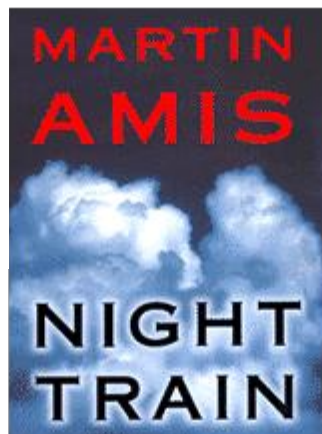


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| NIGHT TRAIN |



BY MARTIN AMIS

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BY ALLEN BARRA | Martin Amis' "Night Train" is being billed as a kind of serious author's holiday, a genre vacation between his thick, clever, mostly "serious" works. The Brit press is roasting him for it. Well, screw them. Many other serious novelists have taken a little time off now and then -- there are certainly those of us who prefer what Graham Greene called his "entertainments" to his longer, presumably less entertaining books.

And "Night Train" is entertaining. It's a detective story about the suicide or murder of a young woman who had everything those around her wanted: beauty, wit, vivacity, health and a stimulating career. The characters, particularly Detective "Mike" Hoolihan -- the quotes are because Mike is female -- are crisp and entertaining. And the solution to the death is original while remaining faithful to murder classic conventions. This last point is no small one: As Borges once observed, the American detective story is generally a disappointment precisely because its solutions don't satisfy the curiosity that the plot has stirred.

"Night Train" is a disappointment for opposite reasons. Amis has never been much interested in character, motivation and plot, which aren't considered major virtues in an era when technique holds court, but at the kid's table of crime fiction, they're essential. You feel as if Amis does care about his characters, perhaps more than he's cared about most of those in his previous novels, but doesn't know how to give voice to that

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concern. "Night Train" feels rootless. "Mike" is convincing as neither a woman nor an American, and the unnamed city Amis places her in gives off no heat. (One suspects it's a pastiche of American big cities that Amis has glimpsed during book tours.) It's true that Elmore Leonard, one of Amis' idols, also doesn't waste a lot of time in description of local fauna, but with Leonard's deft paintbrush strokes, he doesn't need a lot of time to make you feel as if you're in a particular place. The city in "Night Train" is like Gertrude Stein's Oakland: There's no there.

To cover these deficiencies Amis falls back on the mechanics of the murder mystery plot -- a peculiar homage to Leonard, whose books (like most of Dashiell Hammett's) aren't mysteries. Amis may not like it, but the author "Night Train" draws most comparison with is Raymond Chandler, for whom Amis has a well-known contempt. The book's best lines -- "Guys? She combed them out of her hair" and "You wouldn't pray for a body like that -- but something was wrong with it. It was dead." -- sound much more like Chandler than like Leonard, as does Mike Hoolihan's Philip Marlowe-like narration. "Suicide is the night train," she tells us, "speeding your way to darkness ... this train takes you into the night, and leaves you there." To which Marlowe might have replied, "What did it matter where you lay once you are dead? You were dead, you were sleeping the big sleep, you weren't bothered by things like that." **SALON | Jan. 26, 1998**

Allen Barra writes frequently for the Los Angeles Times Book Review and the New York Times Book Review.

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