[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

# Tough Chaps Don't Dance

**In "Night Train," Martin Amis wanders into a dark alley: His novel about hard-bitten American detectives is a stiff.**

By [Walter Kirn](#)

## Night Train

by Martin Amis

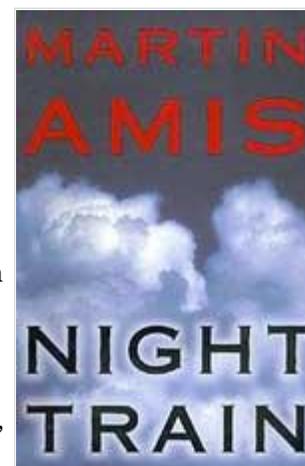
*Harmony Books/Crown; 175 pages; \$20*

If writers, like comedians or singers, could only hear themselves bombing as they worked, it's likely that certain books would be cut short after the first few leaden sentences. Such might have been the case with Martin Amis's **Night Train**, in which the hip and witty British novelist gives us his deadly serious impression of a jaded American cop and ends up sounding a bit like Elton John attempting gangsta rap.

Just have a listen: "You were losing her, weren't you, Trader. She wanted out from under you, Trader, and you could feel it. Maybe she was already seeing someone else. Maybe not. But it was over. Oh, come on, man. It's everyday. You know how it is, Professor. There are popular songs about it. Get on the bus, Gus. Drop off the key, Lee."

That's homicide detective Mike Hoolihan talking, and don't you forget it, bud. Amis -- whose artistic curveballs announce their flight paths the moment they leave his hand -- makes Iron Mike a woman for novelty's sake, but otherwise she's a central-casting tough guy. She's a chain-smoker (check) and recovering boozier (check) whose "pale blue eyes" have "seen everything" (check). She works in a nameless coastal metropolis, one of whose intersections she refers to as "Battery and Jeff" (that's short for Jefferson). Yet despite her gritty résumé and Bogartish demeanor, Mike seems defensive about her authenticity, taking frequent time-outs from her story to give us quick definitions of police slang. "Paulie No, as we say, is a state cutter. He cuts for the state. He dissects people's bodies and tells you how come they died." Mike also insists on repeatedly distinguishing between the raw actualities of cop life ("this is reality, pal") and the tidy conventions of TV crime shows, most of which the book falls into, anyway.

*Night Train* tells the story of Mike's "worst" case, the suicide -- or was it murder? -- of a certain Jennifer Rockwell, the brilliant, beloved, beautiful, blonde daughter of a top policeman, one Colonel Tom. "She had it all and she had it all, and then she had some more," Mike says of Jennifer, trying on her best Philip Marlowe drawl. (Maybe there's a literary joke here: Amis, a Brit, is writing a "real" American who talks at times like a fictional American created by Raymond



Chandler, another Brit). What puzzles Mike about Jennifer's suicide, besides the fact that she had everything to live for, is that she managed to shoot herself three times. Still, Mike is reluctant to investigate. In one of her life-vs.-television spiels, she assures us that making a murder look like a suicide is virtually impossible. She takes the case because Colonel Tom is a loyal friend; he let her withdraw from liquor in his spare room.

A stretch of routine detective work comes next. Mike interrogates suspects, checks out tips, interviews witnesses. The action hardly seems worthy of Amis's gifts (at least as we've come to know them from earlier novels), and the *noir* atmospheric are strictly stock-footage, even though Amis treats them like epiphanies. "Suicide is the night train, speeding your way to darkness. . . . You buy your ticket and you climb on board. That ticket costs everything you have. But it's just a one-way." Just when the reader can't take another bite of these hard-boiled leftovers in a can, things turn philosophical, however, and *Night Train* becomes the novel of ideas it's been fixing to be since page one. Jennifer, it's revealed, was a cosmologist. Not cosmetologist, *cosmologist*.

That's right, she studied black holes. As do murder detectives, in a sense -- a sense that Mike lengthily interprets for us, as if only trained detectives could spot a metaphor. You can feel Amis getting excited about his book here, with the basic storytelling finished and the fat abstractions looming. The language compacts itself, grows elliptical. Interior monologues crowd out straight descriptions. Symbols crash from the sky like burned-out booster rockets. The question becomes not whether Jennifer killed herself but why she did. And what about the Big Bang? No, not the sound of a gunshot in the night, though that's significant, too -- but the sound of space-time itself being born. "The universe was still the size of your living room until the big telescopes came along," discourses Jennifer's boyfriend, a fellow cosmologist. "And I believe, as Jennifer did, that when all this kicks in, this information that's only sixty or seventy years old, we'll have a very different view of our place and purpose here. . . . The revolution is coming, Detective."

The revolution comes too late. The story has already imploded by this time, disappearing up its own black hole. Amis has so mishandled the small stuff -- people, places, voices -- that he's forfeited his right to handle the large stuff. His leap into spacey existentialism lacks a solid platform. Worse, he underestimates the genre he's supposedly paying tribute to. The American detective novel doesn't require lectures on cosmology to spook and alienate the reader any more than British drawing-room comedy needs panel discussions of class and gender roles to make an audience laugh at social mores.

The book has an element of cross-cultural posturing, as if Amis were trying to wow the folks back home with his insights into all things stateside: "American cities like to fix it so that their seats of learning are surrounded by war zones." Unfortunately, the America Amis captures might as well be South America. Mike's speech is peppered with antique swinge talk ("he balled the wife"), and the TV series that he cites -- *Perry Mason*, *The Defenders*, *Car 54*, *Where Are You?* -- have mostly vanished, except in third world reruns. For a book so concerned with tweaking popular culture, its sense of what's shaking in Hollywood these days is pretty limited. Every "quality" cop show since *Hill Street Blues* has traded in the same ironies, ambiguities, sarcasms, and ambivalences that Amis behaves as if he'd just invented. Mike's jab at TV-addled jurors -- "They want commercials every ten minutes or it never happened" -- isn't exactly breaking news. Nor is calling alcoholism "suicide on the installment plan."

*Night Train* has its moments. There's an autopsy scene with startling acoustics, a hotel barroom that reeks of real martinis, a paragraph of description here and there that rises above ordinary pulp. Plus, the book is short, its pacing swift enough to carry us through the mucky ruminations on Being and Nothingness. The little things that Amis gets right, however, can't redeem the one big thing he gets wrong. His arty cop talk just doesn't cut it, man.

**Find this article at:**

<http://www.newyorkmetro.com/nymetro/arts/books/reviews/2145>

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)