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BOOKS OF THE TIMES; Raging Midlife Crisis As Contemporary Ethos

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Lead:

THE **INFORMATION** By Martin **Amis** 374 pages. Harmony Books. \$24.

Once in a while in some artists' careers, there comes along a work that sums up all their preoccupations, all their technical innovations to date. Sometimes, as in the case of Philip Roth's novel "Operation Shylock," the work is simply a playful but solipsistic dictionary of familiar riffs and routines, a self-referential game of mirrors. Other times, as in the case of Ingmar Bergman's film "Fanny and Alexander," the work is a wonderful synthesis of all that has gone before, a synthesis that not only serves as a kind of Rosetta stone to an oeuvre, but also transcends the sum of its parts.

Text:

While Martin Amis's new novel, "The Information," is no "Fanny and Alexander," it happily belongs to that second category of work. By turns satirical and tender, funny and disturbing, "The Information" marks a giant leap forward in Mr. Amis's career. Here, in a tale of middle-aged **angst** and literary desperation, all the themes and stylistic experiments of Mr. Amis's earlier fiction come together in a symphonic whole.

Like his first novel, "The Rachel Papers," "The Information" features a horribly hapless hero, who's obsessed with bodily functions. Like "Dead Babies" and "Other People," it purveys a willfully cynical view of modern life, a fascination with the seamy world of drugs and illicit sex. Like "Success," it pits two old friends against each another in a competition for women and recognition. Like "Money," it chronicles the spectacular fall of a not particularly likable hero. And like "Time's Arrow" and "London Fields," it boasts a highly complex narrative that attempts to use the latest post-modern hydraulics to articulate an ambitious social vision.

In the past, Mr. Amis's narrative high jinks have often seemed awkward or merely gratuitous: "Time's Arrow" clumsily used a reverse-time sequence to relate the story of a former Nazi doctor, and "Money" featured silly cameo appearances by the author himself. In "The Information," however, Nabokovian devices are not only employed to frame the story of a failed novelist, Richard Tull, but are also cunningly used to open out his hilarious tale of envy and revenge into a glittering meditation on

the nervous interface between the real world and the world of art. At the same time, they transform his comical midlife crisis into a hard-edged satire of contemporary life.

The vision of society delineated in these pages darkly (and presumably deliberately) presages the grim, futuristic one presented in "London Fields." In that 1990 novel, London stood perched on the rim of millennial disaster, a victim of urban chaos theory and its own denizens' uncontrollable greed and lust. In "The Information," which takes place in the present, racial and class tensions have already begun to escalate to a screeching new decibel level, and violence on the streets is dangerously random. There are burning mattresses on the sidewalks, sinister vans on the side streets, and menacing strangers watching the children play in the parks. Innocent-seeming old ladies turn out to be hit-and-run scam artists or telephone sex-line experts, and the "nasal insect drill of need and neurosis" fills the air at night.

For Richard, Mr. Amis's hero, the world has become a grim mirror of his own preoccupation with death, middle age and -- last but not least -- his rapidly unraveling career. Once upon a time, it seems, Richard was a promising young novelist with a bright future, a beautiful wife and lots of ambitious plans. He was happy feeling superior to his best friend and old schoolmate, Gwyn Barry, whom he even routinely beat at chess, snooker and tennis.

Recently, however, the two men have stepped onto escalators headed in opposite directions. Gwyn's progress is ever onward and upward: he has written a politically correct utopian novel that has become an international best seller; he has married a fabulously beautiful and wealthy woman who's related to the Queen, and he has become the No. 1 favorite to win a prestigious literary prize called the Profundity Requit, which would guarantee him a cushy income for life. All this success has turned Gwyn into an insufferable boor who spends the better part of his time preening for photographers and searching for his own name in the papers.

Richard, in the meantime, has fallen into an awful slump and appears headed for even further frustrations. His last few novels have gone unpublished, and his latest, unpromisingly titled "Untitled," is now making the rounds of ever smaller and drearier publishers. His willfully difficult and allusion-filled work just isn't the sort of thing anyone wants to read. Richard's marriage has also hit an impasse (thanks, in part, to his impotence), and he finds himself increasingly baffled by his twin sons' noisy demands.

Even the two jobs that are supposed to help him eke out a literary living (reviewing obscure biographies and editing trashy manuscripts for a vanity press) are depressing him more than usual, and his former skills at chess, snooker and tennis are threatening to let him down. If people were planets, Richard thinks, he would be Pluto: the smallest and most pathetic, far away from the sun.

So what's Richard to do? He decides to ruin Gwyn's career -- or, failing that, his life. Some of Richard's strategies are purely literary: trying to ruin Gwyn's chances of winning the Profundity award by bad-mouthing him to the judges; scheming to write a nasty profile of Gwyn that would depict him as an untalented phony, and plotting to accuse Gwyn of plagiarism and manufacturing the evidence that would indict him.

These outrageous schemes are expertly rendered by Mr. Amis with the sort of light,

high-spirited comic brio that distinguished "Lucky Jim," the classic novel by his father, Kingsley, but Richard's plans soon take a darker -- and more ominous -- turn. Having decided that the literary world affords few truly satisfying opportunities for revenge, Richard turns to the real world, the world of sex and violence, to try to get even with Gwyn. He tries to seduce Gwyn's childless wife, Demeter, while sending a punked-out young woman to try to seduce Gwyn. He also retains the services of one Steve Cousins, a street hustler, hit man and drug dealer to the aerobically fit. Once summoned, however, Steve (or Scozzy, as he's known to his friends) will prove difficult to control; indeed he will drag Richard and Gwyn out of their prim, self-absorbed world of books and introduce them to the mean streets of the London underworld.

Martin Amis's work has always reverberated with literary echoes, and in the case of "The Information," it's easy to find dozens of allusions, debts and hidden homages to other books: from "Lucky Jim" to Richard Price's "Clockers," from Saul Bellow's "Humboldt's Gift" to Tom Wolfe's "Bonfire of the Vanities." Such references, however, are thoroughly subsumed here by Mr. Amis's own idiosyncratic vision and his ability to articulate that vision in wonderfully edgy, street-smart prose. He has written just the sort of novel his bumbling hero dreams in vain of writing: an uncompromising and highly ambitious novel that should also be a big popular hit.



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