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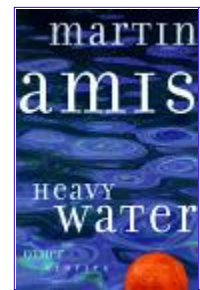
A Heavier Amis

Heavy Water and Other Stories reviewed by Nathaniel Rich

Martin Amis
Harmony Books, 208 pp., \$14.70

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Critics on both sides of the Atlantic delight in calling Martin Amis an "American Author." The British take a snide, condescending pleasure in this, having been spurned by one of their greatest authors for an American publisher, agent, and life-style. Americans accept him with a self-satisfied smirk. Yet if either side seriously considered Amis' own response to the clamor, *Heavy Water*, they might not gloat as much. Although he has left England in the dust of its antiquity, his destination is not America.



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Spanning his whole career from the mid-1970's to the present, Amis' first collection of short fiction is a microcosm of his career. While it does affirm his departure from a traditional English style, it more importantly captures his changing perspective. Amis' themes, like him, no longer resemble their former selves.

His early fiction focused narrowly on odd characters, as they evolved and reversed roles. In *Dead Babies* (1975), a bizarre group of decadent summer people find out that the most normal of them is a devious murderer. In *Success* (1978), two men, one wildly successful and the other a failure, gradually switch roles. Similarly, *Heavy Water's* "Let Me Count the Times" (1981) portrays a staid, mid-level businessman who obsesses over onanism and other quite un-businesslike sexual fantasies.

Less entertaining are the stories in *Heavy Water* which might initially appear to be American influenced (hip, post-modern, drubbingly cynical). Take "Career Move" (1992), where poets are Hollywood celebrities and struggling screenwriters sell their scripts to obscure low-circulation journals. Although the premise is promising, Amis continuously rehashes the same joke. In "Straight Fiction" (1995), heterosexuals (flight attendants, San Franciscans, and Christopher Street denizens) are discriminated against by the homosexual majority (square-mustached, Perrier-drinking, promiscuous). The tone ranges from clichéd and unfunny to offensive. Both are set in America, and both confirm Amis' status as visitor. He retains a British condescension-perhaps unintentionally-while lacking a mastery of the society's personality.

It is therefore an oversimplification to say that Amis has become American. True, he now wrestles themes of popular culture that are more endemic to America than to Britain. His locations and characters have become increasingly American as well. Yet this transformation is part of a larger movement, a widening of his whole scope. Amis has not only reached out to a new continent, but has moved from analyses of character to analyses of Western culture and thought. Gradually he has shifted

from micro to macro, from within to without.

The question posed by Amis is not "What now, after England?" but simply, "What now?" This is evident in "The State Of England" (1996), one of the collection's highlights. Ostensibly, it criticizes the decadence of contemporary Britain through Big Mal, a self-destructive, amoral father stuck in a spiraling mid-life crisis. In a moment of deliberate clarity, Amis writes that Big Mal "wanted a change, and England wasn't going to give him one."

Yet even this story is not about England as much as Western culture as a whole. Besides Big Mal (Amis' "modern man"), there are few other British characters. Indeed, Big Mal "felt wonderfully evolved, like a racial rainbow, ready to encompass a new world." This world is not American, but multinational, without boundaries; it is the much-heralded Global Village.

Within this larger perspective, Amis' writing is as contemplative as it is biting. Big Mal, his "modern man," invests all of life's anxieties and confused fears in meaningless competitions, such as his son's athletic prowess relative to the other children. When Jet loses a foot race, Big Mal falls into a depression, until he has a revelation: "Jet had looked completely exceptional. Not the tallest. Not the lithest. What, then? He was the whitest. He was just the whitest." Amis portrays a world in which nostalgia (no matter how misguided) and nihilism are coexistent and even codependent.

His most recent pieces echo the tone of his last novel, *Night Train* (1997), in which an apparent murder mystery becomes an inquiry into existentialist fear. In "Janitor on Mars" (1997), an earth fifty years from now reacts to the existence of alien life. What most startles this world is the discovery of its utter insignificance: as the alien says, "In the Ultraverse there are an infinite number of universes and an infinite number of planets, and in infinity everything recurs an infinite number of times." Although Amis overindulges in the alien's view of a dysfunctional earth, he poses a question consistent with "The State of England:" what will happen after nihilism and post-modernity destroy themselves?

Amis offers no answer, but accomplishes the difficult task of both satirizing and sympathizing with the disconnected culture that he portrays. This culture is not American, but global. Amis does, however, settle one debate-the critics'. Any American who assumes credit for his broadened vision is mistaken; in fact, Britain has the wider perspective engendered by old age. Amis has not only extended beyond England, but beyond America as well.

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