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MY PROFILE

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Filming the unfilmable: Martin Amis's Money

The great satirical novel of the Eighties is coming to the BBC — despite the author's uncertainty about its adaptation

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There is a certain kind of bloke — and, let's face it, it's always a bloke — who cites Martin Amis as his favourite author. Now in his thirties or forties, this bloke read *The Rachel Papers* and/or *Money* as a teenager and enjoyed it/them so much that he revisited Amis when he studied English at university. He continues to rate the author, even though he is too distracted by boxed sets of 24, 2.4 children and the tedious administration of middle age to have read any of Amis's recent stuff.

I am this kind of bloke. I read *Money: A Suicide Note* as a teenager and found myself relating to the transatlantic travel, world-weariness and debauchery it described, even though I had been to the US only once, had only started living life and had not dabbled in anything stronger than dark rum. At university my dissertation explored "London in the modern novel", mainly as an excuse to read lots of Amis; *The Information* (1995) is the only novel for which I have queued on the morning of publication and though I haven't had time for *Yellow Dog* (2003), *House of Meetings* (2006) or *The Pregnant Widow* (2010), I cite Amis as one of my favourite authors.

This is why it feels so strange to reread *Money*, which was named by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 best English language novels since 1923, on the occasion of BBC Two's adaptation of the book as part of its Eighties season. It is why it is even more strange to find myself on the phone to Amis, who asks me, as a way of avoiding telling me what he thinks of his fifth novel, which was published in 1984 ("I don't reread myself much any more — I used to all the time, but, when I do, it's sort of uneasy for me because it strikes me as incredibly uneven"), what I thought of it. I repeat the original question, as a way of buying time.

"I haven't read *Money* since I handed it in, really," he proffers. "I remember once it was launched, once I'd written the first chapter, I didn't have many doubts, I didn't agonise and I laughed a lot, but when I came to read it through it took two and a half days to read, rather than the usual one day. And then what struck me far more horribly was that I had put all my eggs in the basket of voice. I mean, there's not much in the way of plot, there's a certain amount of character development, relationships and all that. But it isn't a plot novel, it's a voice novel. While I was reading it through I thought I'd gone insane. I thought it was ridiculous.

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"I thought, the voice isn't working at all. My ampts were on fire as I read it. But I handed it in and then, as often happens, you look at it at proof stage and suddenly it was much more convincing. I've never had that: three years of no anxiety and then three days of tense anxiety."

There is a pause on the line — or, rather, a pause slightly longer than the pauses that punctuate Amis's world-weary drawl — which indicates that it is my turn to deliver a verdict. His admission about plot gives me the courage to begin, because the first thing that hit me on rereading the novel was that I could not remember what happened in it. I could recall that the novel is narrated by John Self, a director of commercials who is invited to New York by Fielding Goodney, a film producer, to shoot his first film. I could remember that it was a satire of Thatcherite greed. And that Self spends most of the novel getting wrecked. But beyond that I could recall no detail.

There was another surprise: the metafictional tricks that had impressed me so much when I was an undergraduate — the reference to readers ("Reader, someone seemed to say"); novels ("but novels ... they're all long, aren't they"); and the unreliable narrator ("The truth is, I — I haven't been behaving as well as I've

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led you to believe”) — seemed a bit tedious. Indeed, I found myself sympathising with Kingsley Amis who, famously, stopped showing interest in his son’s work after discovering that Amis had inserted himself as a character in *Money*, complaining that Martin was “breaking the rules, bugging about with the reader, drawing attention to himself”.

There was compensation for this disappointment in the richness of the language. In my paperback copy, my teenage self had underlined lines that he had thought were particularly good: the description of John Self’s apartment as “the Sock”, for instance. The description of a haircut as “a rug-rethink”. On rereading the novel I found more than a hundred new things to highlight. “Her tooth-crammed smile went everywhere and nowhere”; “There’s only one rule in street and bar fights: maximum violence, instantly”; “This is why they’re called hard-ons ... They’re not easy. They’re very difficult.”

These instances served to remind me of Geoff Dyer’s remark that “as a stylist Amis’s influence has been so strong that he’s subtly infiltrated the language, animated it, so that anyone writing now is aware of a greater current or charge pulsing through it than there was in the heyday of Graham Greene, say”. It is astonishing to hear Amis say that one of his regrets about the book is that he resorted to cliché. “When John Self gets in a lift with his girlfriend and there’s this guy with a knife, he says, ‘You got a problem?’ And I think that must be the first example in English of the use of that phrase. That’s good if you can do that. But there are other phrases I used in the book that had already been used, and I don’t think you should do that.”

Yet the most notable and unnerving thing about *Money* is its prescience. It is peculiar that Amis wrote the book as a reaction to his having felt like a fish out of water in New York in the 1970s, when he was working as a screenwriter on a science fiction thriller, *Saturn 3* (the performers Kirk Douglas, Farrah Fawcett and Harvey Keitel inspired the characters Lorne Guyland, Butch Beausoleil and Spunk Davis in the book). *Money* is regarded as one of the great literary responses to the greed of the 1980s. Reading it in 2010, however, it struck me as a great novel about the Noughties.

After all, the novel’s central themes, from the extreme pornography that Self watches to social atomisation, fast food, drink, violence, television, obesity, alcohol, sex and, more than anything else, money — what Self describes as “the global joke which money keeps cracking” and the message that wealth can be a form of fiction — are 21st-century concerns. Indeed, even the stuff about Self’s bad teeth (“there’s a definite swelling in my jaw now, on my upper west side”); misogyny (“I thought to myself, here’s someone who’s really worth raping”); and racism (“there are few things better than the reluctant black smile: worth a hundred dollars”), seems to be conceived as satirical commentary on the kind of allegations that are hurled routinely at Martin Amis, literary celebrity.

Amis concedes that he has in part been blamed for John Self’s crimes. “With a character like John Self, what you do is take the most debauched 1 per cent of your character and pretend it’s 99 per cent of your character,” he says. But he dismisses any credit for prescience, saying that it was the last thing on his mind to write about Thatcherism and the capitalist bubble.

“I never thought I was doing that, but in retrospect it does seem to have summed up a decade to a certain extent.” And the Noughties too? “Yeah ... I can see that. But again it wasn’t my intention. All I wanted to do was create a sort of comic monster.”

Of course, it is possible that the book is not prescient at all and that the excesses of the Noughties simply echo those of the Eighties. Hence the current renewal of interest in all things Eighties, which includes Hollywood remakes of everything from *Wall Street* to *The A-Team*, *Footloose*, *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *The Karate Kid*. There is also a chance that I am reading too much into the novel. If so, I am certainly not the first to do so. Next year an entire issue of the literary journal *Textual Practice* will be dedicated to *Money*, based on a symposium that was held at Birkbeck College in May 2009, to mark 25 years of “Amis’s masterpiece”. (Amis is amused that a letter asking him to write an afterword or give a brief interview for *Textual Practice* referred to the book’s “canonicity”.) There is also, of course, the BBC adaptation to think about.

There is another awkward moment on the phone when Amis, who has not seen the BBC film, asks for my verdict. “What’s it like?” Again, he is polite enough to fill the subsequent silence. “I hope it’s good. It all depends on the actor, I suppose. One of the great disappointments of my life is that in the mid-Eighties we got quite far in making the film, with Gary Oldman as John Self. He’s a wonderful actor. He had that character absolutely down. The first thing he said to me was, ‘I got a great new cough’. And he did the cough, and it took so much out of him and it was so funny. That will go down in my mind as one of the great missed opportunities

because he's a sort of novelistic actor. For me it was a tragedy it was never made. But I haven't seen the TV version."

If Amis sounds apprehensive, he has good reason. Television adaptations of contemporary novels have an unfortunate tendency to be grating for those who like the book in question as well as those who have not read it. Television tends to be kindest to conventional books and *Money* is so complicated that it has often been called "unfilmable". Furthermore, much of what the BBC does nowadays seems to be affected by an inability to decide whether to go for ratings or quality.

Amis has had terrible luck with film. Though he has written a lot of film journalism and a number of film scripts (including screenplays for *Northanger Abbey* and *Mars Attacks!* that were never used), he says that he has never had a good experience with the medium, "except perhaps with a version of *The Rachel Papers*, which I had nothing to do with".

A further warning comes from the *Shaun of the Dead* actor Nick Frost, who plays John Self in the BBC film. I interview Frost in a hotel suite, as the final touches to the two-part adaptation are being made. He has a sophisticated understanding of the book — "It's about having everything you want and still not being happy" — and has thought a great deal about the character of John Self, which is his first serious dramatic role, saying: "He likes to think of himself as more intelligent than he actually is." However, Frost also says that "people are [probably] going to be fairly disappointed because everything they love about the book isn't in two hours of television" and reveals that the director is trying to "fix" the voiceover, which suggests that it is proving to be a problem. Frost also provides several caveats, perhaps designed to lower expectations — such as "I think [the director] Jeremy Lovering has done an amazing job given we shot a two-hour film in four weeks for no money at all" — concedes that the book is "fairly unfilmable" and says that Amis is "going to hate it ... just because he can".

In fact, while Amis turned down the opportunity to be an extra, saying that the idea couldn't have worked and that he would have "deserved ridicule" for it, he seems to want the adaptation to do well.

But the adaptation is poor. Vincent Kartheiser, who plays the über-slick Fielding Goodney, is impressive. The *Hotel Babylon* star Emma Pierson, who plays John Self's love interest, Selina Street, is suitably sexy. The set looks fantastic and the film has a great score, but the viewer never knows where the voiceover is coming from. The tone is all over the place, veering between real and hyper-real. And the script, written by Tom Butterworth and Chris Hurlford (*Ashes to Ashes*), is weak, lacking darkness and danger and reducing great passages of comic writing, in some instances, to a dildo joke. One is reminded of the verdict that John Self delivers on a film script in the novel. "We have a hero problem. We have a motivation problem. We have a fight problem. We have a realism problem."

Amis, who according to early reports began to read the script but stopped when he came across what he regarded as a particularly inappropriate cliché, at the start, does not sound surprised to hear this.

"Is he fat?" Amis asks about John Self.

He's fat.

"They've managed that." A laugh. "I do want it to be good, I don't want to be on a downer about it." Another very long pause. "I had a good talk with the producer and said, 'If you are adapting a book you've got to have a very good reason for not using the words of the book'. And what tends to happen is that it all gets homogenised to what the scriptwriter thinks is funny and they tend to update it always and you lose that language, and without the language and without the voice, it ain't much."

Of course, I say, authorial voice is always one of the things that goes when a book hits the small screen.

"Unless you want to do something original — use the language of the book and make it a voice thing and not a narrative thing."

It is inevitable, of course, that reviewers will pick up on the fact that a book about a movie going wrong, which was inspired by a movie going wrong — *Satum 3* was nominated at the inaugural Golden Raspberry Awards for Worst Picture, Worst Actor and Worst Actress — has produced yet another movie gone wrong. My only hope is that some viewers realise that somewhere within this self-reflecting sequence lies a great novel that is worth rereading.

***Money* is broadcast at the end of this month as part of the BBC Eighties season**

