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## Heavy Water

Martin Amis  
Harmony  
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New York  
1999  
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## Heavy Water and Other Stories Martin Amis

As he has descended from the lofty perch of the satirist, Martin Amis's fiction has become--dare I say it?--more soulful. The best stories in his new collection Heavy Water and Other Stories--"The State of England," "The Coincidence of the Arts," "What Happened to Me on My Holiday"--attest to the increasing range and resonance of his fiction.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the final story in Heavy Water, "What Happened to Me on My Holiday." Ironically, the emotional resonance of this intensely autobiographical tale is deepened by means of a linguistic device that may initially alienate many readers. The story is narrated by an eleven-year old boy, a fictional version of Amis's son Louis, whose summer holiday on Cape Cod is shattered by the death of his step-brother (Elias Fawcett, the son of Amis's first wife Antonia Philips, who died at seventeen).

Amis represents Louis's response to this loss by means of a highly stylized phonetic speech (part American slang, part British phrasings) that is the verbal equivalent of the estrangement and stupefaction death leaves in its wake: "I dell id thiz way--in zargazdig Ameriganese--begaz I don'd wand id do be glear: do be all grizb and glear. There is thiz zdrange rezizdanze. There is thiz zdrange rezizdanze." Reading the story aloud, as I did to my 10 and 14-year old children, the reader feels Louis's grief as a physical presence--thick, hard, unyielding.

Wordsworth's "still, sad music of humanity" sounds throughout "What Happened to Me on My Holiday," preserved in a meticulously crafted fugue-like structure in which the voices of other characters and nature itself contribute to the theme of loss. Louis plays with his younger brother and his four-year-old cousin, catching crabs and minnows, understanding all too well (as his cousin does not) that a dead sprat will never

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return to life. He sees in the natural world intimations of the mortality he is now struggling to understand, observing the "gloud of grey" he sees rising from a pond on the day he hears that his stepbrother has died back in London: "nat mizd [mist], nat vag [fog], but the grey haze of ziddies and of zdreds [cities and streets] . . . and nothing was glear." Elias now inhabits the distant land of memory, where Louis imagines him hurrying about "with bags and bundles . . . jaggeds and hads [jackets and hats], gayadig, vestive [chaotic, festive]".

Meanwhile, another of Louis's cousins goes into the pool without his arm-floats and must be rescued. At the end of his holiday, in the car on the way to the airport, the word "grey" returns again, like a haunting melody--the melody of mortality: "Greynezz is zeebing ubwards vram the band. And nothing is glear. And then zuddenly the grey brighdens, giving you a deeb thrab in the middle of your zgull." Now all the notes of the story converge, all the deaths come together, and Louis thinks of his brother: "one vine day you gan loob ub vram your billow and zee no brother in the dwin bed. You go around the houze, bud your brother is nowhere do be vound."

For readers new to Martin Amis, *Heavy Water* will serve as a bracing introduction to his arresting vision and his remarkable artistry. It will assure the rest of us that his artistic quest is nowhere near its end.

Reviewed by James Diedrick

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