

Culture

Money, and Martin Amis

Porn-loving, junk-food guzzling, pill-popping John Self is a monster from another era, right? Sadly, 25 years after its first publication, Martin Amis's satire on 80s excess is still spot on, argues Thomas Jones

Thomas Jones
The Guardian, Saturday 15 May 2010
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Greedy guts John Self (centre, played by Nick Frost), with the cast of the BBC's production of Money. Photograph: Laurence Cendrowicz/BBC

For a while there – say, for 25 years or so – it was looking like a good time for capitalism: the early 1980s seemed a turning point in history, the beginning of a victorious endgame for the forces of neoliberalism, the crusaders of money. The governments of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher oversaw the beginning of an apparently unstoppable period of financial deregulation and privatisation, during which organised labour was defeated, communism collapsed and faith in the power of the market grew and spread: almost everyone seemed to agree that the best way to run things was just to stand back and let the money get on with it.

With the run on Northern Rock in 2007, the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008 and the onset of the current – how hopefully people have started to say "recent" – financial crisis, that began to look like a big mistake. The money couldn't be trusted after all: there it had been, busily at work, reliably making more and more of itself, until suddenly it wasn't.

There's a scene in [Martin Amis's Money](#), first published in 1984 and now newly adapted for TV, in which the narrator, John Self, plays a game of chess against one of his neighbours in Notting Hill, a novelist called Martin Amis. They play for money, doubling and redoubling the stakes as each of them thinks he's getting the upper hand. At last the game seems to be heading for stalemate, until one of them finds himself in zugzwang: "Whoever has to move has to lose," says Amis. "If it were my turn now, you'd win. But it's yours. And you lose." You always lose when you go up against money.

The novel is set in the summer of 1981 – the Brixton riots and the royal wedding are going on in the background – as Self, an obscenely successful director of TV commercials, jets between London and New York. His first feature film, a loosely autobiographical, absurdly cerebral

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work. His first feature film, a loosely autobiographical, absurdly topical story, is in development. Having made a small fortune from using images of scantily clad women to sell junk food, Self now plans to make a large fortune on the big screen, under the guidance of his producer, Fielding Goodney, a grinning, permatanned young man he met on a plane, too slick to be true. In one of the novel's many ironies – irony is *Money's* default position – "Slick" is Fielding's nickname for Self.

Amis's narrator is anything but slick: he's obese, junk-guzzling, alcoholic, chainsmoking, pill-popping, priapic, with rotting teeth, tinnitus and a dodgy heart. He's not like us, we can be confident of that: for one thing, we are readers and he is not. He makes quite a big deal out of just how much he isn't a reader, which should be pretty reassuring to us readers. A monster of appetite, John Self has no self-control. In New York, he divides his free time between strip joints, brothels, bars, computer game arcades and fast-food outlets. In London, it's the pub or the kebab shop or the porn emporium or the bookie's. He'd gamble in New York, too, if he could only find somewhere to do it.

Now the way I figured it I had six realistic options. I could sack out right away, with some scotch and a few Serafim. I could go back to the Happy Isles and see what little Moby was up to. I could call Doris Arthur. I could catch a live sex show around the corner, in bleeding Seventh Avenue. I could go out and get drunk. I could stay in and get drunk.

In the end I stayed in and got drunk. The trouble was, I did all the other things first.

He's both producer and rampant consumer of all that's most squalid, all that's most lucrative about the late 20th century. He's the embodiment of 1980s greed, the antisocial manifestation of the notion that there is no such thing as society, the idea that monetary value is the only value.

Of course, if that's all he was, his company would be intolerable, both to the other characters in the novel and to its readers. But John Self has one redeeming feature: he's funny. Funny enough to explain why people would spend time with him (he thinks it's because of his money; you could say he has self-esteem issues), and funny enough to make his misanthropic, paranoid, nihilistic rants and his tales of depravity and humiliation not enjoyable, exactly – you couldn't say *Money* was a pleasure to read, any more than you could say that John Self gets any real pleasure out of smoking, drinking, eating or masturbating – but compulsive, like one of Self's addictions.

"Unless I specifically inform you otherwise," Self says, "I'm always smoking another cigarette." The one-liners come at almost the same rate as the cigarettes. "I should have realised that when English people say they can play tennis they don't mean what Americans mean when they say they can play tennis. Americans mean that they can play tennis." He's self-aware, too, up to a point – "And what am I starring in? It feels like slapstick to me" – and self-deprecating, which is an important part of his ugly charm:

Anyone who's got the balls to stand there and tell me that a handjob isn't exercise just doesn't know what he's talking about. I almost had a heart-attack during number three. I take all kinds of other exercise too. I walk up and down the stairs. I climb into cabs and restaurant booths. I hike to the Butcher's Arms and the London Apprentice. I cough a lot. I throw up pretty frequently which really takes it out of you. I sneeze, and hit the tub and the can. I get in and out of bed, often several times a day.

You might think, after more than a quarter of a century, that there's enough distance between us and *Money*, between now and Thatcher's 1980s, to provide a comfort zone, so we can read it safe in the knowledge that the satire no longer really applies, just as we can smile at the irony that the passing of time has brought to bear on Self's observation about Lady Diana and the Prince of Wales – "she doesn't look as though she'll give him any trouble" – and wonder at the intimations of the internet: "all America was interflexed by computer processors whose roots spread ever outward from the trunks of skyscrapers until they looped like a web from city to city". It would be nice to think that John Self was a monster from another time. Yeah, right.

The world of *Money* is a world saturated in pornography. (One definition of pornography might be saying "sex" when you mean "money".) Pornography is everywhere; everything has been porned. The crazy

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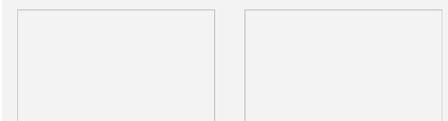
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Hollywood actors who are going to be starring in Self's movie have porno names: Lorne Guyland, Spunk Davis, Butch Beausoleil, Caduta Massi. The fast-food outlets and the junk they sell have porno names: Rumpburger, Big Thick Juicy Hot One, Long Whoppers. Even Self's sex-life is pornographic. In London he has a girlfriend, Selina Street, whom he treats like pornography: she's only sleeping with him for the money, "goes around the place looking like a nude magazine", dresses up in ridiculous underwear and tells him dirty stories about having sex with other people while he has sex with her. He finds it disconcerting if her orgasms don't sound fake. When a stripper in New York asks him what he does, he says that he's "in pornography . . . Right up to here." He's not just talking about his job in advertising: he's talking about his life.

I realise, when I can bear to think about it, that all my hobbies are pornographic in tendency. The element of lone gratification is bluntly stressed. Fast food, sex shows, space games, slot machines, video nasties, nude mags, drink, pubs, fighting, television, handjobs.

But still, prominent though they are in Self's life and worldview, pornography and the sex industry in *Money* are relatively inaccessible, deviant, beyond the pale. Self has to seek them out in grimy dives down dirty alleyways. Flicking through a porn mag in a newsagent's in London, he has it knocked out of his hands by an angry young woman who asks him why he isn't ashamed of himself. (He says he is.)

But since *Money* was published, pornography has gone mainstream; the mainstream has gone pornography. The proliferation of lads' mags, pole-dancing classes, literary magazines holding launch parties in sex shops, breast implants and labioplasty – none of this counts as porn these days; the frontiers have been pushed well back. If John Self were around today, he'd surely never leave his computer.

When people write in praise of *Money* – and it's the novel of Amis's that tends to garner the most praise, the great English novel of the 1980s and so on – something they tend to skip over is the misogyny question: nobody wants to be seen to praise a book for being "really great, apart from the rape jokes". In one review, Ian Hamilton wrote that Self was "grotesque and lovable", and that *Money* "will be thought of for years to come as one of the key books of the decade". He didn't mention the misogyny. It didn't come up. But surely it has to: his misogyny, as much as his love of money, is one of Self's defining characteristics.

At times *Money* reads as a kind of misogynist manifesto. Self is racist and homophobic, too, but his tirades against black men and gay men don't have the deep-felt relish, or the frequency, of his misogynist rants.

You know, I've been told that I don't like women. I do like women. I think chicks are cool. I've been told that men don't like women, period. Oh yeah? Who does then? Because women don't like women . . . Here is a secret that nobody knows: God is a woman. Look around! Of course She is.

Self's a misogynist, no question. Is Martin Amis? Who cares? True, quite a lot of people seem to care, if the recent flurry of media attention around the publication of his most recent novel, *The Pregnant Widow*, is anything to go by. But never mind the author, what about the text? What about *Money*? The young woman in the newsagent's isn't the only feminist in the story. Doris Arthur, the writer who's turning Self's story into a script, meets him at his father's pub, the Shakespeare, in Pimlico. She asks about the motivation of one of the (female) characters in his story. He takes her through to a backroom where there's a stripshow going on. "Can you see okay, or do you want to sit on my face? Tell me something. What's her motivation? What's theirs?" Arthur walks out in tears, calls him an "asshole" and says: "I didn't know they were still cranking them out" – "them" meaning men like Self. The next time they meet she thanks him for showing her how far feminism still has to go. I don't think she'd be cheered by how much or how little things have changed in the last 30 years.

For all the sneering at "motivation" – and Martin Amis (the character in the novel, not its author) does a fair bit of that, too – there's a hefty clue as to why Self may have turned out the way he has in the novel's most disturbing scene, which takes place in another backroom at the Shakespeare:

The parlour had come on a long way since I was a boy. Now, it was close

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with money. The ribbed and pimped gas fire in whose anglepoise heat I used to dress myself for school had been supplanted by a black eggbasket of counterfeit coal. The granny table where I ate my toast was now a cocktail cabinet, with studded plastic, three high stools, a Manhattan skyline of siphons and shakers. Vron reclined on a dramatic sofa of white corduroy. She was a pale brunette of comfortable build, my age. I had seen her before somewhere.

Vron is the stripper we – and Self and Doris – saw earlier. She's also Self's father's girlfriend (his mother died when he was a boy). "It's a very special day for my Vron," Self's father says. She pulls a porn mag out from under the coffee-table and shows the men her photospread. John turns the pages. Vron cries with pride. "My father gazed at me manfully. I believe there was a tear or two in his eyes also."

Considering what this scene implies about Self's upbringing, it's surprising he's not even more of a fuck-up than he is. With nothing else to rely on, no wonder he's so dependent on the things that seem as if they'll never let him down, because there's nowhere lower for them to let him down to: booze, fags, pills, junk food, pornography, money. Good old honest money, always there, brazenly making more and more of itself, until one day, suddenly, it isn't.

The two-part TV adaptation of *Money* begins on 23 May as part of BBC2's Eighties season.

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 Staff
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 **Doody**
15 May 2010, 9:25AM

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Terrific writer, terrible novelist. The sentences zing, but the characters of the purest cardboard, especially the women, and it has a completely unconvincing ending, as does London Fields. The journey there is fun though.

 **pastalin**
15 May 2010, 11:21AM

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I quite enjoyed that book. Cant understand Nick Frost playing Self though.

 **hugsandpuppies**
15 May 2010, 3:41PM

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Loved Money and London Fields - everything else...not so much. Such a shame he followed the trajectory of his father into a reactionary tosser. If only someone would kick his teeth in he might start writing better...

 **seanmcnulty**
15 May 2010, 5:01PM

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13 May 2010, 5:21 PM

Self's a misogynist, no question. Is Martin Amis? Who cares? True, quite a lot of people seem to care, if the recent flurry of media attention around the publication of his most recent novel, *The Pregnant Widow*, is anything to go by. But never mind the author, what about the text? What about *Money*?

Disgraceful sleight of hand above, in an otherwise okay piece. **'So when did you stop battering your wife, Mr. Amis?'**

How slimy to introduce the question of Amis's supposed misogyny – to suggest that *he hates women in general* – and then just to breeze on past with a 'Who cares?' and 'But never mind the author...' especially as the passage you then discuss clearly proves the novel to be *anti*-misogynistic.

To suggest that he *may* be a misogynist, you better 1. be pretty clear how serious an accusation this is (= Martin Amis despises women in general); 2. provide some unequivocal evidence (quotes) for the suggestion.

We must have a term for those very, very few psychos who genuinely loathe women in general. Every blurring – as above – of the meaning of 'misogynist' makes this harder.

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doctorbidston

15 May 2010, 10:13 PM

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Bigging up Amis is a geocultural gaffe. If you want moral direction on questions of money and sex, you're better off listening to country and western music. If you want beautiful sentences, read Catullus or Frank O'Hara. Both of these come without any whining prescriptivism and won't put you off your food.



Kralin

15 May 2010, 10:53 PM

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Money is a great novel. The misogynist stuff above is rubbish. None of the great American novelists that Amis adores get anything like the hassle he does over this. John Self is a complete job, but hilarious, and characters like Selina Street belong entirely to the type of fantasies guys like him buy into.

Anyone who doesn't laugh at the description of the horse race his 'dad' wins a fortune on hasn't got a sense of humour. But the novel is full of brilliant stuff like this. And aside from the American influences there's a bit of Dickens in there as well.

Up to and including this novel Amis' endings were great, very nasty things unfolding almost beyond the characters' (and readers') comprehensions, though a second reading of *Money* reveals many clues - I wasn't sharp enough to pick up on them first time round: the papers he signs, for example.



Percy1916

16 May 2010, 7:44 PM

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Money was his best. I first read it as a volunteer teacher in Egypt in 1987 when I didn't have any, and I thought it summed up virtually everything I was glad to be away from. I still live and work abroad.

I don't think he's bettered it, though he writes entertainingly - *Yellow Dog's* a funny read. *House of Meetings* has its moments too. *London Fields* was almost bound to disappoint, but anyone who's chucked an arrow in a pub as a stranger will recognise certain sly truths in it; and the names of the regular crew are priceless. I don't think I'll be doing the *Information* again though, or *Night Train*.

I do think he's hard on Keats as a poet. But that autobiographical stuff about his old man and the cousin who fell victim to Fred West was well done. The Stalin book was odd, but illuminating.

The old punk in me still enjoys *Dead Babies*, mind.

I haven't read the latest one, still waiting for its appearance second hand.

It's pointless judging him on misogyny/race/sexual bias - we're all equally guilty it would seem (born that way). I would say I thought he held these things up more for scorn than any wry irony.

In short, for me he's someone who found innovative ways of expressing things, but few are interested in what he wants to talk about. Bit like Julie Burchill.



bluesfan86

17 May 2010, 2:29 PM

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A 21st century book in the same mold, but much easier to read.

http://www.amazon.com/Affluenza-David-LaBounty/dp/0984173803/ref=sr_1_26?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1272891739&sr=1-26



chongkina
17 May 2010, 3:34PM

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Amis is just carrying on his father's business.

I'm a librarian in Middle America and I've noticed a couple of interesting things about the Amises here. First, according to Amazon the only Kingsley Amis novel currently in print in the U.S. is "Lucky Jim." Doesn't that seem strange? On the other hand Martin Amis' works seem to be pretty much all available on Amazon but I've noticed that when I put them on the shelf my customers turn up their noses at them. But then who needs Martin Amis when you have Rush Limbaugh?



AugustineSteven
17 May 2010, 9:15PM

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"On the other hand Martin Amis' works seem to be pretty much all available on Amazon but I've noticed that when I put them on the shelf my customers turn up their noses at them."

Always heartening to find a librarian playing the Philistine, sneering at books because they aren't popular. Lucky "customers".

"But then who needs Martin Amis when you have Rush Limbaugh?"

Oh good. You can't read, either.



AugustineSteven
17 May 2010, 9:15PM

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tinlaurelledandhardy
19 May 2010, 2:01AM

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AugustineSteven

Best one-liner reviews I've seen for some time. I'd like to see you take on *The Way Things Ought to Be*.

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