



BOOKS OF THE TIMES; Writers Martin Amis Admires, and He Should Know

By MICHIKO KAKUTANI
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THE WAR AGAINST CLICHÉ

Essays and Reviews, 1971-2000

By Martin Amis

506 pages. Talk Miramax Books. \$35.

In one of the essays in "The War Against Cliché" Martin Amis writes that as a literary journalist, "John Updike has that single inestimable virtue: having read him once, you admit to yourself, almost with a sigh, that you will have to read everything he writes." He continues, "At a time when the reviewer's role has devolved to that of a canary in a prewar coal mine, Updike reminds you that the review can, in its junior way, be something of a work of art, or at least a worthy vehicle for the play of ideas, feeling and wit."

The same might well be said of Mr. Amis, whose reviews and essays in this volume are consistently cogent, often illuminating and almost always entertaining. Though the pieces in this book range over a variety of subjects (including chess, politics, poker and football) with varying degrees of expertise, it is as a literary critic that Mr. Amis distinguishes himself. The author of "London Fields," "The Information" and "Money," he, like Mr. Updike, writes about other novelists as a fellow practitioner, using his own intimate knowledge of the craft to explicate his colleagues' achievements.

Along the way a clear sense of Mr. Amis's own aesthetics emerges: he values vigorous, idiosyncratic language and the achievement of an anomalous, potent voice; he believes that "style is morality;" he loathes clichéd prose and clichéd thinking; and he questions whether biographical facts can shed much light on an artist's work.

But while Mr. Amis clearly loves big, inclusive novels (like Joyce's "Ulysses" and Don DeLillo's "Underworld"), he tries hard to be fairminded in these reviews, to be a mirror as well as a lamp. He praises V. S. Pritchett's stories for igniting "the minutiae of the observed world" with emotional affect; hails Philip Roth as "a comic genius" who often chooses to withhold his talents; and celebrates Jane Austen's "divine comedies of love."

There's an element, to be sure, in Mr. Amis's reviews of checking out the competition and anatomizing others' techniques with an eye to learning new tricks. But there's also an unaccommodated love of literature in these pages, a fervent belief in the transformative powers of fiction and the magical properties of words to conjure beauty and wisdom.

His essay on Philip Larkin -- written in response to Andrew Motion's 1993 biography of that poet -- stands as a devastating response to those politically correct critics who have assailed Larkin as a misogynist and bigot, trying to judge his verse in terms of his life and his life in terms of current social mores. And his essay on "The Adventures of Augie March" emerges as both an impassioned exegesis of a work he hails as "the Great American Novel" and an eloquent tribute to Saul Bellow who, along with Joyce and Nabokov, is installed in the very top tier of Mr. Amis's pantheon of literary heroes.

At his best Mr. Amis demonstrates an empathetic ability to communicate the feel -- the texture, the weight, the tactile energy -- of individual writers' work and to explain to the lay reader how these effects are achieved. He describes Anthony Burgess's "panoptic suavity, his chuckling insouciance, his word-perfect putdowns." He points out that Pritchett's "responsiveness to the quotidian is one of the reasons his stories seem formless." And he salutes "Augie March" for "its fantastic inclusiveness, its pluralism, its qualmlless promiscuity": "in these pages," he writes, "the highest and the lowest mingle and hobnob in the vast democracy of Bellow's prose. Everything is in here, the crushed and the exalted and all the notches in between."

Given his own crack command of language, it's not surprising that Mr. Amis should be equally attuned to the speed and musicality of different writers' prose. Mr. DeLillo's writing is described as "hard-edged, pre-stressed, sheet-metalled"; Mr. Roth's sentences, as "dapper and sonorous, always eventful, never congested." He credits Elmore Leonard with finding a way of "slowing down and suspending the English sentence," thereby opening up "a lag in time" through which he "easily slides, gaining entry to his players' hidden minds." And he writes a paean to Joyce's prose: "this incredible

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