nobody's perfect. The explicitly political parts—such as the section of Chapter 11 about Norman Mailer's "The Armies of the Night" and Chapter 10, about an unfunny joke that a lawyer once told to a jury—are skippable.

Yet Booth's is a great book, profound, learned, the mature fruit of a lifetime spent thinking about why we tell stories. Give yourself a learning break, and keep the company for a while of Wayne C. Booth. You'll be better for it.

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