Wayne Booth uncovers the good and evil in literature

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 authors 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-enthusiasm for the works I like—as the weekly reviewers do at their worst." This book is a wonderful friend, but nobody's perfect. The explicit 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.