



# Amis in Chicago '98

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1350 North Wells

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*Chicago was the only city that really frightened him.*

*It frightened him because it was there, in Chicago, that he would--or would not--be the subject of the Dub Traynor Interview. Radio: hour-long, one-on-one. This was now in doubt. But it frightened him for other reasons too. The severity of its naked steel frightened him. Chicago, he knew, was the cradle, or the ancient assembly point, of the American political machine. What goes around comes around. I'm okay you're okay. We don't take nobody nobody sent. Chicago, he knew, was the eighth biggest city on earth. Cities are machines. No other city he had ever been to said to you, as Chicago said to you, This is a machine. I am a machine. --Martin Amis, *The Information* (1995)*

Martin Amis entered Barbara's Bookstore accompanied by Isabel Fonseca, his publicist, and a member of the bookstore staff. The choice of venue was a significant one for a writer who insists he always votes Labour: Barbara's is one of the city's few remaining independent bookstores, struggling to compete or co-exist with the Border's Bookstore chain, whose massive Michigan-Avenue store location captures much of the central city's book-buying traffic. (Barbara's is also the probable birthplace of the name of the character "Dub Traynor" in *London Fields*<sup>1</sup>.)

Amis's opening remarks were politically significant as well. "It's an honor to be in your country during such an august and edifying phase in its history," he began, sardonic irony doing the work of moral indignation. Noting that he finds the media's frenzy over President Clinton's alleged affair with Monica Lewenski more appalling than Clinton's private conduct ("it's the collateral piety and sentimental Puritanism of the media that gets to me"), Amis observed that in Italy, the prime minister buys **his** mistress an entire television network and it doesn't merit a single headline. What gets lost in such furious fascination with sexual indiscretion, Amis said, is Clinton's failures of political leadership. Karla Faye Tucker was executed just hours before Amis spoke in Chicago.

"In England we don't have the death penalty," Amis noted. "It isn't on offer." Then he told his audience a "parallel story" about an earlier execution. Then-governor Clinton set out to establish his electability during the 1992 primaries by executing Rickey Ray Rector, a mentally

disabled black man convicted of murder in Arkansas. "Murder is man's work," Amis observed, noting that it offered Clinton a way of proving he was tough enough to become president. Amis's friend Christopher Hitchens (who was also Amis's colleague when both worked for *The New Statesman* in the 1970s) was covering the New Hampshire primaries in 1992, and attended a press conference where Clinton appeared and asked the assembled journalists if they wanted to discuss anything **other than** Gennifer Flowers (at that time the only alleged mistress on Clinton's sexual rap-sheet). Hitchens raised his hand, stood, and said yes, he would like to talk about Clinton's decision to execute Rickie Ray Rector-- which prompted Clinton to "speed back on his heels and leave the room" in Amis's words.

"Murder is man's work." This phrase, a close paraphrase of Mike Hoolihan's terse observation "murder is a man thing," occasioned Amis's segue into *Night Train*. "What does immersion in a male world of violence and murder do to a woman?" Amis asked. "It toughens her up . . . but in the end her female nature comes out." This is the story he set out to explore and tell in *Night Train*, he said, before reading several passages from the novel. The passages he read simultaneously show how Hoolihan's hard shell of stock responses have been conditioned by this male world of "diseased sarcasm" and how her actual experiences call this conditioning into question.

Like her investigation of the death of a fifteen-month-old baby boy, "found in a picnic cooler in a public recreation facility in the Ninety-Nine, over to Oxville." Hoolihan is called in to solve the case, "a politically urgent, headline-hogging dunker" because the murdered boy and his family are black, and a gang of white skinheads were seen in the area where the child's body was found. Hoolihan's investigation of the boy's family reveals another motive, rooted in dead-end lives lived in poverty and squalor:

*La Donna was not the mother of the murdered boy. She was his grandmother.*

*Sophie and Nancy were not LaDonna's kid sisters. They were her daughters.*

*Sophie was the mother of the waking baby in the bedroom. Nancy was the mother of the baby in the Igloo.*

*Sophie was the murderess.*

*It was down. We even got a motive: Earlier the same day, Nancy had taken Sophie's last diaper.*

*I was on the six o'clock news that night, nationwide.*

*"This murder was not about race," I reassured 150 million viewers. "This murder was not about drugs." Everyone can relax. "This murder was about a diaper."*

Amis also read several passages about Hoolihan's frustrated search for a motive that would explain Jennifer Rockwell's suicide. Amis has been haunted throughout his life by deaths that frustrate our "sense of an ending":

- The disappearance in 1973 of his cousin Lucy Partington (she fell victim to the mass murderer Fred West, and her body was not discovered until 1995).
- The suicide of Lamorna Heath, the mother of his daughter Delilah Seale.
- The 1996 death of Elias Fawcett, his first wife's son.

It was clear that this aspect of *Night Train* engaged him deeply. As it does Mike Hoolihan: "I am taking a good firm knot and reducing it to a mess of loose ends. And why would I see it like that if it wasn't so? It's the last thing I want. This way, I don't win. This way, I don't prevail." Amis read the following passage from the novel, noting that "it sums up a lot of what I feel about [suicide]":

*It used to be said, not so long ago, that every suicide gave Satan special pleasure. I don't think that's true--unless it isn't true either that the Devil is a gentleman. If the Devil has no class at all, then okay, I agree: He gets a bang out of suicide. Because suicide is a mess. As a subject for study, suicide is perhaps uniquely incoherent. And the act itself is without shape and without form. The human project implodes, contorts inward--shameful, infantile, writhing, gesturing. It's a mess in there.*

After his reading, Amis answered questions from some of the more than two hundred people who attended the reading, then spent over an hour talking with others and signing copies of his books. The questions produced some intriguing details for future biographers:

- Writing a long novel (like *The Information*) is "stupefying," Amis said; "what you need [afterward] "is the therapy of a shorter novel." Amis added that writing a long novel is hard on everyone who lives with or near the novelist. "As I'm finishing a novel, . . . I don't care about anything else."
- Repeating his earlier admissions that he doesn't do first-hand research for most of his books (David Simon's non-fiction book

*Homicide*, the basis of the television series, helped Amis educate himself in police procedure while working on *Night Train*), Amis noted an exception: "I did do some research for *Money* when I went to a hand-job parlor on third avenue (with my then-fiancée's permission). . . . and she really did talk about Princess Diana the whole time; a real snob of a whore . . . ."

- Amis was a script writer for the film *Mars Attacks!* "I rather liked it, though it contained not a word I wrote." He also noted that five of his novels are currently optioned for films, and that several years ago Gary Oldman was poised to make a film of *Money* in which he would play John Self. Amis told of visiting Oldman on a film set, where Oldman enthusiastically mimicked John Self's persona. "I have a great new cough," Oldman boasted.
- Asked about the relationship of his journalism to his fiction, Amis focused on book reviewing, which he described as "torture" but also a "noble form." "It has to be you at your most respectable . . . . You never enter your study with a spring in your step . . . when you're going to write a book review." His next book of journalism, Amis added, will be a collection of his book reviews.

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<sup>1</sup> James Diedrick's note: On December 2, 1997, Michael Hinko wrote the following entry in The Martin Amis Web Guestbook. As Amis writes in *Money*, "names are awfully important"): "*One of the stops on Martin Amis' London Fields publicity tour was Barbara's Bookstore in Chicago. My wife and I found ourselves fused into the tightly packed gathering and felt happy for the opportunity. The hushed crowd listened intently as Amis read aloud through curled lip. After the reading, we waited in line to have two copies of London Fields signed by the author: one for our bookshelf, one for my sister, Deb. As I stepped to the table, Amis asked to whom the book should be addressed. In a quiet voice I answered, "To Deb." Martin looked up quizzically asking, "Just Dub?" I answered affirmatively, thinking he had simply mispronounced my sister's name. He then said enthusiastically, "Dub! What a marvelous name," and proceeded to sign the book as such. Years later, while reading the newly released The Information, I came upon the chapter in which Richard Tull is the guest on a Chicago radio program hosted by "Dub" Traynor. Of course I'll probably never know whether my miscommunication in a crowded bookstore led to the naming of this character. But I always smile thinking of the possibility."*