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## THE GREAT ADDICTION

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**Lead:**

### MONEY

A Suicide Note. By Martin **Amis**. 363 pp. New York: Viking. \$16.95.

THE narrator and protagonist of "**Money**," John Self, 35, half-American Brit, director of "controversial TV ads for smoking, drinking, junk food and nude magazines," is on a roll, riding the momentum of his addictions to smoking, drinking, junk food and nude magazines, plus a few other products of the dependence industries - television, dope, gambling, hitting women, synthetic confidence and, supremely, **money**, the "**money** monkey" on his back. After a late night of overindulgence, at a breakfast meeting in New York with a producer who wants him to direct a movie and "three preliminary moneymen," Self starts "making an extraordinary noise":

"I heard that noise again the other day, while trying to force the last drops of ketchup from a plastic tomato. It was no big deal. I simply coughed myself into a crying jag and had to be helped downstairs. . . . If I were them, I'd enjoy the spectacle. It does my poor old ticker good to see someone really totalled - by his own hand, mind you. Not blasted by outside nature or misfortune, which only frightens me. But they're a bit more puritanical in the States, hence the looks of incredulous solicitude."

**Text:**

The plot of "**Money**" is in a basic, grand tradition. A guy gets totaled. Maybe he survives - in comedy - but he's spectacularly brought down. What makes this book special and important is that it revitalizes its tradition. Its trans-Atlantic urban show-biz patter and smart literary patterns could have been just a jaded fast-lane bummer, a depleting ride in John Self's purple Fiasco - "a vintage-style coupe with oodles of dash and heft and twang." But instead the book's dash and heft and twang serve a deeper energy, a reimagined na"ivete that urgently asks a basic, grand question: what on earth are the rest of us supposed to make of the spectacle of a fellow human getting totaled?

Ashamed of "not knowing anything" (a state he explains by his working-class

background), Self at one point finds himself wearing a tight cummerbund and needing to go to the men's room while trapped in a seat at the Met for "Otello":

"Luckily I must have seen the film or the TV spinoff. . . . The language problem remained a problem but the action I could follow without that much effort. The flash . . . general arrives to take up a position on some island, bringing with him the Lady-Di figure as his bride. Then she starts diddling one of his lieutenants, a funloving kind of guy whom I took to immediately. Same old story. . . . But Otello's sidekick is onto them, and, hoping to do himself some good, tells all to the guvnor. . . . He can't or won't believe it. A classic situation. Well, love is blind, I thought, and shifted in my seat. . . . And now, as the thing on stage came nearer to being over, as I kung-fued my pushy pain into the corner of submission (oh, this bellyful of tender torment), I heard the woman pleading for forgiveness, alone, in a voice that confesses to all the dangers and addictions entailed by a bodily nature. . . . Ah, forgive her, for Christ's sake. . . . Rough her up a bit, okay, teach her a lesson, divorce her, but don't but don't. . . . He holds the pillow now. I can't bear to watch. . . . Don't kill her, just for her *nature*, I thought."

Misconstrual redeemed (sort of). This may be the author's best-case scenario for any self's attempt to connect with the suffering and destruction of others. At the end of his rope, John Self cries, "What is the *point* of me?" - the same question that sophisticated people say is the dumbest thing you can ask about a work of art. Self describes his life as a form of art, his "private culture." "It isn't really very nice," he says, but, on the other hand, "even dirt has its patterns and seeks its forms." So, which petty, spurious route to responsiveness do we choose? Do our tickers beat a little faster with enjoyment of his dirty formal spectacle? Or do we feel fear or (we Americans) "incredulous solicitude," depending on whether or not his pain coincides with our own need to go to the restroom?

The matter of blame comes up, as it will. It's one way to get interested in other people's problems. It's also a way to stay interested in your own. Self attributes his destructive course to his own hand - he's not stupid - but that only leads to bafflement: "Me, I don't like what I want. What I want has long moved free of what I like, and I watch it slip away with grief, with helplessness. . . . What is this state, seeing the difference between good and bad and choosing bad - or consenting to bad, okaying bad?" So he tries other culprits - vampire voices in his head, or Mum, or Martin.

Martin Amis appears by name as a character in his own novel - a kind of Clare Quilty with the ultimate mask off. A high-minded ascetic type given to theoretical chitchat about the art of fiction and the phenomenon of "gratuitous crime," Martin meets Self in a pub and is hired by him as a last-ditch savior. Self's movie directing is being direly threatened by the four stars' irreconcilable ego demands about the screenplay, and Martin's job is to do a rewrite that makes everybody happy. Martin may look like the biggest sellout and hypocrite in the book's teeming cast of artists - con artists, hot air artists, sack artists, all in it for **money**. But his true peer is hidden in a shadowy crevice of the novel (Mr. Amis's fifth):

"Among the alleys and rooftops near the Ashbery (Hotel) . . . a nimble maniac sprints and climbs at large. What he needs to do is drop slating and masonry on to the heads of strolling theatergoers and diners. He has done it five times now. . . . Ultraviolet

policemen lie in wait up there but they can't seem to catch him, this rooftop psychopath, adept of eave and sill, of buttress and skyhatch, this infinite-mass artist. So he darts and shinnies his way through the gothic jaggedness of fire- escapes, drainpipes and TV aerials, while beneath him Broadway crackles in late-night styrofoam, and there is no **money** involved. There is no **money** for him up there at any point."

"**Money**: A Suicide Note" is also a confession - the author's confession of the gratuitous crime of totaling John Self. This self-conscious and Self-indulgent novel has an impact that is, paradoxically, selfless. Self doesn't remember writing out his story, his "suicide note" ("The handwriting on the pad was unrecognizable as mine, much more upright and correct"), and it reads as if Mr. Amis doesn't remember composing it. It's like a tale taken down in a trance by a medium in the grip of a spirit control, one of those prankish controls waxing autobiographical from a spectral barstool.

A chessboard plays a major role, but a Ouija board would be more appropriate. The prose tugs and veers like a Ouija board's planchette (or like the skidding Fiasco car, which "has never been much of an A-to-B device"). It's a simple storytelling voice but skewed by blind ignorance and binge-addict switches of direction. The vocabulary is cryptic with recombinant junk - adcopy syllables, porn buzz, street argot, **money** lingo and shreds of high art, dinosaur and space flicks and music hall turns.

The characters do their best with what barely amounts to language. Self's penniless, manipulative girlfriend, Selina Street, talks a teasing blue-movie streak but sends her real messages in code: "You know why not." (Pathetic in the limited moves open to her, this minimal character emerges as the most memorable bad woman in fiction since the raging Maureen in Philip Roth's "My Life as a Man.") Lorne Guyland, the aging star of Self's movie, supplies the book's comic peaks in his disjointed filibusters for more virile screen time. When he rants about "a poet called Rimbo," Self thinks, "it's not Rimbo, it's Rambot, or Rambeau. Rambeau had a pal or contemporary, I seem to remember, with a name like wine . . . Bordeaux, Bardolino. No, that's Italian . . . isn't it? Oh, Christ, the exhaustion of not knowing anything."

One theme of "**Money**" is rich and impoverished language. And some of its least promising word games end up making the most beautiful patterns: "Fielding Goodney was already in attendance at the Dimmesdale room when I strolled into the Carraway a little after six. Erect among the misangled chairs, he stood with his back to me in the depths of this grotto of glass, two limp fingers raised in a gesture of warning or stipulation. . . . 'Just wash the ice with it,' I heard him say. 'None in the glass, all right? Just wash it.' " Much later: "With **money**, double-dazzle New York is a crystal conservatory. Take **money** away, and you're naked and shielding your Johnson in a cataract of breaking glass."

IN a thoroughly earned conclusion, Mr. Amis

writes: "Life is an aggregate, an aggregate of all

the lives that have ever been lived on the planet

Earth." John Self is an aggregate man. In fact, the only way he can imagine changing

is by flying to California for a costly surgical "rethink" - getting all new bionic parts. He resembles Zeno, the hypochondriac, nicotine-addict, womanizing narrator of Italo Svevo's 1923 Modernist classic, "The Confessions of Zeno." Zeno, finally resolving that the "effort to procure health is in vain" in the modern world, found his "cure" in **money**, buying and selling in the pre-World War I boom. Mr. Amis, treating **money** as "the great addiction" and "the great fiction," picks up where Svevo left off, as if shouldering responsibility for the earlier writer's irony.

Mr. Amis's modern world contains one too many colorful New York cabbies (such a stock character weakens the opening episode). But you could read "**Money**" as an extended, heartfelt reply to the punch line of the joke about how many New York cabbies it takes to screw in a lightbulb: "What's it to ya?"B

HIGH STYLE AND LOW THINGS LONDON Martin Amis's fifth novel, "**Money**," seethes with Swiftian disgust at the corrupting effect of filthy lucre and the private hell of lonely gratification. But Mr. Amis, the 35-year-old son of the novelist Kingsley Amis, shrinks from the idea of being thought an overt moralist. "If one reduces the book to a motto," he said, "it sounds a bit banal. What I found pushing me on was the old link between **money** and ordure and a subconscious image of wealth as the tarnished jewel in the garbage heap. I also had in mind a remark of Saul Bellow's that the astonishing thing about **money** is the way it has survived identification as the root of all evil and that its fans have somehow kept it going. Alongside **money** I place a world of culture, in the face of which the hero, John Self, feels ashamed. But I see it as a positive book with a happy ending in that the only thing that could save Self was a good dose of poverty." In addition to Bellow, Mr. Amis lists Dickens, Joseph Heller and Nabokov among his eclectic literary heroes, and the influence of Nabokov can be felt in the book's sheer delight in language. "I wanted to get away from a tight structure and worries about form and proportion and let the language carry me along," Mr. Amis said. "What I've tried to do is create a high style to describe low things: the whole world of fast food, sex shows, nude mags. I'm often accused of concentrating on the pungent, rebarbative side of life in my books, but I feel I'm rather sentimental about it. Anyone who reads the tabloid papers will rub up against much greater horrors than I describe." Like most successful novelists, Mr. Amis has had his brushes with the movie business which is sharply satirized in "**Money**." Was the book partly an act of cultural revenge? "Not really. I've used the movie background in the book to question the modern idea that everyone is somehow an artist. The artists in my story are bull artists, con artists, drink artists." Much of Mr. Amis's reputation as a novelist rests on his ability to illuminate the seamy side of life with a laserlike wit. Now, as the father of a 4 1/2-month-old son, he feels he may be mellowing and that his future heroes won't be patrolling the 42d Street porn parlors. Speaking of fatherhood, how did Kingsley Amis react to his son's work? "He can't finish my stuff. I tell him he carries incuriosity to fanatical extremes." - *Michael Billington*



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