

Narrative and Narrated Homicide in Martin Amis's *Other People* and *London Fields*

By [Brian Finney](#), California State University, Long Beach
Reprinted by permission; originally published in *Critique* 37 (1995): 3-15.

Martin Amis is not a crime writer. Yet murder and violence features repeatedly in most of his novels. *The Rachel Papers* (1973) confines its sadism to a literary hatchet job executed by the narrator on the girl he seduces and discards in the course of his nineteenth year. *Dead Babies* (1975) ends in an orgy of mass killings. *Success* (1978) has at its climax the suicide of the two protagonists' (step) sister, a victim of both their needs. Her suicide parallels the stepbrother's memory of his sister's murder by their father. *Other People. A Mystery Story* (1981) takes for its central character a woman who was murdered by her homicidal lover before the book even opens. *Money. A Suicide Note* (1984), as its title suggests, is meant to end, but doesn't, with the death of the protagonist and narrator - maybe he escapes his fate because he is also the narrator. *Einstein's Monsters* (1987), five stories set before and after a nuclear holocaust, is necessarily filled with death and mass destruction. *London Fields* (1989) follows the Machiavellian schemes of its female protagonist to have herself murdered by one of three potential murderers. Finally *Time's Arrow* (1991) recounts the life (backwards) of a Nazi doctor and mass murderer.

Why does death, murder and victimization appear so frequently in Amis's fiction? The answer lies not just in the murderous nature of contemporary civilization. It also has to do with the nature of the narrative act. In his later novels beginning with *Other People* this prevalence of violence against one or more of the characters is accompanied by the introduction into the narrative of the narrator in person (rather than as a disguised author-figure, such as the tutor near the end of *The Rachel Papers*). This typically postmodern device draws attention to the highly ambiguous role played by any narrator in fiction. Whoever narrates a story both creates and annihilates characters. Amis calls his books "playful literature" (Neustatter 71) and describes himself as "a comic writer interested in painful matters" (Smith 79). Brought up during the Cold War with its perpetual threat of nuclear annihilation, and finding himself in a world close to ecological disaster, Amis maintains that "it isn't a set purpose to make this life look frightful. It is, to the writer, self-evidently frightful" (Haffenden 7). In the postmodern world, he argues, the "idea that the novelist punishes bad characters and rewards good ones doesn't bear up any more" (Rayner 20). At the same time he points out that the author is not free of sadistic impulses. But, he comments, it isn't real sadism, because he doesn't believe in his characters in the same sense that he believes in real people (Haffenden 12). Nonetheless the author, in mercilessly manipulating his characters to suit his purposes, does vicariously participate in the viciousness of the age in which he lives.

Amis, then, appears to be exploring in his novels the highly ambiguous relationship that pertains between a writer and the characters whom he tortures into life. Unable as a contemporary writer to rearrange life's random nature to fit a fixed moral order, he instead treats all his characters with his black sense of quixotic humor. "The writer," he observes, "is in a god-like relation to what he creates" (Bragg). By inserting the writer's

substitute self, the narrator, into the action, he is inviting his readers to share with him his unease at the role he is asked to play as novelist. In effect he is problematizing the act of narration and implicating his wanton readers in the way they - we - encourage him to play god and kill his characters for his and our sport. Amis wants his readers, like a theatre audience, to recognize their simultaneous immersion in and exteriority to the action. Classic realist novels encourage their readers to push their awareness of the artificiality of the fictional world they are entering to the back of their minds. Metafictional postmodernists such as Amis, on the other hand, desire their readers to maintain a balance or dialogue between the two perspectives - that of the character(s), and that of the godlike author's fictional incarnation, the narrator. This is a difficult task. Yet in his four novels from *Other People* to *Time's Arrow* he has come up with ingeniously different solutions to this problem with each new book. This essay will concentrate on two of these books, *Other People* and *London Fields*, so as to explore the connection between the presence of the manipulative, self-conscious narrator within the fiction and the fictional characters who are ultimately seen to be victims of the capricious narrator.

Other People opens with a confessional Prologue by the narrator. "I didn't want to have to do it to her. I would have infinitely preferred some other solution. Still, there we are. It makes sense, really, given the rules of life on earth; and she asked for it" (9). The narrator simultaneously expresses his sense of guilt and immediately proceeds to spread the responsibility for what he has done and is about to do to the novel's protagonist, Mary Lamb, as she calls herself at first. He blames both "the rules of life on earth" (or the fallen nature of humankind) and Mary whose fall from grace leads to her demand for retributive justice. *Other People* is subtitled *A Mystery Story*, and its first mystery is the identity of its narrator. This narrator never allows us to forget his controlling presence for long. Every chapter except the first and the final four making up Part Three has a section typographically distinguished from the rest of the narrative in which the narrator directly addresses the reader in the second person. Even the first chapter has the Prologue, just as Part Three has an Epilogue, in which the same device is employed.

Invariably these sections encourage readers both to reflect on whatever topic has governed the preceding action and to recognize their own complicity in it. In effect his readers are being repeatedly removed from the fiction by a philosophizing narrator only for him to return them to the action by forcing them to recognize the similarity between whatever action the narrator has been describing and their own experiences. In chapter 7, for instance, Mary enters a Church-Army Hostel for Young Women where everyone has taken a smash to be there. "Have you ever taken a smash in your time?" asks the narrator (66). Not content with dragging us in, he proceeds to offer advice that simultaneously subtly adds to our knowledge about him. "If you see a smash coming and can't keep out of the way - don't break. Because if you do, nothing will ever put you back together again. I've taken a big one and I know. Nothing. Ever" (66). In describing his own fall this Humpty-Dumpty narrator is also returning us to the action of which he is a mysterious part. Is his fall involved in Mary's fall prior to her loss of memory? We are forced back into the narration to find out. So these metafictional interruptions do not have the effect that Martin Amis's father, Kingsley, always charges him with creating - they do not alienate the reader from the story (Morrison 98). They are a basic ingredient of

narration, one that has been employed in rather different ways by comic novelists since the time of Cervantes and Fielding.

At the same time the narrator never lets us forget that we share with him the responsibility for subjecting Mary to the hell that the book's title alludes to. In *Huis Clos* (1945) Sartre depicts hell as other people. Amis's *Other People* is a depiction of a modern hell in which Mary, suffering from memory loss, is forced to rediscover her debased earlier self (or other person) overseen by the all-seeing narrator who enters the action in the form of a police detective called John Prince. It takes the reader most of the book to appreciate the fact that Prince and the narrator are the same person. This is because Prince, like Mary, has a past - as her murderer. He is simultaneously Prince Charming and the Prince of Darkness. He is a Manichean demon-lover. In her previous existence as Amy Hide, her sister tells her, "You said you loved him so much you wouldn't mind if he killed you" (172). And it appears that he did kill her. Amis provides a clue to the significance of this dual role: "the narrator is the murderer and the writer and the murderer are equivalent in that each has the power to knock her off" (McGrath 192). As readers we are invited to enjoy a story about a woman who gets murdered by participating ourselves in her literary murder. We are both spectators of the action and aiders and abettors of the murdering author/narrator.

At the beginning of the novel she finds herself in a kind of limbo where she is forced to rediscover her past life from a position of innocence. This Martian aspect of the book is more original than many of the reviewers allowed. Amis is on record as saying that he began the novel a year before Craig Raine's poem, "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home" (Haffenden 18). Mary's amnesia allows Amis to bring to life the present unencumbered by the preconceptions of the past. "When the past is forgotten, the present is unforgettable" (53). Without a memory Mary is dazzled and dazed by her perceptions of the moment. She begins her life in death as a natural victim for whom sex, for instance, is a strange practice she cannot get the hang of. Trev, the first man to have sex with her, is a natural sadist. But all she can make out is that "[h]is two tongues wanted her two mouths" (42). Repeatedly Amis is able to achieve effects as unusual as this, to defamiliarize our automatized response - in this case to the modern novel's statutory sex scene. At the same time Amy's experience is being vividly evoked by a narrator who is responsible for subjecting Mary to the pain she undergoes from Trev's brutal sexual exploitation of her body. The narrator could interfere at any point, but doesn't. What is more, we wouldn't want him to. We participate in his sadistic treatment of her. And he won't let us forget it. "I've done things to her, I know, I admit it. But look what she's done to me" (100). Having made her the type of character she is (one who is to be found in contemporary life), the narrator then exonerates himself and us by claiming that she has invited his (and our) victimization of her.

The entire book can be seen as a living through or a living back of her life at or after the moment of her death at the hands of her lover. Amis has said that the book "is the girl's death, and her death is a sort of witty parody of her life" (Haffenden 17). In life, as Amy Hide, she started off leading a privileged existence and gradually descended the social scale as she self-destructed. In the novel she begins her fictional existence among tramps

and slowly rises through the book's circles of living hell to sadistically dominate a decadent aristocratic household headed by Jamie. Amy Hide was malevolent and consciously brought disaster on herself and others. Mary Lamb is well meaning and unconsciously brings about the same effect. The innocent Mary of the fairy tale who had a little lamb is patiently brought by the narrator to rediscover within her self the Amy Hide hiding there. Mary, the Dr Jekyll figure of this novel, sees Amy, her Mr Hyde, lurking in her reflection in the mirror. "She is afraid that her life has in some crucial sense already run its course, that the life she moves through now is nothing more than another life's reflection, its mirror, its shadow" (90). She has passed through the looking glass of death to confront her life in reverse. It takes her almost the whole of the book to rediscover "the power to make feel bad" (109) that caused Prince to murder her in life and that she finally turns on Jamie with such devastating effect that she breaks through the mirror to her old self: "She had torn through the glass and come back from the other side. She had found her again. She was herself at last" (185). She is other people. Mary is also Amy. Prince is not the only character to reveal Manichean duality. Mary/Amy also has to be restored to a sense of her power for good and evil. She is representative of her era - complex, neither heroine nor villainess, yet capable of moral choice.

Amis's concept of life-in-death has proved difficult for most readers to grasp, and many reviewers of the book have complained that the mystery was unsolvable. Amis insists that he does not believe in reincarnation (though the book makes use of the concept); "it's just a way of looking at life" (Haffenden 18). In other words he has employed a purely fictional device in order to make strange (in Shklovsky's sense of the term) the ordinary and everyday. Words, language come to be associated by Mary with structure, meaning, the meaning of the past. "Each word she recognized gave her the sense of being restored, minutely solidified, as if damaged tissue were being welded back onto her like honey-cells. Even now she knew that language would stand for or even contain some order, an order that could not possibly subsist in anything she had come across so far..." (37). But language is the lethal instrument of the murderous narrator. It returns Mary to a knowledge of her past existence as the destructive Amy. At the same time language, Mary discovers, can be deceptive. Put to narrative use it can fabricate events. Reading popular romances she realizes "that stories were lies, imagined for money, time sold." (69). Amis, of course, is simultaneously reminding his readers of their part of the narrative bargain - they have paid him to murder Mary for their amusement, and to make her torments sufficiently empathetic to induce those readers to feel drawn into her predicament, to feel that their money was well spent. Is Amis deliberately employing language as a metaphor with which to associate order (especially narrative order) with fabrication? "Real people," he has said, "don't fit in fiction. They're the wrong shape" (Smith 79).

So Amis employs a fiction on which to predicate this novel. But he does provide the attentive reader with clues as to the nature of this narrative premise. For example when Prince takes Mary to the hell-like night club where she gets murdered a second time, he says to her: "Is there life after death? Who knows. Actually I wouldn't put it past life, would you? That would be just like life, to have a trick in its tail..." (117) The section following this in which the narrator addresses the reader takes the question up:

Is there life after death? Well, is there?
If there is, it will probably be hell. (If there is it will probably be murder.)
If there is, it will probably be very like life... (119)

All versions of life after death have been modelled on life, the only experience we are permitted. If we have made the present-day world a form of hell on earth, Amis posits, then why should we expect the afterlife to be any different. And yet there is still the possibility of exercising moral choice, both in this world and in death. Prince acknowledges this possibility when he pleads with Mary: "get it right next time, be good next time. Oh Mary - heal me, dear" (76).

As Amis has said, "It's very difficult to write about happiness and order and prudence and accuracy in human relations" (Smith 79). So he chooses to follow Mary's rediscovery of her past fallen self, the self that has the power to make Alan, her lover, feel bad enough to hang himself when she breaks with him, just as Amy made short work of her lover, Michael Shane, in her past life. The long Part Two follows Mary's journey of upward social mobility and downward ethical behavior as she becomes "like other people" - "getting fear and letting the present dim" (89). Part Three, a mere eighteen pages long, opens with Amy (as she now acknowledges herself) living with Prince in a state of blissful domesticity. "She wasn't sure whether this was love" (195). Yet she feels that she has lived long enough. "He can come for me now" (202). He does just that. He takes her back to the now deserted hell-like night club. "You're already dead - can't you see?" he asks. "Death is terribly easy to believe" (205). That message is spoken both by Prince to Amy and by the narrator to the reader. We have all made a similar mess of life in general. Prince murders her once more. The last chapter ends with Amy aged sixteen finding herself back home just prior to meeting her demon-lover who made her turn bad in her first life. This circular definition of hell is reminiscent of Sartre's *Huis Clos* which ends, "Eh bien, continuon." ("Oh well, let us go on."). Amis seems to be asking us, are we destined to continue making the same errors as those who have gone before us? But also, are writers (and readers) condemned to go on murdering their characters to create new worlds that are always old?

Amis claims that the novel implies that this time round Amy will get it right, although it is unclear where in the text this is definitively suggested. Of more interest is his remark that the Prince figure who is about to encounter her at the end of the Epilogue has reverted to someone "as automaton-like as she was, and didn't realize what was going on" (Haffenden 18). The narrator says, "I'm not in control any more, not this time" (207). He appears to be suggesting that by the end of the narrative the near omniscient narrator is as much in the power of the character he has been victimizing as she was in his power earlier. Her power to make feel bad has finally worked on the conscience of her murderous creator/narrator. He is a prisoner of his own fiction and is returned to the hellish cycle from which only a reformed Amy can set him free. Both the narrator and the reader (who has been encouraged throughout to identify with him) end up caught in the web of the fictional construct they have been conspiring together to weave around the hapless Mary. But Mary is also Amy, and only Amy can release the narrator from his guilt at having ended her life. This is a refusal of narrative closure with a vengeance.

Amis has called *London Fields* "a kind of prequel" to *Other People*. "*Other People* deals with the girl's death and *London Fields* sort of leads up to that" (Bellante 4). Yet ostensibly the plots and characters of these two books are completely different. In addition *London Fields* is set in the near future of 1999 at the end of the millenium, while *Other People* belongs to the late 1970s. So what makes the one a prequel to the other? Both novels can be said to be centered on murderesses - women who ask to be killed. In both the narrator turns out at the end to be the murderer. It is this responsibility of the narrator for the eventual elimination of the female protagonist that distinguishes and connects both books. In *Money* and *Time's Arrow* the narrator plays a contrasting role - that of the naive victim of the events that overtake him. Even the time scheme of *Other People* and *London Fields* turns out to be similar. *Other People* is about a timeless present - one reviewer suggested that "perhaps everything happens in a single instant" (Levin). So too, according to Amis, is *London Fields* a book "about the present," despite its futuristic setting (Trueheart B2).

By situating his novel at the end of the twentieth century Amis is able to make overt many of the issues underlying contemporary life. Maybe he has made them too overt. But the imminent collapse of modern civilization, even the planet itself, what the book refers to as the Crisis, is an integral part of the fabric of the book as a whole. Nicola Six (pronounced "seeks," but also misheard as "sex"), the (anti)heroine, has decided to end her life rather than enter middle age knowing that love is dead for her - and soon for everyone else, Amis suggests. "The death of God was possibly survivable in the end. But if love was going the same way..." (132). Nicola's death wish parallels that of the planet. As a femme fatale or "Old Nick" (but a female devil) she opts for sodomy - the way of foolproof sterility. A personalized black hole, she draws men into her destructive magnetic field just as the black hole of physics threatens to swallow up our planet, our solar system, into its negative energy: "she had the power to receive [men's] love and send it back in opposite form, not just cancelled but murdered" (21). So at the start of the novel she decides to have herself murdered either by Keith Talent, a working class job (the English version of a jerk) and petty criminal whose only talent is for darts and pornography, or by Guy Clinch, a rich, nice but hopelessly romantic "fall guy: fool, foal, foil" (240). Keith represents "reptile modernity;" Guy is handicapped by an "archaic heart" (192).

Unlike Prince, Samson Young, the narrator of and in this novel, appears to have none of his predecessor's godlike control over the actions occurring within the narrative. A Jewish American journalistic writer suffering from a twenty year writer's block, he has come to London after answering an ad. in the *New York Review of Books* for an apartment exchange. (It is typical of the strategy of this novel that he should have been drawn into the book by a literary artefact which is about books.) He finds himself occupying the palatial flat of a successful English playwright called Mark Asprey. Asprey's initials echo those of Martin Amis, so we have from the start the ghost of the author casting his enigmatic shadow over his fictional stand-in, the narrator. Sam, like the earth, is suffering from the final stages of a wasting disease ("Radiogenic, naturally" (161).) that makes him almost impervious to the lure of sexual love. He is quintessentially one of life's observers, "less a novelist than a queasy cleric, taking down the minutes of real life" (3). What he

finds in the Nicola-Keith-Guy triangle is a readymade thriller. "Not a whodunit. More a whydoit" (3). Thanks to Nicola's convenient ability to see into the future he can tell us exactly how and when she will die. Only who her murderer will be remains unknown.

So Amis sets up the novel in such a way that Nicola has to lure one of the men into murdering her while Sam has to worm his way into the main characters' lives (imaginatively as well as physically) in order to get his novel written before he dies himself. "I'm on a deadline too here, don't forget," he writes punningly on the first page (1). The end of his novel has to be made to coincide with the end of Nicola's life on her thirty fifth birthday and has to be finished before his own life is finished. We are forced to notice the artificial neatness of this entire construct in the opening pages. It is far too orderly to be true to life, although it qualifies as "a true story" (1), that is, a true fiction. At the beginning of the book Sam cannot understand this distinction. He sees himself as no more than a second rate reporter doing "fieldwork," incapable of "improving on reality" (39). He begins his researches in the spirit of a peeping Tom. Yet a crucial part of his initial raw material turns out to be not life in the raw but literature. He enters a web of intertextuality. He recovers Nicola's diaries that reveal among other things that she had had a torrid affair with Mark Asprey before his departure for Sam's apartment in New York. Keith gives him a brochure outlining the dubious services he offers. Guy reluctantly parts with two autobiographical stories he has written. Sam comments: "Documentary evidence. Is that what I'm writing? A documentary? As for artistic talent, as for the imaginative patterning of life, Nicola wins. She outwrites us all" (43). She acts, that is, as Sam's muse. On his first visit to her apartment he pleads, "Nicola, let me be your diary" (62). A diary might be a daily record, but that does not make it any more factual than other forms of writing.

The plot of the narrative is ostensibly being concocted by Nicola. She, not Sam, is in control of the fabula (story), although the syuzhet (or plot) is necessarily in the hands of the story's narrator. As the novel progresses Sam is drawn into the plot of the story he is telling, and not simply as a passive participant. At the end of Chapter 4 he stops Keith's narration of his first visit to Nicola's flat in mid flight so as to go and see her himself to check out the accuracy of Keith's story which was being regaled to his mates at the pub and was in danger of turning fictional. Fictional! Sam should know better. When he arrives at Nicola's she is reluctant to let him in. So he plays "a mild hunch," and tells her that there is no need to dress for him. He scores a bullseye (to adopt Keith's darts lingo). She invites him up. "That's what writing is, a hundred hunches..." he comments (60). Life and literature are becoming indistinguishable, even for the documentary narrator.

Gradually the scale of his interventions in the plot escalates. "Guy asked my advice about Nicola. I gave my advice (it was bad advice), and with any luck he'll take it" (101). He can't afford to have Guy see through her or his story will be ruined. But wasn't it Nicola's story? Sam does have moral qualms. He asks Nicola, "Do you really need Guy? Couldn't you just edit him out" (119)? Amis here is simultaneously sharing the author's dilemma with his readers. Sam also tries to get her to pay off Keith's gambling debts to prevent Keith having his darts finger broken in retaliation. Next he traps Nicola into revealing her earlier affair with Mark Asprey. (How can Nicola be said to be in control of this part of

the story?) Forced to try and fly back to New York for a week, Sam asks her to "keep activity to the minimum" while he's gone" (235). On his return, after he has discovered the cigarette burns on Keith's daughter whom he has grown to love and thinks that they have been caused by Keith (after misreading one of Keith's diary entries - another instance of the unreliability of journal writing), he pleads with Nicola to lure Keith away from his home as much as possible and keep him happy so as to minimize the possibility of his hurting his daughter again. "There go my unities," Sam remarks (388). Ostensibly he is referring to the Aristotelian unity of place. More importantly he is drawing attention to the multiplicity of narrative voices in the book. Sam might be the designated narrator, but Nicola is meant to appear to control the plot and M. A. lurks just off stage reminding us that both Sam and Nicola are narrative mouthpieces with limited autonomy. There is no escaping the problematics of the narrative act in Amis's fiction.

As the interventions by the narrator in the events he is narrating grow in importance, so do instances proliferate in the narrative of the dependence of narrative, not on life, but on other narrative. Take the case of Keith. Even more than John Self in *Money*, he is the typical product of what Baudrillard has called the age of simulation. Simulation, according to Baudrillard, is opposed to representation. In an age of simulation it is no longer possible to distinguish between the image as representation of a reality outside it and the simulacrum, "never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (11). Keith has been educated by the popular media. His idea of authenticity and his expressions and vocabulary all derive from the tabloids and television. Initially Sam makes the mistake of thinking that the string of clichés that Keith employs when he describes a football match he has been to are "just memorized sections of the tabloid sports pages." Then with a shock he realizes that they are "what he actually sees" (97-8). Similarly Keith's attitude to women and sex is entirely conditioned by the media, especially the porn. industry. Nicola comes to understand that, if it were possible to make a taxonomy of it, "[h]is libido would be all tabloid and factoid" (202). He actually prefers sex on video, which is where he acquired a taste for it in the first place. Video allows him to fast forward the uninteresting bits and to freeze frame the most salacious glimpses of female flesh. Nicola, who understands the power of simulacra, capitalizes on this by seducing Keith on screen, making pornographic videos of herself for him to watch in solitary, onanistic pleasure.

Keith is an extreme example of the general truth that, as Amis says, "our sex lives are mediated by images from elsewhere that we now all have in our heads". Nicola equally manipulates Guy with "ads for love" in which, "like advertisements for menthol cigarettes, they walk through the corn hand in hand" (Bragg). Guy's sister-in-law's, Lizzy's, love life reduces itself to a series of capitalized media clichés - "He Refuses To Make A Commitment. She Has A Problem Giving Him The Space He Needs..." etc (281). Even Sam is not immune. "I too," he writes, "have need of the Fast Forward" (40). Sam's naive attempt to keep life and fiction separate from each other is undermined in numerous ways throughout the novel. He is forced to admit the extent to which the demands of narrative form compel him to tone down Marmaduke, Guy's horrific baby, a caricature that Amis calls entirely "essayesque" (Bragg), or to exclude important material

from the book. Missy, for example, Sam's American girlfriend, "had to go. For reasons of balance. Reasons of space" (435). Amis is not about to re-cover the ground already covered by Tristram Shandy. "The form itself is my enemy," Sam realizes. "In fiction (rightly so called), people become coherent and intelligible - and they aren't like that" (240). What Sam fails to see is that he too is writing within a narrative genre, the thriller, which he is simultaneously subverting by turning it into a "whydoit." Amis uses Sam's literary naivety to demonstrate the inescapability of the poststructuralist assumption that all forms of narrative belong to the democratic state of textuality.

Not only does Amis totally undermine Sam's claim to factual reportage in his narration; he also problematizes the distinction between life and literature. Literature insists on spilling over into life in a hundred different ways in this book. When Guy, stifled by his expensive domestic life, tells his wife he's going out, she asks him what for. "See some life," he shouts back. "Oh. Life! Oh I got it. Life" (86). That confusion between Life and Life is necessary for the novel to work. In a letter in which Mark Asprey tells Sam he should try writing fiction, he also recommends Sam to read his novel, *Crossbone Waters*. The book, an adventure story with a love interest, turns out to be "an awful little piece of shit" (389). Next Sam discovers some old magazines in which it turns out that the heroine sued Mark Asprey for her portrayal in the book and the entire novel was a thinly disguised slice of life. Finally, in his last letter to Sam, Mark Asprey admits that virtually all of his book including the heroine's magnificent breasts was a figment of his imagination. Asprey's justification: "It doesn't matter what anyone writes any more. The time for it mattering has past. The truth doesn't matter any more and is not wanted" (452). We are thrown back into a Baudrillardian world where images no longer represent anything beyond themselves. In this fictional world in which Keith and everyone else cheats in one form or another, in this apocalyptic fable about our postmodern condition, Life is Life.

Who then is making who up? Who is in control of this narrative? Is it Sam? Is it Nicola? According to Sam she "outwrites us all" (43). Yet even here Sam is employing writing as a figure of speech. Certainly she outacts them all. She is also aware of the power writing can exercise over life. She starts off dropping her diaries in Sam's sight. She uses a book to reveal to Guy the fact that she had guyed him all along about her invented friend, Enola Gay, the name of the plane that delivered the first atom bomb, Little Boy (implying that guys like Guy ought to be better read in the history of the discovery of thermo-nuclear fission). She knows how to really revenge herself on Mark Asprey - by locking herself in a room and burning the manuscript of the only novel he ever wrote from the heart (incidentally another link with *Other People* where Amy Hide claims to have done the same thing to Michael Shane). But what about her own status within the novel? This is problematic, to say the least. One reviewer called her "a masturbatory figment of male imagination, not really a woman at all" (Fuller). Sam worries about this:

"Nicola, I'm worried about you, as usual...I'm worried they're going to say you're a male fantasy figure."

"I am a male fantasy figure. I've been one for fifteen years. It really takes it out of a girl."

"But they don't know that."

"I'm sorry, I just am."(260).

Amis has commented elsewhere that "given that the guys in my novels are either victims or predators," the women "have got to be equivalent figures." Amis is covertly offering an ironic defence within the novel of his penchant for female characters like Selina and Nicola. "I'm writing comedies. Vamps and ballbreakers and goldiggers are the sort of women who belong in comedy" (Bellante 5). Such women are types, the subjects of fictional narratives, genre-specific. Nicola herself begins to question her own reality status within the novel when she gets into a conversation with Sam about when it is acceptable for fictional characters to vacillate. She agrees that characters subject to sexual vacillation are permissible:

"They are the story. With the other stuff there's no story until they're out of the way.' I said uneasily, 'But you're not in a story. This isn't some hired video, Nicola.'" She shrugged. "It always felt like a story," she said (118).

Amis is constantly playing metafictional games of this kind with his readers, and nowhere more than in the surprise ending. The narrator replaces Guy at the last minute to become what? The one to bring Nicola's life within the narrative to an end? Or the real fall guy whom Nicola had set up from the start? "She outwrote me. Her story worked. And mine didn't," Sam writes after taking the pill that will end his life (466). But it is his story of her story. He has outlived her. He has contained her within his larger narrative.

But Amis hasn't finished playing metafictional hide and seek with the reader. Where does Mark Asprey, or rather M. A., come into all this? Because the whole novel only works on the premise that the reader is aware of the author playing games with his naive narrator who is nevertheless given all the linguistic sophistication of Amis's developed narrative style. Amis is constantly playing implicit jokes on the narrator. For one so earnestly bent on adhering to the facts, for example, he shows a tremendous unconscious talent for fictional allusion. On reading the contents of Nicola's diary, he comments that it "was just a chronicle of a death foretold" (17). At the end of the book he leaves Mark Asprey his "confession", saying that "[p]erhaps it is also an elegy to the memory of an unfortunate lady..." (468). Unwittingly he transforms factual diaries and confessions into fictional fables by Marcia Marquez and Pope. Only in the Endpapers, Sam's two last letters to Mark Asprey and Kim Talent, does Sam begin to suspect that he is himself the victim of fictional invention. His letter to Mark ends with a PPS: "You didn't set me up. Did you" (468)? And in his letter to Keith's daughter he feels himself succumbing to the pill he took: "Blissful, watery and vapid, the state of painlessness is upon me. I feel seamless and insubstantial, like a creation. As if someone made me up, for money. And I don't care" (470). He might have been responsible for bringing Nicola's life to an end. And she might have ensured that he brought his own life to an end. But at the last minute he realizes that both of them have been given life and deprived of it by the ghostly M. A.

The narrator is and always has been as much of a fictional instrument as the characters in the hands of the author. The author. Not Mark Asprey. Because authors can never enter directly into their own narratives. They are compelled to invent alter egos, Sams or Mark Aspreys, who are held by the essential nature of fictional narrative at a distance from their creators who are themselves locked in their solipsistic state of non-narrative being.

If, as Amis maintains, the bleak facts of contemporary life can only be rendered comically, that is with black humor, then it is essential that readers be induced to identify with the author rather than with the objects of his creation whom he seeks to mock with his dark laughter. To effect this the author has to introduce a narrative alter ego in the person of the narrator, someone who can both enter the action and control it and us, the readers. But the narrator is not the author. In both *Other People* and *London Fields* Amis explores the ambiguous position that the narrator of postmodern fiction such as his must occupy. Simultaneously he must be both an instrument for the author and as much a victim of the author's capricious will as any of the other characters. Similarly readers are made to see their active implication in the sadistic treatment met out to characters by narrator and author, and yet to be themselves subject to the wayward will of the author.

In fact Amis goes out of his way to detach his readers by the end of each book from the narrator who has acted as their Virgilian guide through the inferno of contemporary civilization. Having encouraged the narrator to do our dirty work for us, we ultimately find ourselves victims with him of the author's covert manipulation. By killing off the narrator at the end of both books, Amis is abruptly distancing us from the narrative, compelling us to take an extranarrative perspective, to share with the author his murderous act of closure. *London Fields* is a "whydoit" in more senses than one. It investigates why eventually it is the narrator who murders Nicola. It also investigates why we as readers want Sam (or one of Amis's fictional characters) to murder her. What is this rage for form? Why do we derive enjoyment in proportion to the ingenuity shown by the author in plotting the murderous end to his characters' fictional lives? The appeal of fiction has always been the clarity it offers us by its orderly rearrangement of life. What postmodern writers such as Amis have done is additionally to draw our attention with various metafictional devices to the artistic ingenuity entailed in transforming life into Life, anarchy into order, homicide into harmless pleasure, and readerly into writerly narration.

Works Cited

- Amis, Martin. *The Rachel Papers*. New York: Knopf, 1974.
----- . *Dead Babies*. New York: Vintage, 1991.
----- . *Success*. New York: Vintage, 1991.
----- . *Other People. A Mystery Story*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1982.
----- . *Money. A Suicide Note*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1985.
----- . *Einstein's Monsters*. New York: Vintage, 1990.
----- . *London Fields*. New York: Vintage, 1991.
----- . *Time's Arrow, or The Nature of the Offence*. New York: Harmony, 1991.
Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations*. Trans. Foss, Paul, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman. New

- York: Sémiotexte, 1983.
- Bellante, Carl and John. "Unlike Father, Like Son. An Interview with Martin Amis." *The Bloomsbury Review* 12.2 (March 1992): 4-5, 16.
- Bragg, Melvyn. *The South Bank Show* (Martin Amis). London Weekend Television, 1989.
- Haffenden, John. *Novelists in Interview*. London and New York: Methuen, 1985. 1-24.
- Levin, Bernard. "Forgetfulness of Things Past." *Sunday Times* (London) 8 March 1981: 43.
- McGrath, Patrick. "Martin Amis." *Bomb* 18 (1987), reprinted in *Bomb Interviews*. Ed. Betty Sussler. San Francisco: City Light Books, 1992. 187-97.
- Morrison, Susan. "The Wit and the Fury of Martin Amis." *Rolling Stone* 17 May 1990: 95-102.
- Neustatter, Angela. "Amis and Connolly--The Best-Seller Boys." *Cosmopolitan* 185 (August 1978): 71-72.
- Raynor, Richard. "The Style Is the Man." *Time Out* 27 March 1981: 20-21.
- Smith, Amanda. "The Two Amises." *The Listener* 92 (1974): 219-20.
- Trueheart, Charles. "Through a Mirror, Darkly" *Washington Post* 26 November 1991: B1-2.