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Nicholas Lezard's choice

## The many faces of Martin Amis

Yellow Dog offers differing faces to the world, depending largely on how one is feeling at the time. Or how one is feeling about Martin Amis at the time, says Nicholas Lezard

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**Guardian**

**Yellow Dog, by Martin Amis (Vintage, £7.99)**

On the front cover, we are reminded that the Observer said "here is a novel to silence the doubters". Yet the doubters have been strident and vocal. The TLS's comment - "not absolutely terrible" - was one of the kinder ones. Tibor Fischer's celebrated denunciation ("It's like your favourite uncle being caught in a school playground, masturbating") cannot have further contributed to either Amis's peace of mind or bank balance. It certainly put me off.

Anyway, when the paperback arrived, I braced myself for the humiliating experience that I was assured reading Yellow Dog would be. When I next surfaced I found that I had been reading for an hour, and enjoying myself immensely. What on earth was going on?

It's funny that Fischer should have used such an image to conjure up his idea of the novel's ghastliness, for adult reaction to children's sexuality is one of the book's big themes. To summarise: the actor/writer/rhythm guitarist Xan Meo, who has gangster ancestors, is savagely beaten up, and, as a result of his injuries, undergoes a significant personality change, from reconstructed to very much unreconstructed male. His grammar collapses in on itself and he becomes given to such pronouncements as "salad is bullshit" - and much worse. This is very well observed indeed.

Then we have nice-but-dim Henry IX ("interested in watching television - or in staying still while it was on"), traumatised by the revelation that someone has been spying, or worse, on his daughter, Princess Victoria. Amis is clearly soppy about the royals (we have known this since the character with his own name in Money blubbed at the royal wedding), but at least his head knows that the institution is an untenable anachronism.

There is Clint Smoker, yahoo journalist of the sub-tabloid Morning Lark, utterly without redeeming qualities, even with his tiny penis. There is also a coffin loose in the hold of a passenger jet which doesn't seem to have much to do with anything but allows for some buttock-clenching moments of airborne terror.

The standard critical line on Amis's fiction can often be supplied or illuminated by recourse to his own non-fiction. From a 1992 interview with Nicholson Baker, complaining about Vox: "Its slightness is inbuilt. It has no room to manoeuvre. It has no prose."

That's quite a good hostage to fortune, isn't it? Because, famously, Amis's novels have not much else but prose. Very good prose it is, too - but this can give them too much room to manoeuvre. They flail all over the place, occasionally knocking their heads against signposts saying "nuclear apocalypse", "ceaselessly bifurcating universe" or "global warming". (How one sometimes misses the much less grand, but no less personally urgent theme of the earlier novels, namely: "I'm not getting enough sex".) Off they trot in the direction indicated, before getting distracted by any one of Amis's dazzling set-pieces, whether it's about finding the gents in a cinema, a toddler having a poo in its romper suit, or ... well, you can fill in your own favourite. But this complaint is nothing at all new in the world of Amis-evaluation.

Like a Necker cube, *Yellow Dog* offers differing faces to the world, depending largely, it seems, on how one is feeling at the time. Or, specifically, how one is feeling about Martin Amis at the time. If you're feeling stern, it is a mess of unresolved postures, of a magniloquence at odds with the scanty and barely comprehensible plot. With a bit more indulgence, though, it is considerably tighter than not only *The Information* but *London Fields*, too, not outstaying its welcome, and certainly more aware than its predecessors that it's all a bit of a joke. Even the text-messaging jokes are funny ("r u o fait with the poetry of Ezra £?").

Besides, when was the last time anyone expected a tidy resolution from an Amis novel? They all seem to end in a blur of shame and violence, like those cartoon whirlwinds with arms and fists but no otherwise identifiable features. And all these questions are only raised because Amis himself raises the stakes so emphatically. It seems a bit much to complain about that.

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