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BOOKS OF THE TIMES; Women May Be From Venus, but Men Are From Hunger

By MICHIKO KAKUTANI

YELLOW DOG

By Martin Amis

340 pages. Miramax Books. \$24.95.

Martin Amis's new novel reads like a sendup of a Martin Amis novel written by someone intent on sabotaging his reputation. It bears as much resemblance to Mr. Amis's best fiction as a bad karaoke singer does to Frank Sinatra, as a kitchen magnet of Munch's "Scream" does to the real painting.

It is a novel that takes every theme, narrative technique and preoccupation of the author and turns it inside out, revealing how qualities that have established Mr. Amis as one of the foremost stylists of his generation can easily devolve into self-indulgence and mannerism; how daring choices in subject matter and form can mutate into mere grossness and hollow pretension.

In "Yellow Dog" his propensity for dwelling on the seamy underside of modern life, for satirizing the squalor, terror and corruption of urban existence, degenerates into a Bret Easton Ellis-like penchant for willful and cheap sensationalism. At the same time Mr. Amis's celebrated love of language wilts in these pages into silly and mindless wordplay, while his mastery of postmodern pyrotechnics withers into an excuse for lazy craftsmanship and a messy, improvised story that is neither provocative nor compelling.

The story, such as it is, is meant to drive home a baldly stated theme: that "men were in power for five million years" but now have to "share it with women," and that as a result women are "a little crazed by their gains in power," and men are "a little crazed by their losses." This idea -- and the related one that men are prone to an atavistic violence and a desire for revenge, that they are hard-wired to seek power and control -- is diagrammatically illustrated with highly contrived subplots involving incest, blackmail, pornography and an out-of-control airplane loaded with hazardous waste.

The central character of "Yellow Dog" is an actor and writer named Xan Meo, who considers himself "the dream husband": "a fifty-fifty parent, a tender and punctual lover, a fine provider, an amusing companion, a versatile and unsqueamish handy man, a subtle and accurate cook, and a gifted masseur who, moreover (and despite opportunities best described as 'ample'), never fools around."

One evening Xan Meo is brutally assaulted by some thugs and sustains a head injury that leaves him a changed man. In the wake of the assault he suffers memory lapses, develops a penchant for profane language and starts entertaining creepy, sexual thoughts about his young daughter. His injury, it seems, has sent him back to a caveman past, stripped of all of civilization's values and taboos. Needless to say, his second -- and heretofore happy -- marriage begins to unravel.

Intercut with Xan Meo's adventures are the stories of half a dozen other tormented people: the king of England, who is trying to cope with a comatose wife and his wayward daughter, Princess Victoria, who is supposedly the subject of a compromising videotape; Clint Smoker, a sleazy columnist for a sleazy tabloid and

a man obsessed with his inadequacy in bed; Ainsley Car, a troubled soccer player who needs a bodyguard to protect the world from his violent outbursts; Joseph Andrews, a "Sexy Beast" style gangster who has spent years in exile from his beloved England; and Royce Traynor, a corpse intent on exacting revenge from beyond the grave.

Mr. Amis does a clumsy, mechanical job of dovetailing these characters' stories, and his narrative curiously lacks the sort of odd, prickly details and zingy dialogue that have distinguished his previous books. Instead there is a rote retailing of the sort of adolescent-minded obsession with bodily functions that surfaced in his earliest fiction, and inane, pointless wordplay that seems like a parody of his much-vaunted fascination with language.

Much is made of the confusion between the gangster Joseph Andrews and the hero of the same name in Henry Fielding's famous novel, and many of the characters in "Yellow Dog" have ridiculous, annoying names: the king's mistress is named "He;" a drug pusher is called "And." There is a series of tiresome e-mail messages from a woman to Clint Smoker ("i thought i'd cheer u up with some verbal 4play") and some equally tiresome excerpts from Clint's offensive and sexist columns: "And who does the judge think he's kidding? He's got the gall to tell us there was 'no provocation.' When the bird was wearing a school uniform."

Much of this book consists of Mr. Amis depicting men who are avatars of chauvinistic rage and repellent sexist compulsions, the same sort of thing David Foster Wallace did in his 1999 collection of stories "Brief Interviews With Hideous Men." Mr. Amis does this in a thoroughly dogged and portentous fashion, embroidering his narrative with heavy-handed asides about how "male anger, male heat" translate into "male violence," how vengeance begets vengeance, how modern life is awash in acts of "horrorism."

None of the newfound depth of emotion displayed by Mr. Amis's extraordinary 2000 memoir "Experience" can be found in these pages; none of the brio and ambition of his 1995 novel "The Information." Were Mr. Amis's name not emblazoned on this book, it seems unlikely to have found a publisher. It reads not as a satire or dark parable of modern life, not even, really, as a fully fashioned novel, but as a bunch of unsavory outtakes from an abandoned project: nasty bits and pieces best left on the cutting room floor.