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### THE SALON INTERVIEW

MARTIN AMIS TALKS ABOUT HIS PENCHANT FOR TORTURING HIS CHARACTERS, THE SEDUCTIVENESS OF SUICIDE, DISTURBING MEMORIES FROM HIS PAST AND LIFE IN THIS UNFASHIONABLE CORNER OF THE MILKY WAY.

By **Laura Miller**

Feb. 10, 1998 | -- **F**eelings tend to run high when it comes to the work -- and the career -- of Martin Amis. Son of the magnificently misanthropic British novelist Kingsley Amis, Martin enjoyed a celebrated debut at age 24 with "The Rachel Papers," the "memoir" of a clever but hopelessly --

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ruthlessly -- affected young fellow on the verge of his 20s. Grumblings about the undue advantage of an esteemed literary parent accompanied that success, and Amis has provoked plenty of outrage, and envy, since. In 1995, during the negotiation of the advance for his last novel, "The Information," Amis found himself in the midst of a bitter tempest that roiled the never especially placid teacup of England's literary scene. He fired his agent (in the process alienating her husband, his close friend, novelist Julian Barnes); hired the notorious New York agent Andrew Wylie to secure him a fat 500,000-pound advance; got lambasted by novelist A.S. Byatt for extorting unjustified sums from Britain's publishers in order to squander them on fancy dental work; and abandoned his wife of 11 years to take up with writer Isabel Fonseca.

Acrimony, jealousy, *Schadenfreude*, betrayal and feckless ambition have long been Amis' literary subjects as well. At 48, he is as well-known for his pitiless satires of human ugliness and folly as for the glittering brilliance of his prose. In such novels as "London Fields," "Money" and "Time's Arrow," he applies the height of literary ingenuity and invention to the depths of contemporary life, and the results, while impressive, have earned him a somewhat scary rep. In person, he's slight and soft-spoken, but also uncannily articulate. After a much-discussed (by him) midlife crisis during the writing and publication of "The Information," a savage tale of literary envy, classic Amis, he's touring to promote "[Night Train](#)," a somber, subdued detective novel whose narrator is Mike Hoolihan, a knocked-about 43-year-old female cop investigating the apparent suicide of Jennifer Rockwell, a girl with a seemingly perfect life.

**This book is a departure for you in several ways. First of all, it's very American.**

I've written in a more subdued American voice before. "Time's Arrow" is sort of an American voice. "London Fields" has an American narrator some of the time. This is the first time I've used an American narrator throughout, and "Night Train" is presented as an American document. Here you have double quotes with the full-stop and the commas inside, and a capital letter after a colon, and you say things like "to" at the beginning of a sentence -- all that looks very odd in the English edition, but looks completely normal in the American.

**And Mike is a woman ...**

I had written from the point of view of a woman before, but I hadn't used first person. I'll say that the whole thing felt very natural to me. The day I was starting it, I was going upstairs

to my study with a cup of coffee, thinking, "Jesus, in 10 minutes, I will have to be a woman. How am I going to make this transition?" But it was a breeze. That part didn't worry me at all. I have often said, and gotten into trouble for saying, that there are huge differences between men and women, a view that is not unpopular now, but was very unpopular about 10 years ago. It turns out that when your creative energies are in play, there doesn't seem to be any difference at all. I just made the switch. It didn't feel like I was doing anything unusual, just writing.

**Mike, a semi-burned-out recovering alcoholic, is the total opposite of the victim Jennifer ...**

I usually write about extremes of fortune and talent. There are usually two characters; one who has everything, one who has nothing. A sort of savage disparity between two people.

**I think the difference here is that you don't really handle her in a satiric way. She has dignity.**

She does. I respect her efforts to be good at her job and a straight person. I was frequently moved by her, and that is why the ending felt so terrible. It is an odd thing: Once a novel ends, you could ask me about any of my characters and I'd give you my guess about what they are up to now, but I can't say for sure. The same with Mike. I hope that she pulled herself out.

**Mike is so different from the narrator of your last novel, "The Information." He also has his problems, but he's just so horrid in his grappling with them, and his response to them. You really seem to respect Mike. Do you feel like that is a new direction for you?**

I do. I get the feeling that there is a new direction. I feel I'm at a kind of turning point. I've been playing devil's advocate for a long time. I sometimes think it's easy to be dark, easy to be nihilistic. What is difficult is to write well about happiness. Not many people have done that. Perhaps Tolstoy, perhaps early D.H. Lawrence. That is clearly a greater challenge than writing dark. Writing light is very difficult. It's been said that happiness writes white. It doesn't show up on the page. When you're on holiday and writing a letter home to a friend, no one wants a letter that says the food is good and the weather is charming and the accommodations comfortable. You want to hear about lost passports and rat-filled shacks. If you are a comic writer, which I mainly am, you want things going wrong. That is what comedy is about.

**You also have to have some kind of conflict to have a**

**story, to have drama. Otherwise nothing happens. That's not quite the same as being dark though.**

Right. And this book is as dark as I could make it. I said, OK, if this is noir, then let's really make it pitch black. But I do feel that I have always have been playing devil's advocate, I have always been exulting in people's discomfort. I feel there's a sort of sadistic element in me as a writer. I do torture my characters. Now I am just wondering whether it is going to go on like that. The novel that I'm shaping in my head is still pretty dark, with glimmers. It would be no good to just decide to write more positively, so to speak. You have got to evolve there. It has got to develop at its own speed. I suspect it is turning in that direction.

**"Positive" is not quite the word I would use. Your authorial perspective is less lofty in this work. In a certain way, you are on a level with Mike, not slightly above, looking down on her struggle.**

Yes, there's also no author-surrogate figure in this book. I'm writing a memoir next, about my father and about the last few years of my life. When I have done that, I feel I'll have cleared the path for something.

**Do you find these changes we've been talking about exciting or daunting?**

I will just follow my instincts, and just see what happens. Luckily that is all you ever have to do as a writer. You can't put yourself on a program to improve. You can't 12-step it. I am fascinated to see how it goes. You just follow your nose and see what happens. Your whole career is like a novel, in the sense that when I begin, I know where I am going to start. I have an idea about where I am going to end up. I know something crucial happens in the middle. But then it is a journey with a destination but without maps. Your whole writing life is like that. You have some sort of glimmer, but you don't know how you are going to get there.

**What was the germ that started "Night Train"?**

Originally it wasn't a police story. It was someone asking someone, who'd been perhaps an investigator or a private eye, a retired person, to look into a suicide. Then, when I started researching this sort of thing, I started reading a lot of true crime, and I got into the police side of it, the procedural side. It started as a short story, as did "Time's Arrow." I imagined it would be 30 or 40 pages, but then suddenly it took on weight, took on cargo.

You'd be surprised at how flimsy-sounding the original

thought is in any of my books. I have written 400-page novels that had just half a sentence as their germ. For "Money," I had nothing more in mind than there's this fat guy in New York trying to make a film, and that was it. Then it just gets going. For "Night Train" I had this idea that you'd look into a life and find it absolutely perfect, and you wouldn't be able to ... then of course, once I made Jennifer an astrophysicist, it even turned into a kind of existential novel. I thought once or twice about Camus and "The Outsider" and Genet's "gratuitous act." This nihilistic vein was opened up. *It is an odd mix of genres.*

**Did you always have the idea that the suicide that was going to be investigated was going to seem completely bewildering?**

Yes, that it would be almost comic to see what good shape this life was in. You look at the health, wonderful. You look at the boyfriend, he was adorable. Then of course, once it gets going, other elements come in and the investigator herself becomes at least as important -- they have a kind of dance together, these two characters.

**We have to be careful. It's important to not know, while you are reading it, exactly where it is going to go.**

True. There's more narrative drive than is usual for me, and more plot. As someone writing for a so-called literary audience, I always rather despised plot, up to a point. Then when you have to do some, you realize it is rather demanding, and it's *hard*. I am completely committed to entertaining the reader, but this is the first time I have done it more through narrative than through other things. I would wake up at 5 in the morning and think: Make sure there are no holes in this. I did feel quite stretched.

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