

A Discussion Board Dialogue on *Night Train*

By Robert Martinez and Nick Shuit

[*Note: In its previous incarnation, The Martin Amis Web featured a discussion page. James Diedrick selected the following dialogue as especially worthy of preservation.*]

Robert Martinez, 8/25/98, 6:55 p.m.

Nick made an interesting point: how Mike seems to move farther away from understanding the closer she gets to Jennifer Rockwell. When I finished reading *Night Train* back in January, I immediately thought of a passage from Shakespeare's *Richard III*: it is a scene where Buckingham comments on our inability to know people's "hearts" (their true identities), that we can only know their "faces." Perhaps going along with what Eric, Nick, and what others have said, it seems that meaning/Jennifer's identity/the "reason" for her suicide simply become more ambiguous the harder Mike strives for it.

In a way (and someone please tell me if my interpretation is off), I thought the novel almost is an allegory of the inability to know the Self, to know the universe. Perhaps in this sense the novel might be considered "existential." (Amis himself said that he found himself using "that word" once he had finished the novel--a word he said he uses about once every couple of years.) Amis has played with these ideas before (most notably in *London Fields* and *The Information*), and by making Jennifer an astrophysicist, he seems to be continuing his interest in using the universe as a metaphor for the postmodern deconstruction of meaning. He (Amis) even commented during his visit to Washington, D.C. in January 1998, that it was rather bleak to realize that the more we know of and study our universe, the smaller we become in the overall significance of things. This would make *Night Train* an apt parody of the detective genre: after gathering all the clues, Mike leaves us with no explanation, no closure, no answers.

I do have a question, though: Does anyone have any thoughts on why critics have labelled *Night Train* a "why-not-do-it"? (Instead of a "whodunnit.") Perhaps it has been called that because of its refusal to provide answers, meaning, closure? Sort of a cynical (but fitting) label for a postmodern genre?

Nick Shuit, 8/25/98, 7:39 p.m.

In my reading of *Night Train*, Mike does discover the reason behind Jennifer's suicide. She finds nothing. Nothing is what opens Jennifer's eyes. Nothing is what Mike finally sees. Once Mike investigates the case, we follow her as she tries to penetrate Jennifer's motives, only to find that, in one sense, things were exactly as they appeared at the outset: Jennifer committed suicide. And yet the final "answer"-- her suicide-- means so much more. But, as I've argued elsewhere, the answer isn't complex at all. It's very simple actually. It's nothing.

Consider the case of the murdered child that Mike discusses. The police looked around for answers, but the truth of the suffocated infant was such a simple thing-- a dispute over diapers. Yet that is shocking, because, as far as motivations go, well, that's pretty absurd. Mike describes the case, explains the puzzlement the police feel over the case, and then reveals the truth in a stunning way. In murder cases the law and its guardians look for motive-- but what if the motive is so grotesquely simple that it defies belief? What if Lady MacBeth was upset at Duncan because he failed to compliment her on her new hairdo? What if she did the deed and reported back to MacBeth with a glib "G'night, hon, see you in the morning. Oh yeah, the King's dead. [exit]" I think it goes hand in hand with something Amis talks about a lot (and he tends to repeat himself I've noticed).

Motive, in "real life," and especially in fiction, is becoming nonexistent. Our sense of "a to b to c" logic in relation to fiction is rapidly becoming inadequate to deal with what we find, just as Mike's weary police logic can't crack Jennifer's case (and when we read aren't we always, like detectives, looking for motive to help us solve the puzzle?). Look at Mike's investigation of the double shots (Jennifer firing twice). It sounds incredible, unbelievable, but she finds several other cases of two shots being fired in a suicide. Again, like us, she asks "why" and "how"? It can't be possible-- but it is. It happened. I think Amis is telling us that the old ways of "seeing" are no longer viable. The "real" answers might just be more terrifying and irrational than we can fathom-- and they're right in front of us, if we could only see them.

My interpretation of the book is that Jennifer comes to an understanding of the universe (cue up "existential" here) and it drives her to suicide. And I think Mike, from the evidence of Jennifer's case as well as some instinct of her own, comes to the same perspective. I'm pretty sure that Mike's narrative is a suicide note, although it certainly leaves the door open for a savior-- love, maybe?

In any event, I think Amis is doing a bit more than just offering a doom-and-gloom view of existence. There's a lot more in the novel to consider. But I think Mike does solve the case-- she just can't handle what she finds. The answers are in the text. The answers are nothing.

To answer your final question, I think it's a mistake for the critics to judge *Night Train* based on its adherence to genre or lack thereof. Amis is a Serious Novelist who's known for deviously subverting formulas and juggling tropes. The critics seem to have approached the book based on what it wasn't rather than what it was. Once again, a failure to "see" properly.

Robert Martinez, 8/26/98, 2:51 p.m.

I enjoyed your response, Nick--incredibly suggestive. Your whole discussion of "seeing" and especially of "motive" was elucidating. The way Amis deals with the question of motivation does relate to his other works, and is, I think, very much in a postmodern vein. In his novel "Money," Amis talks at length about the increasing absence of motivation in the world to explain phenomena or action. Remember the

passage towards the end of the novel where Martin Amis tells John Self that motivation can't be found on the streets; he then tells Self that gratuitous crime is a point in case. Perhaps I'm wrong, but it seems that this passage in "Money" is very relevant to this discussion of "Night Train." Amis really seems to be pointing at some of the terrifying effects of postmodern culture: the absence of meaning to explain action, in the old logical systems we have used in the past. (Sort of a breaking away from the sign/referent model that postmodern/deconstruction theorists always babble about.) But I agree with you here that Amis isn't simply pointing to this absence and lamenting the situation. He is pointing to other ways of "seeing"--of explaining phenomena that seems to defy reason. It defies reason, perhaps, because it is such shocking change from our current (and old) ways of seeing/thinking.

Related thought: this all possibly relates to a discussion Fredric Jameson raises in his essay "Postmodernism; or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." In this essay, Jameson writes rather suggestively of postmodern vs. modern architecture, and uses the Bonaventura Hotel as his prime point of discussion. He describes the mirror surfaces of the hotel as a breakdown of our old ways of seeing and understanding--that is, we no longer connect images to what they refer to, we no longer view or think about things in a 3-D environment/space. Instead of seeing the building (image) and its components and structure (referent), we see a glass structure that mirrors all around it: the building becomes, in effect, a simulacra of the environment, of things surrounding it.

Jameson then asks how this breakdown of meaning--this loss of sign/referent systems to image/image systems (things being valued only for what they represent)--will affect our perception and way of thinking. (I apologize if I'm simplifying things or rambling or misstating: the idea came suddenly, and I'm squeezing all this in during a lunch break). Perhaps Amis is answering or addressing Jameson's question. Not knowingly, perhaps, but the similarities are there, I think. Like you said, Mike understands the suicide, just as Jennifer understood the universe: both experienced a profound and complicated emotional response to each of the "nothings" they saw (Jennifer's "nothing" being the universe, Mike's being Jennifer).

This would also tie into the scene with the child murdered over the diaper: the emotional impact is so profound and complex, yet the answer was simple--the diaper. As you said, our old system of logic--of seeing, to relate it back to Jameson--cannot explain the event; it cannot help us make sense of the incident in a way that will bring closure to us (as we currently define closure).

Motivation defying belief. Fielding Goodney destroying John Self for no apparent reason, simply to enjoy his con-artistry. (Or, you could say that Fielding applies art to real life: Fielding thinking that he was Roderigo, and Self Iago. Sort of similar to all the real life "actors" Amis talks about in "Money": people who believe in TV, then try to apply it to life. As Amis comments in "Money," " " And where does that leave reality?" (around page 340).

Let me apologize, for I think I have rambled uncontrollably. I really enjoyed your response, and I think it really helps us see further how Amis is possibly dealing with the issue of "meaning" in our postmodern age.

P.S. Your response about "seeing" and meaning, etc., is making me think of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. DeLillo deals with very similar themes in this novel.

Nick Shuit, 8/26/98, 5:23 p.m.

Thanks for the great response, Robert. Obviously *Night Train* has a lot more to offer readers than the critics have let on.

Certainly Amis is depicting a breakdown of meaning that jibes with semiotics and post-structuralist thought. Sometimes I think that Amis' true vocation is journalism, and his subject is life at the dog-end of the twentieth century. I say this not to denigrate his fiction, but to mention a quality of observation that I think is especially strong in his books. His journalism, which is always sharp, approaches its subjects from an external vantage point, whereas his fictions rely heavily on psychological penetration. I can imagine his restlessness as, say, he interviews John Travolta. He must be imagining entire short stories looking out at the world through Travolta's mind. It must kill him sometimes to stay, as it were, on the other side of the wall. In any event, I think the ideas you discussed were very relevant to Amis' fiction, but, in my opinion, they are only relevant in terms of the descriptive facet of his prose. Postmodernism has freed him to depict the world as he sees it-- fractured, polyglot, full of elusive meanings, slippery signs, mirror-mazes. As far as that goes I think your assessment is appropriate (though I've never read Jameson or, to my shame, DeLillo).

For me, though, I respond more to the interaction of the characters within this bizarre anti-structure of meaning. How do his characters interact? How do they deal with the loss or obfuscation of meaning or truth? What advantages or disadvantages are to be gained from human relationships? The real marrow of *Night Train* is Mike's relationship to Jennifer. There's something there, some connection between them. It's not merely that Mike must deal with "nothing," she must also deal with her own rapidly increasing proximity to Jennifer Rockwell. Here, I'm not sure deconstruction or semiotics really apply. I think it's as conventional a story as any, oh, I don't know, perhaps a 19th Century *bildungsroman*, which is why I appreciate Amis so much. The frameworks of his novels are consistently challenging and provocative explorations of modernity, yet the stories captured inside them are (risking an unforgivable banality) universally human.

As much as I enjoy some of his other contemporaries like, say, Will Self or Thomas Pynchon, sometimes the "postmodern" hijinks in their books crowd out the human element. I'm not blathering here about cute babies and life-affirming will-power or triumphs of the human spirit set to bombastic cinema soundtracks. I simply mean human interaction of any kind-- which is about all we have left to remind us of our humanity. I'd liken the characters in his books to silver balls shot simultaneously into a circus-like, buzzing, flickering pinball machine; they bounce off the pinwheels and bumpers and

dinging bells-- and, most importantly, each other. It's a violent game, and "postmodernism" is just another type of pinball machine. I'm interested in the kinetics inside the machine.

Night Train does illuminate the dissolution of meaning in modern society, true, but I think Amis also has a lot to say about how people are negotiating this new existence. Just another example of Amis' wonderful ambition. I can't think of another living author who has dared to cover the universe from minutiae to nebulae, to make quasars quotidian. A truly titanic writer (and only 5'-5"!).

Robert Martinez, 8/26/98, 7:08 p.m.

Another wonderful response, Nick. I think I see your point: postmodern theory/deconstruction/etc. can help elucidate some aspects of Amis's prose, but they don't necessarily get at the human interaction in his books. I'm weary of theory, because I don't like to force feed books through theoretical methods; in the case of Amis, I have found him interesting because of the way in which he articulates how his characters move in modern life (which is a movement through postmodern culture).

I agree with your comment about Pynchon (I haven't read *Will Self* yet--he's on my list): Pynchon and others (like maybe Paul Auster or William Gass) do seem to enjoy the pranks and play that come with postmodernism. Amis does some of this too, but I think he always has emphasized the human aspect in his fiction. I've been drawn to his work by his ability to describe how people are reacting to the loss or blurring of meaning, or the influence of media, etc.

I guess when I use the word "postmodern" I'm referring to the vast cultural and technological changes that have occurred over the past few decades that have shaped/reshaped human interaction. In a way, it is an attempt to capture a moment in history or culture, so you can then think about how specific changes within this period have affected people. Theoretically, postmodernism probably is another "pinball machine." But I think Amis has at heart the personal and social movements within the postmodern world. His emphasis on sexuality and female/male relationships would probably be a case in point.

I very much like the phrase you use when talking about this issue: "...but I think Amis also has a lot to say about how people are negotiating this new existence." I think this feeling is most apparent in "Dead Babies" (which, perhaps, explicitly begins the theme of the death of love to be developed later in "London Fields"), "Money," and "London Fields" (along with *Night Train*). It is actually there throughout the fiction and journalism (I'm recalling some of the "human concerns" that come out of his essays on Robocop, Madonna, and Gloria Steinem). Ah, I wish I had the books with me! Your description of his characters being like pinballs violently rebounding off each other was rather appropriate; it actually made me think of the phrase Amis uses in "Money" and "London Fields" to describe peoples' interactions: human "force fields." What is your thought about this phrase/idea?

What is your interpretation of how his characters negotiate modern life? In a way, I think you're right about *Night Train* being Mike's suicide note; it is a dark ending. However, I thought your suggestion that love might save her was interesting. In "London Fields," Amis seems to be saying that love--a basic (and rapidly disappearing) human bond--is all we have left to help ease our movements in the violent pinball machine of modernity. Even John Self, one of his most cruel and disgusting characters (alongside Andy Adorno), becomes a bit endearing when he talks about needing "that human touch." (He says this at various times: when Fielding lays a hand on his shoulder, when he's with Caduta, etc.) When Self utters these words, it seems that Amis is giving us a sincere and quiet moment among the roaring chaos of modern life. It is a moment where Self's faults and wickedness fade out of view briefly, allowing us to see how hurt he is--how the twentieth century has hurt him. Perhaps I'm misreading, but it seems as though Amis gives us a brief moment, a quick look at the bruises that contribute to his characters' nastiness.

Nick Shuit, 8/28/98, 1:01 p.m.

I agree wholeheartedly with your comments about postmodern literary theory. Not only is it deleterious to "force feed" a book through such theories, I'd go a step further and say it's a bit like the wood-chipper scene in "Fargo." There isn't much left on the other side of the process, and you'll need a thick pair of gloves and a strong stomach to sort through what's left. That said, the grotesque little academic hidden in my left ankle does feel that "postmodern theory" isn't wholly awful. It's just misapplied sometimes.

Incidentally, I highly encourage you to read Will Self. There are some stylistic similarities between Self and Amis, even though they are quite different in subject matter. Self's prose is every bit as remarkable as Amis', but he eschews the latter's larger themes for explorations of smaller, often middlebrow topics that usually revolve in some way around pharmaceuticals of various kinds. His protagonists and villains are even nastier than Amis', though in a much more surreal way. I'd recommend "Grey Area" or "Cock & Bull"; Self is also responsible for perhaps the greatest parody to appear in the title of a short story in the history of literature: "The Rock of Crack As Big As The Ritz." Indeed.

Regarding Amis' more humanistic approaches to modern literature, he's clearly got some basic, "universal" concerns that you don't find in most of his celebrated contemporaries. It mystifies me that some critics have labeled Amis a misogynist and nothing more than a mischievous prankster. I think Amis' fears and anxieties are readily apparent on every page of his books, especially his journalism. Occasionally, his obsessions are almost embarrassing to read, as in his nuclear war phase in the 80s (although, I must admit, the world no longer faced exactly the same threats when I read those works, so perhaps it's unfair to chortle at them).

Time's Arrow, for instance, seemed to me from the beginning to be a work of the most serious order, despite the initially jarring narrative device. I thought it was horrifying and, in its way, morally very sound not only in what was depicted, but also in the form it took. I gained a lot of respect for Amis when I read *Time's Arrow*. It was quite daring to

approach that subject the way he did. Not many novelists would have taken such a risk, but he did, and he pulled it off. Similarly, it angers me that so much in "The Information" was ignored. Despite Richard's sometimes nefarious machinations to ruin Gwyn, what came through for me was Richard's fragility, not his meanness; his own struggle was more compelling than the oft-pointed out analogues of real people or rivalries. Need I express my disappointment that so many have decried *Night Train's* alleged failure as a detective story rather than the other themes it evoked?

When Amis speaks of "force fields," I think it's an apt description of his characters and how they interact. Certainly there are "spheres" or "force fields" that exist, and characters are constantly crossing into someone else's air space. It's true in all his books, but actually, I find that to be true of a lot of modern fiction, going back at least as far as *A Passage To India* or "Ulysses." You can even cite Walter Pater in that context. It seems to be a common way of depicting characters in our time, insofar as we are "cut off" or "in our own little worlds". Our existences are isolated and solipsistic. So Amis' characters ramble on until another "force" invades that world--hence Richard and Steve Cousins, Mike and Jennifer, Samson and his triumvirate of subjects, and so on. However, for Amis, and this is one reason I find his thematic imagery so compelling, you'd have to tweak the term slightly. It's not so much "force fields" as "gravity fields."

You can tell Amis has been reading Hawking-- he even mentions Hawking in *Time's Arrow*-- and to me the difference between "force" and "gravity" fields is that the former repels as well as attracts, and the latter simply pulls something toward it. The forces that work on his characters are gravity, the pulling of one person to another, a force both universal and inevitable. I haven't really decided for myself whether or not that force is related to anything-- sex, power, greed, the usual suspects. I think it fits more in the framework of Amis' understanding of the universe, viz a viz gravity being the most powerful force in the universe, a force that dictates virtually everything. Maybe it's simply that his characters are discovering that gravity acts on their will as well as their bodies.

Again, I don't know if that's Amis' view of "true" human nature, or whether that's simply a stylistic device to place his characters in a certain time, a certain place. Because, in a psychological sense, given the states of the world, of technology, and of our understanding of the cosmos, we all feel the pull of gravity a little bit more than we used to. So I don't know if Amis is saying that gravity has a literal impact on our wills, but certainly I think it's a masterstroke in terms of highlighting the existential smallness of human beings. I think that's what his characters are constantly finding out for themselves.

I can't really answer your question about how Amis' characters negotiate modern life. In many respects, I don't think they do. The "payoff" for many of his characters, such as Richard or Mike, is simply enlightenment about their status in the universe (in other words they're humbled in some way-- put in galactic perspective). It's a good question, but to answer it I'd need to go more in depth in his books

For instance, I was elated when I discovered, in *Transparent Things*, the joke in M.A.'s foreword in *London Fields*. If you read Nabokov's passage about book titles, and then re-read M.A.'s words, it really casts a funny and rather dubious light on M.A. (Asprey not Amis); Amis gives Samson a final revenge. In any event, I can't talk about *Time's Arrow* too much because I'm at work and I don't have the book here.

Speaking generally, I think that love could possibly save or redeem Mike, and I believe that it's strongly hinted in the crucial final pages that Mike's lover might be able to save her (the one word). I'm fairly sure that *Time's Arrow* is a suicide note because, if I'm remembering things correctly, Mike would have killed herself drinking until she quit, and at the end she sets off to do precisely that. So there's a real chance that Mike will die-- or that someone or something will intervene and save her. It's sort of schmaltzy to say, but, yes, it probably is love. And to his credit Amis doesn't spell that out in neon letters.

"Love," which is often just a form of deep empathy in his books, also appears in, say, *London Fields*, in the passage I'd previously cited in another post (Samson addressing Kim). In *The Information* it comes out in Richard's outpouring of love for his own offspring. Ultimately, I think Amis poses more questions than answers, but definitely "love" or at any rate "empathy" is a wonderful counterbalance in his world to "the information" or "gravity", if you will, but it's always kept in the margins, hinted at, pointed to, but never depicted in broad terms.

By the way, thanks for a great discussion, Robert. I'm glad to see that other people are as deeply interested in Amis' work as I am.