

two new books recalling the merry boom and dismal bust of “pre-Code Hollywood,” that all-but-unexamined period when American filmmakers operated free from official censorship.

The label “pre-Code” is something of a misnomer. The Production Code, setting rules for Hollywood’s purity, was adopted with lofty purpose in 1930—“correct entertainment raises the whole standard of a nation”—and widely flouted until 1934, when Joseph Breen became the enforcer of a new and more stringent Code.

Many films from the pre-Breen years no longer exist, at least in their original version. In order to secure reissue thereafter, films made before 1934 had to be submitted to the Code and—retroactively—to the Code’s splicer. This had irreversible results when the original negative was cut, as it often was. Among films that no longer exist in the form in which they were made, and in which they made film history, are *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *Mata Hari*, *Shanghai Express*, *King Kong*, *42nd Street*, *Frankenstein*, *Public Enemy*, *Tarzan and His Mate*, and *Animal Crackers*.

Making the pre-Code era doubly worth examining is that it coincides with the worst years of the Great Depression, a trauma that challenged the fundamental values and assumptions of American society. In his witty and weighty *Pre-Code Hollywood*, Doherty, who teaches at Brandeis University, traces Hollywood’s surprising and little-known response to the calamity. Such pictures as *Wild Boys of the Road* and *Heroes for Sale* told bitter, disillusioned stories in their titles alone, while others, such as *Gabriel over the White House*, flirted with what Doherty calls a “dictator craze.” Cinematic “insurrection”—a key word in the subtitle—would come to an end with the enforcement of the Code, as would Mae West’s suggestive sashays and any celluloid hints that the glamor of crime ended anywhere but the gutter or the hot seat.

Vieira’s *Sin in Soft Focus* details pre-Code history and its no-longer-available films in a clear and lively text that inevitably pales alongside the 275 photographs, many of them unfamiliar, all of them beautifully reproduced. They seductively evoke the period, shimmering with a black-and-white elegance so alluring, ironically, that it is easy to see what alarmed the bluestockings.

Vieira, a Los Angeles-based film historian

and photographer, writes with indignation of the mischief done by cardinals with scissors. The Code was almost entirely spearheaded by American Catholics, and the author quotes a Cleveland bishop exhorting parishioners, “Purify Hollywood or destroy Hollywood!” Vieira raises the question whether anti-Semitism underlay the Code, then lets Code czar Breen answer it. Describing Hollywood’s mogul class to a fellow Catholic, Breen said: “Ninety-five percent of the folks are Jews of an Eastern European lineage. They are, probably, the scum of the earth.”

Doherty, by contrast, defends Breen—who enforced the Code from 1934 until 1954 and wielded as much power over pictures as Louis B. Mayer or Jack Warner—as a virtuous aesthete who thought of himself as a “creative collaborator.” All he wanted for American cinema, writes Doherty, was “to imbue it with a transcendent sense of virtue and order,” and in doing so he came out “on the side of the angels.”

Really? They would strike Vieira as avenging angels, one suspects. And why do virtue and order, especially when “transcendent,” sound so like the professed goals of every reformer who ever sharpened the scissors, lit the bonfire, or—come to think of it—digitized the orgy?

—Steven Bach

### **THE BROKEN ESTATE: *Essays on Literature and Belief.***

By James Wood. Random House. 272 pp. \$24

Wood, a young, Cambridge-educated Englishman who is now a senior editor at the *New Republic*, belongs to a critical tradition that has largely expired in the thin air of current academic practice. Learned, passionate, and judgmental, he recalls Lionel Trilling and Edmund Wilson, critics who believed that literature matters to the way we live and that its quality can be established through exegesis and argument. Wood’s grave and rather pretentious title sets the tone for this collection of 21 essays on 19th- and 20th-century writers of fiction and poetry, a span stretching from Austen and Melville to Pynchon and Updike, with a swipe at Thomas More and a wicked reduction of the critic George Steiner thrown in for good measure.

Wood is especially attracted to such writers as Melville, Gogol, Arnold, and Flaubert, who

seem to him to struggle with the distinctions between literary belief—the assent fiction wins from us to credit its reality—and formal religious belief. Those distinctions became harder to maintain after the ascendancy of the novel in the mid-19th century, when, in Wood's view, the old estate—"the supposition that religion was a set of divine truth-claims, and that the Gospel narratives were supernatural reports"—no longer held. Novels caused the Gospels to be read as a collection of fictional narratives, even as fiction acquired the status of religion under the influence of writers (Flaubert pre-eminently) who made literary style an object of worship. "For it was not just science," writes Wood, "but perhaps the novel itself which helped to kill Jesus's divinity, when it gave us a new sense of the real, a new sense of how the real disposes itself in a narrative—and then in turn a new skepticism toward the real as we encounter it in narrative."

Novels have been credited with a lot in the past: they have ended innocence and toyed with readers' affections and shredded the social fabric. But did they really bring down God? (Yes, there is that escape-hatch "perhaps.") Wood was raised in an evangelical nook of the Church of England, he tells us, but has since become an atheist. Yet he cannot quite let go of the faith he has tried to replace with the lesser consolations of art; in this book, at least, the loss informs his vocation.

Wood is a fearless and astute critic, who has not only read everything but come to terms with it—come to *his* terms with it, that is. Fiction for him is about narrative and character, and the best fiction creates characters who get away from their authors and move in a reality beyond the confines of the page, so that we can imagine their spillover lives. Among the

writers he thinks great are Austen, Melville, Gogol, Flaubert, Proust, Lawrence, Woolf, Joyce, and Mann; no argument there (well, Lawrence perhaps). Wood's notions of what makes for great fiction—"fiction as it should be: a free scatter through time, unpressed, incontinent, unhostaged, surprised by the shock of its unhindered passage through frontiers it, and not history, has invented"—appear to champion a wild expansiveness. But they are actually rather stern criteria, disqualifying those who play by different rules (Updike, Pynchon, DeLillo); allegorists are at special risk of being sent early to the showers.

"The writer-critic," Wood says, "is always showing a little plumage to the writer under discussion." He shows a lot of plumage, and his attraction to simile and metaphor seems irresistible. He notices air conditioners "dripping their sap, their backsides thrust out of the window like Alisoun, who does the same in Chaucer" (though presumably without chilling the room). Then again, he can be graceful and apt: "Fiction should seem to offer itself to the reader's completion, not to the writer's. This whisper of conspiracy is one of fiction's necessary beauties."

The last of these essays originated in part as a sermon at an Oxford college, and that's appropriate, because Wood writes as if he would be right at home in a pulpit. He is immensely serious about locating the abiding achievement of literature and honoring its importance as an alternative to faith. But when the furrow in his brow threatens to suck in the rest of him, he can provoke even an admiring reader to blasphemy: "Lighten up: they're only books." As indeed they may be, to those whose estate is still whole.

—James Morris

## Science & Technology

**WHAT A BLESSING SHE  
HAD CHLOROFORM:**  
*The Medical and Social Response  
to the Pain of Childbirth from  
1800 to the Present.*

By Donald Caton. Yale Univ. Press.  
288 pp. \$30

I had my kids without anesthesia and treasure the memory, an attitude that a col-

league of mine likens to making a fetish out of having dental work without painkillers. Pain relief during childbirth raises a host of questions: What is best for the mother? What is best for the baby? What is "natural," and does that matter? The world is full of people who think they know the ideal birth experience, and, therefore, full of women who think they got it wrong.