

Mr. Amis's Planet by Morten Høi Jensen

April 25th, 2012

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MARTIN AMIS HAS ALWAYS BEEN a casualty of his own biography. Every new book comes swathed in literary gossip or literary scandal to do with his father, his teeth, his divorce, his politics, his agent or his friends. The recent publication in England of *Martin Amis: The Biography* by Richard Bradford (a jangling heap of bad writing and factual inaccuracy) doesn't actually tell us anything new: we know it all already. Born in 1949, the son of novelist Kingsley Amis, handsome Martin with his furrowed brow and energized prose seized on the wheezing literary world of 1970s England and shocked it back to life. While writing some of the most entertaining literary criticism you'll ever come across for publications like the *Times Literary Supplement* and *The New Statesman*, young Amis penned in quick succession a handful of early novels that heralded the arrival of a bright, brash new voice in English letters — a voice perfectly suited to mingle with the yobs and snobs alike, scathing in its hyperbolic charge, addicted to the dregs of British society. In one of those early novels — *Success*, published in 1978 — one of the characters pleadingly tells the reader, "Take me to America," and that's exactly what Martin Amis did. His sprawling, early-to-mid-career comedies — *Money*, *London Fields*, *The Information* — all pitched their voices "somewhere in the mid-Atlantic," as another character has it, revivifying English prose with the freewheeling energies of its American cousin.

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T A G G E D A U T H O R

Martin Amis

T A G G E D B O O K S

Martin Amis, Lionel Asbo, Money

The ensuing four decades of novels, essays, stories and journalism make up one of the most electric and original bodies of work in modern literature. Whatever one says of Amis, however one feels about what Kingsley complained of as a "terrible compulsive vividness in his style," it takes serious effort to deny the overwhelming originality of Amis's voice, and seems to me quite a bit harder to resist the temptation to imitate it. Alas, Amis says somewhere that the great stylists are the ones you shouldn't be influenced by (easier said than done, mate); like Proust, he believes that style is a quality of vision, the revelation of an author's private universe. In his memoir *Experience* he claims that "style is mordidity: mordidity detailed, configured, intensified." Reading Amis, we learn to inhabit his voice, his vision, and the mordidity that is his private universe. We learn to see the world the way Amis sees it: the way, in the novel *Money*, an overheated tunnel's "throat swelled like emphysema with fags and fumes and foul mouths"; or the distant airplanes in *Yellow Dog* that "were like incandescent spermatozoa, sent out to fertilize the universe." We see, in *The Rachel Papers*, the narrator's mother's skin that "had shrunken over her skull, to accentuate her jaw and to provide commodious cellars for the gloomy pools that were her eyes; her breasts had long forsaken their native home and now flanked her navel; and her buttocks, when she wore stretch-slacks, would dance behind her knees like punch-balls."

What kind of private universe is this? Well, for starters it's a universe shaped by gusts and headwinds of comic hyperbole ("her buttocks...danced behind her knees like punch-balls") and an undercurrent of the literary high style ("the gloomy pools that were her eyes"). It's a universe both strange and strangely familiar; a universe racked with drink, drugs, and porno (*Money*); environmental disaster and nuclear weapons (*London Fields*, *Einstein's Monsters*); sexual revolution and male anxiety (*The Pregnant Widow*, *The Information*). It's a private universe shaped by a partly outraged and partly excited response to the late twentieth century. Much of the comedy in Amis comes from this strange ambivalence. It's what makes reading his essays on topics like Madonna, American presidential campaigns, and Hugh Hefner so engaging. Amis doesn't reject or cower from what he once called the "great convulsion of stupidity" of the modern world; however savage his critique, you can never really shake the feeling that part of Amis takes a perverse pleasure in the modern. He is the fiercely mordant litterateur who upholds the achievements of Joyce, Nabokov and Bellow. But he is also the laddish, snooker-playing, cigarette-smoking son of the twentieth century.

Irving Howe wrote of Saul Bellow's prose that it was sometimes "strongly anti-literary," that it tried to "break away from the stateliness of the literary sentence." Amis, in turn, credited Bellow (his literary mentor and surrogate father) with attempting to find a voice appropriate to the twentieth century, and his own fiction is an extension of this ambition. In *London Fields* the writer-narrator Samson Young muses that, "perhaps because of their addiction to form, writers always lag behind the contemporary

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formlessness. They write about an old reality, in a language that's even older." Contrary to this tendency, Amis risks form in the pursuit of a language that mirrors the contemporary formlessness. His best novels - Money, London Fields, The Information - are oddly shaped and (with the exception of the nearly-perfect Money) very uneven. But unlike your run-of-the-mill Booker contenders, routinely jettisoning their cargos of contemporary speech in order to stay afloat on a sea of polite style, Amis' novels go right into the currents and whirlpools of modernity, surging and hoarding without constraint.

Amis's novels have always dealt, on some level, with the struggle between the literary and the unliterary. This was certainly the moral force behind Money (1984), a boldly experimental novel written in the paradoxically literary voice of the fantastically unliterary John Self, a debauched commercial director pinballing between New York and London, working on his first feature film. By Self's own admission, he is addicted to the late twentieth century. He calls himself "a ticking grid of jet-lag, time-jump and hangover" and is frequently bogged down in combat with a debilitating excess of "fast food, sex shows, space games, slot machines, video nasties, nude mags, drink, pubs, fighting, television, handjobs."

Unleashed by the economic excess of Reaganism and Thatcherism, money flows through Self as though it has a mind of its own. "You should see how much money we pay each other," Self says of his commercial firm Carburton, Linex & Self, "how little work we do, and how thick and talentless many of us are... you can't legally treat money in such a way. But we do."

Financial, alcoholic, and gastronomical excess are mirrored by verbal excess. Amis rans riot with the English language, stretching and bending it to suit his purposes, usually with fantastically original results. He's called it a "voice novel." John Self is described as "a gurgling wizard of colorific excess"; a "crackling sorcerer of grub and booze, of philtres and sex-spells"; on his hotel bed, he lies "hugely, malely, in my winded Y-fronts." A famous passage draws an unforgettable portrait of early '80s Los Angeles:

You come out of the hotel, the Vraimont. Over boiling Watts the downtown skyline carries a smear of God's green snot. You walk left, you walk right, you are a bank rat on a busy river. This restaurant serves no drink, this one serves no meat, this one serves no heterosexuals. You can get your chimp shampooed, you can get your dick tattooed, twenty-four hour, but can you get lunch? And should you see a sign on the far side of the street flashing BEEF-BOOZE-NO STRINGS, then you can forget it. All the ped-xing signs say DONT WALK, all of them, all the time. That is the message, the content of Los Angeles: don't walk. Stay inside. Don't walk. Drive. Don't Walk. Run! I tried the cabs. No use. The cabbies are all Saturnians who aren't even sure whether this is a right planet or a left planet. The first thing you have to do, every trip, is teach them how to drive.

This comic passage betrays both an ebullient knack for slang (booze, cabbies) and high literariness ("a smear of God's green snot"; the rhyming couplets of "shampooed/tattooed"). The narrator's boozy fatigue and the novelist's Dickensian outrage are skillfully imbricated, producing that uniquely Amisian brand of metropolitan lowlife and literary brilliance.

Critics like to say of Amis that he is a mordant without a moral subject. This has always seemed to me a serious misunderstanding. "Geopolitics may not be my natural subject," Amis admitted in The Second Plane, "but masculinity is." More than that, masculinity is the Big Theme of all his work: violent, unfettered, full-throttle masculinity, whether in the field of pornography, street violence or nuclear weapons. There's a great clip on YouTube where a young Amis, appearing on a talk show after the publication of his first novel in 1973, overbearingly explains to a very alarmed Barbara Dickson that, no, he himself does not actually share the rather misogynistic views of his main character. "I'm much more gallantry than my hero," Amis draws. He is routinely dismissed as some species of sexist, but the truth is that no other male writer has skewered the delusions of male grandeur the way Amis has. The great male leads of his novels are always seen in moments of great male anxiety, or in galloping strides of great male affirmation. These have ranged from the deeply comic, as in Money -

...with a chick on the premises you just cannot live the old life. You just cannot live it. I know: I checked. The hungover handjob thwart the unmade bed-you can't do it. Blowing your nose into a coffee filter - there isn't the opportunity. Peeing in the basin - they just won't stand for it. No woman worth the name would let it happen. Women have pretty ways. Without women, life is a pub, a reptile bar at a quarter to three...

· to the frighteningly serious: the epidemic rape of women in East Germany by Russian troops during the Second World War, evoked by Amis in the affecting *House of Meetings* (2006).

Masculinity and the unliterary: in Amis, they're never far apart. In his universe, women are often seen as representatives of culture, or culture as being either feminine or maternal (Kingsley Amis's second wife, the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard, guided Martin's early literary education). In the 'Acknowledgements' section of *The Pregnant Widow*, Amis celebrates Jane Austen as "the mother...of 'the line of sanity' that so characterizes the English novel." You could of course object that this is merely a different kind of sexism, but then I think you'd be missing the point made about masculinity, which is its various degrees of destructiveness, its violence. In his early novels it was the violence that fascinated him, the violence men will do to their bodies and the violence they will do to women's. *The Rachel Papers*, *Success*, *Dead Babies*: these were grotesque comedies of the human body ("That morning," the narrator of *The Rachel Papers* writes of a zit, "man and spot had become one, indivisible. Now, it felt like a surgically implanted walnut"). In the mid-career work, like *The Information*, the middle-aged man is just "candidly and averagely semi-fucked up, along the usual male lines." Richard Tull, the novel's central character, is an impotent novelist as well as an impotent male. In one of the funniest passages in the novel, Amis lists the full range of excuses Richard comes up with in bed to his wife: "Best of all, unquestionably (no contest), was the death of the novel."

If Martin Amis hasn't exactly mellowed with age a certain degree of tenderness has nevertheless entered his more recent work. For all the horrors it chronicled, *The House of Meetings* was a work of daring human compassion, while *The Pregnant Widow* took a broad view not just of the sexual revolution and the English novel, but also of ageing ("it's the death of others that kill you in the end": hard not to think of Christopher Hitchens, Amis's dearest friend, when you read that now).

At first glance, Lionel Asbo: *The State of England*, Amis's forthcoming thirteenth novel, feels like an expansion of the trajectory Amis first embarked on with *Money*: the annals of grotesque wealth and inexplicable celebrity in the modern world. Lionel Asbo - a petty thug who wins £140 million in the lottery and becomes a mainstay in the British tabloids - is a comic creation on par with John Self, Keith Tulent and Steve "Scozzy" Cousins. There's an unforgettable scene in which Asbo hunkers down at a posh restaurant with his tabloid, *The Morning Lark* (Amis-devotees will recognize it from *Yellow Dog*), a couple of pints of champagne, and orders an impenetrable lobster he repeatedly fails to pry open. London, too, is evoked with Amis's familiar riffs on inner-city decay. *Diston Town* - a fictional area of London, though likely based on something like Canning Town - with "its burping, magmatic cand, its fizzy low-rise pylons, its buzzing waste. *Diston*-a world of italics and exclamation marks." *Diston* - where all the dogs "suffered from Canine Tourette's."

And yet, for all the similarities and references to earlier work, Lionel Asbo feels like something of a departure for Amis. For starters, his prose, like Bellow's, has crystallized with age. He is less interested, these days, in the great Augie Marchian gulps of London Fields and *Money*. His writing is sharper, leaner. But what's truly surprising about Lionel Asbo is the novel's other main character: Desmond Pepperdine, Lionel's young black nephew who struggles, first, to emerge unscathed from the constraints of his kippered childhood (absent father; mother dies an early death), and, second, to raise a family. In his portrayal of Desmond and his young wife, Dawn, Amis is unexpectedly moving and richly sensitive to the plight of young parents. *The House of Meetings*, *The Pregnant Widow*, *Lionel Asbo*: they don't make up a trilogy, not by any means, but in them there are tremors of tenderness, motions of maturity.

Bradford's biography and the forthcoming publication of *Lionel Asbo* are likely to rehash many of the routine Amis objections. (What will it be today? Lack of plot? Excess

of style? Too-attractive wife?) He continues to confound us as a novelist because he continues to thwart our expectations of what a novel ought to look like. The Information's Richard Tull "fancied that his fiction was looking for new rhythms," and so it proves with Amis. Whatever else you object to about his fiction, his essays, and his journalism (come on, let's hear it), they have found invigorating new rhythms. The outraged hilarity, the lurching energy of the prose, the contagious joy in its creation (how badly I want to sound like him!) - Amis patented the new rhythms. No one's prose has been better suited to write about the aimless decay of modern cities, the yelpings and flailings of male ego, the diminishing returns of literary careerism. Amis once wrote that great writers "heighten and transfigure the world you see, for ever." To give just a small example, try looking at a modern American metropolis again after reading this take on Houston, from an essay about the making of RoboCop II:

The main precincts are deserted after 6pm - for this is a modern city, and no one is seriously expected to live in it. You work in it. Elegantly alienated youths rollerskate through the empty malls. They aren't sullen or simmering or smashed; they are just not interested. Later, the night sky will contain the faint reports of gunfire: the crack wars of the crack gangs. Driving through the more depressed areas the next day, you will find the streets littered with beer cans, hookers ("Hey, white boy!"), undergarments, human wigs, and the nomadic poor, clustered in the steel and concrete crevices of the city; soon, the police will come and briskly pressure-hose them out of there, and they will be obliged to regroup somewhere else. But not downtown, where the future is contentedly going about its business. Look into the magenta glass of the looming skyscraper, and what do you see? The reflection of another skyscraper - and another, and then another.

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TonyMastragiarjo

Great essay! It will send me back to reread London Fields and The Moronic Inferno. But the quoted passage on LA from Money left out the great punch line: "The only way to get to the other side of the street is to be born on the other side of the street."

Just needed to rectify that.

4 months ago 9 Likes

Like Reply



LeeRonstad

I recently found a copy of Amis' 1986 "The Moronic Inferno". His short sketches of American literary celebrities at the time are still a fun read - gossipy, bitchy, trenchant - a wonderful collection of Amis's observations of American literary and cultural life from the early to mid 1980s.

4 months ago 2 Likes

Like Reply



Ted Fontend

Good essay. Kingsley's a better novelist and was a more interesting person, however.

4 months ago 2 Likes

Like Reply



DSarge001

this is an opinion

4 months ago in reply to Ted_Fontenot 1 Like

Like Reply



Professorskridlov

Good God, Kingsley Amis was a booze-soaked old bore. Interesting? In what sense interesting? With the exception of *The Information*, *Money* and *London Fields* I've abandoned, unfinished, everything else the younger Amis has written - but he's still a lot more interesting than his old man. His memoir *Experience* is made unreadable principally by the amount of time he spends waffling about this unpleasant one-hit-wonder. Who reads him any longer?

2 weeks ago in reply to Ted_Fontenot

Like Reply



TedFontenot

I disagree. Irrelevant and impertinent ad hominem aside, I don't know what you've read of Kingsley's. Probably *Lucky Jim*, I'm sure. He followed that up in his early years with some fine novels, that are both funny and felt. What else have you read?

Kingsley, besides being a good poet and a fine essayist (on high and low subjects), was an original even in late career. *Stanley and the Women* and *The Old Devils* are excellent. *SATW* has a original take on the relationship between the sexes (and contrary to what feminist ideology what have you think, it comes down as hard on men as women), and *TOD* adds to that in that it daringly treats old people as if they were not different than the young or middle-age. Indeed, part of what gives *TOD* its special appeal (or should) is that it doesn't engage in special pleading based on being old. Had it been by an American author, it could easily have been entitled *The Old Fxcks*.

2 weeks ago in reply to Professorskridlov

Like Reply



Mark John Ramsden

Most excellent Mr Jensen.

Too, jacks up the Lionel Asbo feeding frenzy. To the max. Blood's in the water. Reviving us weary old sharks.

4 months ago 2 Likes

Like Reply



Rgseaman

In some circles that's called having your cake and eating it too. A satirist who sucks up to his targets.

4 months ago 1 Like

Like Reply



redharmony

Money, by itself is so damn great that had he never written another word his reputation would have been secured. But even if nothing else he has written is quite as perfect it's all better than almost anybody else's work. The criticism here is personal, not literary, in that peculiar way that so much of the British reaction to him is. His father didn't teach him how to write, acquire him an agent, or in any way anoint him, and their writing styles have almost nothing in common. Give him the credit he deserves. He has created a body of work that nobody else could match, and he did it on his own.

4 months ago 1 Like

Like Reply



Ken

Nobody does anything on his/her own.

3 months ago in reply to redharmony

Like Reply



jblack

We live in a century in which writers have forgotten to write. They generate prose in long files and fabulous fonts, complain ceaselessly, chirp or glitter in flashes, drone in machined works without a scrap of humanity nor wit nor end in site [sic], and complain moe about being ____ or ____ or ____ and molested, raped, victimized. Amis is called lots of things (bitchy, gossipy, a prodigy, a prick, a polemicist, a misogynist, an apologist, an old boy wonder, a Nabokovian, an egotist). But he is simply a writer. Maybe a great writer. Certainly a lonely one. Hardly anyone else is bothering to do the godawful, daunting and daily hardwork of writing well and with human purpose.

3 months ago

Like Reply



Marcus Spah, German writer and professor.

Great essay, enjoyed.

3 months ago

Like Reply



Guest

Amis needed

3 months ago

Like Reply



chrishavens

My favorite novelist. Reading House of Meetings now.... re-read more than one novel..... Read all of Kingsley, but one, saving it... Guy lives eight blocks from me know, bless him.

3 months ago

Like Reply



Charles Frith, <http://charlesfrith.blogspot.com/> +66 47 33 47 69

Amis?

Had it. Lost it.

Was never a man's man. Particularly after getting his teeth fixed.

4 months ago

Like Reply



Bernecky

Fawning. Sybaritic. An acolyte. Morten Hoi Jensen: "Amis's novels have always dealt, on some level, with the struggle between the literary and the unliterary."

There is no such struggle; or, rather, there was none, for the young prince. All that he ever needed to do was to abdicate, give up his right to the Amis throne, go to work in the sewers.

Martin Amis would have you believe that he is queer the way Corporal Maxwell Klinger was, and a transvestite in name only. Garbing himself differently from the way Kingsley Amis garbed himself when *he* was of military-age, Martin Amis cajoled, seduced, the reader into desiring, militantly, to recruit him.

Now he's old and he lacks the moral authority to send even one young man to serve in a way that he himself refused to serve. All of his anti-Islamist screeds have been for naught, if they haven't been in service to the Islamists.

4 months ago

Like Reply



BrotherJohn

This isn't a constructive critique of Martin Amis, nor of Morten Hoi Jensen's article. If think that if one has nothing to say then one should remain silent. Rather than sharing the rage and anger that you seem to have inside yourself, wouldn't it be better to keep it to yourself?

Martin Amis is a writer, not a catalyst for hate. If you have something to say about his work which will illuminate it for other readers then please share, but we don't need to know that, for whatever reasons, you hate this man that you do not know and have never met.

It is unlikely that Martin Amis will better Money, London Fields and The Information, but does that make him a bad person? What you have written is not satire. If you don't like his books then don't read them, and please, for everyone's sake, keep whatever bitterness you feel towards the world to yourself.

4 months ago in reply to Bernecky 1 Like

Like Reply



Bernecky

If he's satirizing anything, it's you. Your gullibility.

Amis's bosom buddy, a hanger-on of princes, Christopher Hitchens, took his own son to Iraq to view the war: the deaths of Hitchens's fellow citizens, up close and personal, from a safe place. How would Hitchens's best friend/defender, Martin Amis, justify what looks to be a case of Dad taking Junior to see a snuff film being made, or a portrait of the writer as a war profiteer. Maybe both.

But, of course, as long as there exist enough people who are less desirous of justice and more desirous of being pleased, chances are good that the question won't arise.

If it should arise, Martin Amis, expert on "the modern American metropolis," can be trusted, like Jane Jacobs, another high priest of the city, to move to Canada.

4 months ago in reply to BrotherJohn 2 Likes

Like Reply



BrotherJohn

I am not gullible, I just enjoy good writing. Unlike some people I am able to separate the man from his work. Of all the evil, destructive people in the world it hardly seems 'just' to be picking on a novelist. He's too easy. If you really care about the world pick on a real villain. Attacking martin Amis is a cliché. Go and find a corrupt statesman or a murderer.

3 months ago in reply to Bernecky 1 Like

Like Reply



Bernecky

Brother John: "Unlike some people I am able to separate the man from his work."

Well, then. Able to separate a man from his deeds, you can do something that most men can't do.

What if Amis's whole way of being reflects a desire on his part to escape exactly the blind loyalty that you demonstrate toward him?

3 months ago in reply to BrotherJohn

Like Reply



Carlos Decourcy Lescoutx

...quite true, there's so much dying going on it feels like snow in May. i guess those rambles through cemeterys when young were a premonition. but why should i worry, i'll live forever, and on that day i don't, i won't be thinking about sod.

4 months ago

Like Reply



Genrod

According to "times arrow" I'm younger today and enjoy him that much more.

4 months ago

Like Reply

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