In this remarkable blend of memoir and criticism, James Wood, noted contributor to the New Yorker, has written a master class on the connections between fiction and life. He argues that, of all the arts, fiction has a unique ability to describe the shape of our lives and to rescue the texture of those lives from death and historical oblivion. The act of reading is understood here as the most sacred and personal of activities, and there are brilliant discussions of individual works—among others, Chekhov’s story “The Kiss,” W.G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants*, and Penelope Fitzgerald’s *The Blue Flower*.

The Nearest Thing to Life is not simply a brief, tightly argued book by a man commonly regarded as our finest living critic—it is also an exhilarating personal account that reflects on, and embodies, the fruitful conspiracy between reader and writer (and critic), and asks us to reconsider everything that is at stake when we read and write fiction.

**Aesthetic Theology and Its Enemies**

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David Nirenberg

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Throughout most of Western European history, Jews have been a numerically tiny or entirely absent minority, but across that history Europeans have nonetheless worried a great deal about Judaism. Why should that be so? This short but powerfully argued book suggests that Christian anxieties about their own transcendent ideals made Judaism an important tool for Christianity, as an apocalyptic religion—characterized by prizing soul over flesh, the spiritual over the literal, the heavenly over the physical world—came to terms with the inescapable importance of body, language, and material things in this world.

Nirenberg shows how turning the Jew into a personification of worldly over spiritual concerns, surface over inner meaning allowed cultures inclined toward transcendence to understand even their most materialistic practices as spiritual. He draws on an astonishingly diverse collection of poets, painters, preachers, philosophers, and politicians to reconstruct the roles played by representations of Jewish “enemies” in the creation of Western art, culture, and politics, from the ancient world to the present day.