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Lust Among the Ruins

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Is the world in for a rosier future, or are we just kidding ourselves? Martin Amis, unregenerate, is determined to send us plummeting into darkness. With evangelical ardor, he sets his sixth novel, "London **Fields**," in the grimmest of times. The approach of a global catastrophe he simply calls "the Crisis" provides the background for a bitter tragicomedy of life in a world going noisily to hell.

In Mr. Amis's last novel, "Money: A Suicide Note," society was on its way to total corruption, a condition embodied in the greed of the character John Self, a truly horrific antihero. And "Einstein's Monsters," a recent collection of short stories, brought forth exactly what its title predicted.

By insisting on such a relentlessly dark vision of life, Mr. Amis has certainly prepared us for what we are to encounter in "London **Fields**." The title itself has a sinister twist, suggestive as it is of some rural paradise rather than the malignity of Mr. Amis's setting, the futuristic but all-too-familiar city of London in 1999.

A total eclipse is predicted, and the sun now lies like a misplaced ball of fire on the horizon. Nuclear bombs stockpiled for a trip to oblivion may be dropped on the day of the eclipse. The weather has become the news - the greenhouse effect, "dead clouds," balls of lightning in Yugoslavia, solar storms, tree-killing winds and orange skies. Animals seem to be vanishing. What else could go wrong? How about eating junk food that continues to cook after it hits the stomach?

What do people do in a world that feels "more and more nugatory"? Fortunately, this

is no tale of generals barking menacing orders. The people in "London **Fields**" tend, by and large, to do exactly what they would probably always have done, crisis or no crisis. And this is where the book saves itself from the burden of its symbolism, setting a small-scale story of personal destruction against the backdrop of the larger doom.

"London **Fields**" is a virtuoso depiction of a wild and lustful society. In an age of attenuated fiction, this is a large book of comic and satirical invention. As he did in "Money," Mr. Amis again employs the device of the intrusive and all-knowing author within the story. His stand-in here is an American writer, Samson Young. Sam, who is dying (perhaps of radiation poisoning), is preparing to write a murder mystery. "Let me say with due modesty and caution," he tells us at the outset, "that I have the makings of a really snappy little thriller. Original, too, in its way. Not a whodunit. More a whydoit. I feel sickly and enraptured."

Sam is temporarily renting the London apartment of the dramatist Mark Asprey, whose artifacts suggest a life as super-stud. Asprey is also the author of popular books under the name Marius Appleby. And he may even be the all-time favorite lover of the novel's heroine, Nicola Six. He appears in her diary as the mysterious MA. (MA. Get it?) "London **Fields**" offers Dickensian complications - but don't worry, they all unravel. For the basic plot is straightforward. The "murderer," the aforementioned Nicola Six (read that "Sex"), has been identified by Sam, an easy chore because Nicola has already dreamed, on several occasions, of her own death, which she knows will occur on her next birthday. The two possible murderers, also identified by Sam, are Keith Talent, a low-life criminal who is also a dart-throwing champion, and Guy Clinch, a wealthy and appallingly honorable gentleman. The question is, who will kill Nicola?

Mr. Amis's characters bear the burden of a satire that turns them into caricatures. But once this has been said, we can move on to the fact that Mr. Amis's language imbues these caricatures with a vitality and an erotic intensity seldom found in current fiction. "London **Fields**" is not a safe book; it is controlled and moved not by plot but by the density of its language. The author freely offends sensibilities. Indeed, it's difficult to think of anything he spares us when it comes to the concerns of the flesh. But his language is demonically alive.

Mr. Amis has a virtuoso's ear for street talk, and he gives his characters a rich bazaar of language - from the question Keith uses to end almost every sentence ("innit?") to the complaints of one of his girlfriends, Trish Shirt: "He comes round my owce. Eel bring me . . . booze and that. To my owce. And use me like a toilet."

Keith Talent represents Mr. Amis's best creation in the book - a grotesque who is nevertheless both surprisingly vivid and desperate. It is a portrait done in verbal glitter. Yet Keith's dispassionate cruelty is almost mythlike. Born into poverty and emotionally without resources, he seeks escape by becoming a petty thief and professional cheat. He yearns for the best that life offers, at least in his terms - a dart-throwing championship and television-celebrity status.

As a criminal, Keith is a failure who is not clever enough to know when he is being cheated. So the taker gets taken. But there are limits to his badness: "Although he liked nearly everything else about himself, Keith hated his redeeming features. In his

view they constituted his only major shortcoming - his one tragic flaw. When the moment arrived, in the office by the loading bay at the plant off the M4 near Bristol, with his great face crammed into the prickling nylon, and the proud woman shaking her trembling head at him, and Chick Purchase and Dean Pleat both screaming Do it. Do it (he still remembered their meshed mouths writhing), Keith had definitely failed to realize his full potential. He had proved incapable of clubbing the Asian woman to her knees, and of going on clubbing until the man in the uniform opened the safe."

Keith's prodigious sexual appetite is multiracial, and followed by ample bragging. ("When it came to kissing and telling, Keith was a one-man oral tradition.") He is a man formed by television cliches and tabloid headlines. His natural home is a grim pub called the Black Cross, where misogyny and cruelty rule. His true passion is not women but darts, a game in which, with a mindless flow of energy, he succeeds. Keith is a prodigious consumer of aphrodisiac "porno" beverages and burning curries, and Mr. Amis gives us, all too often, a graphic account of Keith's bodily functions; repetition dulls the effects of the author's savagery.

Keith as timeless hooligan mistreats both his wife, Kath, and their infant daughter, Kim. What will be his downfall? He will meet Nicola Six.

Guy Clinch is the other potential murderer. Unlike Keith, Guy is rich, handsome and wholesomely simple - in short, a man destined for vicissitudes. Mr. Amis seems unable to equate goodness with anything other than a gullibility bordering on imbecility.

Guy represents the aristocrat drained of vitality and isolated from the world by money and position. The author has administered an especially fiendish coup de grace to poor Guy and his hapless American wife, Hope: meet Marmaduke, their 18-month-old monster child. Clearly, Marmaduke must be their only progeny, and further sex between the parents features all possible birth control devices, used simultaneously.

Marmaduke excretes on cue, sinks his teeth into anyone, sexually attacks his nannies (who form a miniature army) and has a special fondness for blinding pokes at Guy's eyes, followed by paralyzing blows to Guy's genitals. Guy, however, "loved Marmaduke despite the clear sense, constantly refreshed, that Marmaduke had no lovable qualities. Marmaduke gave no pleasure to anyone except when he was asleep."

Nicola Six is ready to meet her potential murderers. In fact, she is truly addicted to the idea. Just ask Sam, who from time to time invites Guy, Keith and Nicola to his apartment - or visits them on their own turf. Nicola is a problem, though; she makes us yield to a sneaking suspicion that a misogynist lingers here somewhere. She is not truly satisfying as character or caricature. She seems to be another of Mr. Amis's plastic women.

Beautiful Nicola is 34 years old and promiscuous by choice. In a world abloom with asthma, lesions and eczema, she is in the pink of health. Furthermore, Nicola is a repository of underwear philosophy and pornographic fiction - a sexual savant. "They wanted," she says of her various patrons and suitors, "the female form shaped and framed, packaged and gift-wrapped, stylized, cartoonified, and looking, for a moment

at least, illusorily pure."

Nicola presents herself to Guy as a professional virgin just waiting for the right experience. To Keith, she is a social step up, an inaccessible woman in need of a man around the house - someone to fix things.

As the novel proceeds, the Crisis approaches - and also the murder. Unfortunately, Mr. Amis endows the former with some painfully obvious symbolism, a series of painted arrows to guide the simple reader through the allegorical overkill. To Nicola Six falls the unenviable task of carrying the message: Nicola has always had an imaginary friend named Enola Gay, who in turn has a child called Little Boy. In case the reader's memory needs refreshing, Nicola obligingly lends Guy a book, which explains that Enola Gay was the name of the plane that carried the first atomic bomb (Little Boy). Nicola also refuses to wear a bikini (remember Bikini Atoll?): "Nicola Six disapproved of bikinis. She execrated bikinis." As a tale of nuclear warning, "London **Fields**" is unconvincing. It succeeds, however, as a picaresque novel rich in its effects. All the minor characters are full of life: Keith's women, from the classic whore, Trish Shirt, to the ever-pure Debbie Kensit; the patrons of the Black Cross; Lizzyboo, Hope's sister, who is gorging herself in preparation for Armageddon. Even the intrusive Sam knows how to observe the world: "After its latest storm, after its latest fit or tantrum or mad-act, the sky is blameless and aloof, all sweetness and light, making the macadam dully shine. Sheets and pillows in the wide bed of the sky."

Oh yes, the murder finally happens. But knowing who does it is somewhat beside the point, innit?

THE PLANET AS MURDER VICTIM

LONDON

One day about five years ago, Martin Amis noticed a newspaper article whose premise was that "people who are murdered are somehow psychologically predisposed to be murdered." "That stuck around in my mind for a while," said the 40-year-old author, discussing the origins of "London **Fields**" in his writing flat here. "Then all my other interests and preoccupations gathered around it.

London was one of those preoccupations; so was the idea of the millennium. "Once I pitched the story forward to 1999, it had to be my novel about the century." Since our century has introduced nuclear weapons and the poisoning of the planet - "the two possible means of self-destruction - I thought, 'Is the planet the murderee?'"

The novel he is currently creating is "about - this sounds so ridiculous - the life of a Nazi doctor done backwards in time," he said.

The book begins with the protagonist on his deathbed, and as it winds its way back in time, "all acts of kindness and cruelty are reversed. Some are comedy - you know, you go to church and take money from the bowl." And some are revelations. "If you do Auschwitz backwards," he said, "it's a miracle."

DEBORAH STEAD

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