

Doubting Tom

by [Gordon Houser](#) in the [August 23, 2003](#) issue

This first novel is getting a lot of attention because its author, *New Republic* book critic James Wood, is known for his merciless criticism of well-known novelists. But of greater interest to *Christian Century* readers is its handling of religious themes.

Thomas Bunting, the first-person narrator, is a philosophy student who puts off finishing his Ph.D. thesis in order to work on a personal project called the Book Against God (BAG), in which he develops arguments against belief in God.

While the novel moves in and out of various time frames, in the narrative present Tom's wife, Jane, has left him, and his father has died. The primary motivation for Tom's anti-God obsession lies in his relationship with his father, Peter, a respected country vicar in the north of England. Peter, like his son, was well read and "prided himself on his worldly sense of humour, aware that this was rare in priests."

Tom (the doubter) wants to break away from his father, but he can't bring himself to tell Peter (the rock) that he does not believe in God. This love-hate relationship with his father parallels Tom's relationship with God. While he declares that God does not exist, he rants at God for the suffering in the world.

About BAG, Tom's friend Max asks, "Isn't God your intended reader?" When Tom replies that he doesn't believe in God, Max says, "Yes you do." Another character, an agnostic theology professor named Timothy, tells Tom that God "does palpably exist for you . . . because you can't stop talking about 'God.'" Nevertheless, Tom maintains his belief (or nonbelief) to the end, though an element of doubt enters when he realizes that his father may indeed have loved him.

The Book Against God, like its narrator, is of two minds. A comic novel light in tone, it yet wants to deal with the big ideas about which Tom claims to care passionately. Regrettably, we rarely see the passion. Only in his relationship with Jane and her music (she is a concert pianist) does passion emerge.

Wood tries to temper his novel's overt didacticism by using an unlikable narrator, a chronic liar with whom it's difficult to sympathize. But Tom's shallowness makes his

virulent assault on God unconvincing. And the dramatic flow of the narrative suffers because the main character changes so little. Other characters are more engaging--particularly Peter, but we see too little of him.

Wood weaves some interesting arguments into the dialogue--no mean trick--but too many of them tilt against straw men. For example, he exposes shallow theology without dealing with more nuanced views. He rails against Kierkegaard by using selective quotes. And he refers to one character's "pseudo-Dostoevskian line of argument" as "unempirical." Yet Dostoevsky presents his own convincing and passionate case against God in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

To his credit, Wood's prose is outstanding, his narrative voice apt and rich with delightful phrasing. An example is his description of Durham's "loyal river, obeying the crowded banks, selflessly flowing." A leather coat has "white creases in it like the striations of fat in a piece of meat." One character's words "fell like instantly evaporating rain."

In the end, the novel implies that belief in God is less the result of intellectual argument than of relationships. That's a pretty Christian point of view, whether or not James Wood thinks so.