

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.

Caton demonstrates that women, obstetricians, social theorists, and preachers (among others) have been reading significance into labor pains for at least two centuries. The author himself is an obstetrical anesthesiologist, trained to alleviate the pain of childbirth, and spurred to undertake this book by his surprise that “many women did not want my help.” His historical account is naturally shaded by his professional assumptions (as he freely acknowledges), but it is also informed and enlivened by his technical and scientific understanding of anesthesia.

Ether was first used in childbirth in 1847. In 1853, Dr. John Snow (of epidemiologic fame for tracing a London cholera epidemic to a contaminated well) administered it to Queen Victoria during labor. Later, her daughter was given chloroform during her labor, prompting the queen to utter the sentence that gives the book its title. Caton dis-



cusses the reception of ether and chloroform among physicians and patients, tracing the changing social interpretation of pain and the strands of medical doubt (in the mother, ether caused nausea, chloroform caused liver damage—and no one knew their effects on the infant). He moves on to scopolamine, the notorious “twilight sleep” of the early 20th century, and argues that educated, affluent American women demanded it as their due and their emancipation. In his account, the profession has responded to the wishes of pregnant women, adjusting medical practice as the patients’ attitudes shifted. Natural childbirth and Lamaze simply continue this trend.

The book’s foremost strength is its intelligent combination of the science of pain relief—which remains one of the great gifts of modern medicine—with a rich matrix of social history. Caton touches on the medical inter-

pretation of pain, the position of women in society, and the emergence of science as a driving force in medical change. If his perspective remains that of an anesthesiologist, convinced that most fully informed women will choose medication, his intriguing story nonetheless helps us understand childbirth, pain, and pain control.

—Perri Klass

***THE MEN THEY WILL BECOME:  
The Nature and Nurture of  
Male Character.***

By Eli Newberger

Perseus Books. 288 pp. \$25

Another book on the subject of boys being boys, this one from the pediatrician who testified against Louise Woodward, the British nanny found guilty by a Massachusetts jury of shaking her infant charge to death. The founder of the Child Protection and Family Violence Unit at Children’s Hospital in Boston, Newberger rejects the argument, advanced by Judith Rich Harris last year in her controversial *Nurture Assumption*, that peers play a defining role in development. We are born with traits but not character, he says. Character is learned, primarily from one’s parents, and as it develops it becomes “a resource for shaping the part of temperament that is malleable.” When character is badly shaped, Newberger looks to the parents first. Parents who, for instance, dislike having an innately shy, inhibited child may “drive him into being an aggressively disobedient child.” The author rejects genetic determinism except insofar as he believes males are hard-wired to pursue power and must learn self-control.

Newberger concludes his anecdotal analysis by championing the wisdom of “all the great moral philosophers from Aristotle to Bernard Shaw,” to wit: the “pathway to character” is “to renounce some of the satisfactions which men normally crave.” In place of caveman power plays, he recommends “reciprocity in marriage, parenthood, work or play.” And to those adages he appends the Socratic oath. With self-knowledge “comes the possibility of fulfillment, and of character that will continue to be strengthened by choosing to do right, and, after failure, to do better the next time.”

You knew this, of course, but there’s no harm in hearing it again.

—A. J. Hewat