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Novelist at Large

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Lead:

VISITING **MRS. NABOKOV** And Other Excursions. By Martin **Amis**. 274 pp.
New York: Harmony Books.

Text:

WRITTEN for British newspapers like The Observer and American magazines like Vanity Fair, and as an apparently welcome respite from writing fiction, the articles in Martin Amis's latest collection of essays have the range and appealing ragbag variety of work done on assignment. Indeed, as he writes in the introduction to "Visiting Mrs. **Nabokov**: And Other Excursions," the only thing that unites these pieces is "getting out of the house."

In his forays away from his desk, Mr. Amis goes to China with a rowdy British soccer team whose patron and mascot is Elton John; he talks to Salman Rushdie in hiding, interviews Graham Greene in Paris and, in "one of the pillared public rooms of the Montreux Palace Hotel," visits Vladimir **Nabokov**'s widow, Vera. He also attends a Rolling Stones concert, the Cannes Film Festival and the 1988 Republican National Convention, watches world championship chess and women's tennis matches, and plays poker with David Mamet and snooker with Julian Barnes.

Much of this is amusing, and it's perversely gratifying to see Mr. Amis irritated or horrified by things that we feel might annoy or appall us too: by the grim corporate architecture of Frankfurt or the crush of fans being herded into a rock concert. ("Once inside, panic and claustrophobia jockeyed routinely for one's attention. . . . In the high tradition of all the best rock concerts, you were treated as if you'd come to sate some vile addiction rather than simply to exchange cash for entertainment.")

Several of the more successful essays are written in a tone strikingly unlike the ironic jeremiad we've come to associate with Mr. Amis's most recent novels, "London Fields" and "Time's Arrow." Among these sympathetic studies is an incisive, rather loving essay on the brilliant, less than lovable poet Philip Larkin, who was a friend of Mr. Amis's father. An interview with -- and appreciation of -- J. G. Ballard makes one want to rush out and buy all of Mr. Ballard's novels.

In his introduction, Mr. Amis tells us that "writing journalism never feels like writing in the proper sense. It is essentially collaborative: both your subject and your

audience are hopelessly specific." In fact, the most specific of these pieces are the strongest. There's a lively essay on the filming of "Robocop 2" and our eerily detached fascination with the "Robocop" films' bloody-minded bionic charm. And it pleased me to learn that Vladimir **Nabokov** was a "compulsive tipper" at the hotel where he lived, and that his widow insisted on picking up the check for drinks with Mr. Amis.

The blurrier pieces -- including one on the nuclear weapons establishment in Washington -- mean well enough, but keep tripping over grand statements and slightly awkward bons mots, like this observation occasioned by Mr. Amis's meeting with the chief scientist on the Strategic Defense Initiative project: "He is about Can Do. I am about Don't Do."

SUCH moments make one understand why Mr. Amis occasionally seems to chafe against the limits of his "hopelessly specific" subjects and audiences. Partly it's a problem of form, partly of expectation. The literary or celebrity interview, the 3,000-word article -- these genres demand (that is, we readers demand) wit at the expense of depth, more facility than profundity. If some of the nonfiction collected here is clever and not much more, one understands that Mr. Amis was writing on assignment.

The essays in "Visiting Mrs. **Nabokov**" are bright; they move quickly; they don't ask much of us, or offend. And isn't that just what we're looking for as we lunge for the magazine rack on the airplane? In an essay on an alarming emergency landing during a flight to Spain, Mr. Amis describes himself as "a nervous passenger but a confident drinker and Valium-swallower." Those of us who don't much like to fly have always understood that there is something worthwhile -- merciful, one might say -- in writing something that pleasantly passes the time 30,000 feet above the ocean.



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