



Dickens with a snarl

Martin Amis's fizzingly intelligent Booker contender, *Yellow Dog*, should finally silence his detractors

Robert Douglas-Fairhurst
Sunday August 24, 2003

Observer

Yellow Dog

by Martin Amis

Jonathan Cape £16.99, pp288

Martin Amis's memoir, *Experience*, has a thoughtful description of the way that readers approach a good novel: 'frowning, nodding, withholding, qualifying, objecting, conceding - and smiling, smiling first with reluctant admiration, then smiling with unreluctant admiration'. Actually, your first reaction on reading a novel as mind-tinglingly good as *Yellow Dog* is not so much admiration as a kind of grateful despair. Mostly this is because, like all great writers, he seems to have guessed what you thought about the world, and then expressed it far better than you ever could.

It isn't even possible to feel envious towards him without realising, with a sigh, that he has managed to get there first, too. From *Success to The Information*, Amis has investigated the workings of envy - its thin-lipped rivalries, its serious games of talking up and doing down - with the sort of unruffled brilliance practically guaranteed to make a green mist settle on the page. Indeed, given the regularity and range of Amis's fictional excursions into envy, it is tempting to think that the recent flailing attacks on his work must be some sort of shared Nabokovian joke; if not, they merely provide further gloomy evidence that critics work in the same way George Santayana thought history worked: they are condemned to repeat what they fail to understand.

Amis deserves better. 'How does he do that?', you wonder, as he describes how, 'after a while, marriage is a sibling relationship - marked by occasional, and rather regrettable, episodes of incest'. And then he does it again: 'the contrails of the more distant aeroplanes were like incandescent spermatozoa, sent out to fertilise the universe'. And then again: 'Fame had so democratised itself that obscurity was felt as a deprivation or even a punishment.' And then you notice that all three sentences appear on the same page of *Yellow Dog*, and you are still only on page 8. Faced with writing of this quality, the temptation for the reviewer is simply to quote as much as possible without getting in the way: the 'neutral madness' of a sparrow's eye; the sound of 'unserious panic' coming from a playground; the 'motion jigsaw' of a swimming pool.

One common criticism of Amis's previous novels was that they too resembled 'motion jigsaws': spasms of style that never quite fitted together into a single design. The niggling doubt was that he worried too much that a flat phrase would sever his imaginative connection to the world, and not enough that all his carefully chosen words didn't necessarily add up to a novel.

There was some justification for this view in *The Rachel Papers*, which occasionally threatened to become little more than a series of pouts in search of a plot. There was far less justification for it in later novels, such as *Time's Arrow*, where it became clearer that Amis's lightness of touch was also his centre of gravity. There is absolutely no justification for it in *Yellow Dog*. Here is a novel to silence the doubters, because here, as he probes a human world increasingly disconnected from itself, Amis has found a subject to match the tessellated polish of his style. Here it all adds up.

In 65 fragments, three main stories emerge. There is the Royal Family, presided over by Henry IX and his reluctantly voluptuous daughter; there is an extended criminal family, which stretches from Big Mal, the cuboid

bouncer, to Joseph Andrews, the ancient but vicious East End villain currently enjoying a restless retirement in California; finally, there is the solitary anti-hero, Clint Smoker, who compensates for his tiny genitals by writing luridly overblown stories for a tabloid rag.

At the same time, hanging over these stories with its unpredictable weight of disaster, there is the shadow of 'Flight 101 Heavy' (not the novel's only nod to Orwell) as it is buffeted from the outside by turbulence, and from within by a coffined corpse that seems intent on having some company on its journey to the hereafter.

As these stories develop, connections emerge - so many connections, in fact, that *Yellow Dog* starts to look like a teasing, testing parody of a Victorian multi-plot novel - Dickens with a snarl. The King is suffering at the hands of a blackmailer, who in turn has personal and professional links with the writer Xan Meo, who in turn has ties to a gangland world which gradually spreads out through the novel like a stain. And so on.

What motivates all these stories is the itch of vengeance: the 'circular arguments' of reprisal, and 'the misery of recurrence' that threatens to reverse personal and cultural development. What knits them together is the way that vengeance emerges as a pathological version of the ordinary human need for reciprocity and exchange, even if this is only experienced as the linguistically shrunken flirtation of email chat, or the 'lonesome crowd' of speakers clamped to their mobile phones.

And yet, the world on which Amis etches his plot is one where people rarely enjoy a meeting of voices, let alone a meeting of minds. Instead, it is a world of tongue-tied embarrassments and speechless furies, where the punctuation '...' breaks off so many conversations that those jabbing dot-dot-dots start to look like a series of failed SOS messages; a world where radio waves and jet vapour-trails cross in the sickening sky like hands groping in the dark.

The plaintive returns of '...' in *Yellow Dog* testify to how much of a good novel can lurk in the interstices between its words and sentences: the holes in the net which the writer uses to snare the world. Amis's two previous novels were similarly peppered with moments of trailing off and cutting short, although here the plush trickery of their surroundings left many readers feeling that he simply hadn't worked hard enough to paper over the cracks of his thinking. But Amis's return to form in *Yellow Dog* may owe less to *London Fields* or *The Information* than it does to his short stories, the most recent collection of which, *Heavy Water*, contained a modern fable ('State of England') in which Big Mal made his first lumbering appearance, while Joseph Andrews lurked menacingly off-screen.

Short stories require reticence, a certain self-restraint, if they are not to grow into those longer stories we call novels, and *Yellow Dog* - weighing in at a lean 300-odd pages - shows that Amis, so often criticised for his excesses, is unexpectedly adept at scaling down his style. Puns flicker briefly and go out; the haunted fears of a world still coming to terms with the 'Horrorism' of 9/11 emerge obliquely through a footballer's hazy memories of goal celebrations in Wembley Stadium: 'The Twin Towers explode!'; even Big Mal is cut down to size, from being 'built like a brick khazi: five feet nine in all directions' ('State of England') to being a mere 'Five foot eight in all directions' (*Yellow Dog*). And throughout, thrumming away beneath the reader's radar, there are Amis's brooding verbal repetitions, as the logic of 'an eye for an eye' seeps into his prose like the sound of vengeance itself: 'For this, that. For that, this', 'his enemies' enemies', 'that's right, that's right', 'See how that goes down down the pub', 'enough's enough'.

Not that admirers of the earlier novels will be disappointed. All the familiar obsessions are here: the thick detail of London life; efficient but messy bursts of violence; a disgusted relish for the oozings and peelings of the human body; 'the obscenification of everyday life'. Stylistically, too, the old tics and tricks emerge: names (such as He, the King's Chinese mistress, or Love, his butler) that hover between the seriousness of allegory and an excuse for bad jokes ('He touched him and he touched He'; 'If you would, Love'); italics that are chiselled into his prose, urgently leaning forward as if anticipating an answer to questions like 'What used to be funny?... And is it still funny?'; even, for readers who miss the appearance of Amis as a character in his own fiction, a fleeting mention of the footballing wizard 'Martin Arris': Martin Amis as seen through a typographical squint.

Here, though, these elements seem to have an extra set of quotation marks around them, as if they formed part of a conversation between Amis and his younger self. Not that Amis has changed his mind about what he is up to as a novelist: the best writers rarely do; they simply get better at being themselves. But *Yellow Dog* does show a change of emphasis, as it circles mournfully around the idea that as we grow older we lose much more than our

teeth or our hair. We also lose our innocence.

It is an idea that ran throughout Amis's attempts in *Experience* to explain the dreadful temptation of adults - and not only paedophiles - to destroy in children the purity they have lost in themselves, as if the only way they would know how truly fragile something was would be to crush it. In *Yellow Dog*, too, 'innocence' is a word which tolls like a bell. What we need as we grow older, Amis seems to be arguing, with his usual fizzing intelligence, is not more experience. What we need is more innocence.

Guardian Unlimited © Guardian Newspapers Limited 2006