

700,000 people in the street

[Be There](#)

July 26, 1981

## Mary Lamb and Mr. Wrong

By EVAN HUNTER

I do not appreciate an obscure novel. The only clear signal such a book transmits to me is that a writer was either too lazy or too cowardly to reveal completely his mind or his heart. To me obscurity presumes the need for an academic middleman, an eager translator who will explain all to the sluggish reader and thereby become a collaborator in the act of creation. This should not be the role of a critic.

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**OTHER PEOPLE**  
**A Mystery Story.** By  
Martin Amis.

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Martin Amis's fourth novel is titled "Other People: A Mystery Story." There are mysteries galore in its pages, but the book faces no danger of being lost in a bookshop's genre section. Mr. Amis has more "serious" matters on his mind, it would appear, and he sets about exploring them by presenting us with an amnesia victim who awakens in what seems to be a hospital and does not know who, where, or even *what* she is. Barefoot, bewildered and released onto the street by what is surely the world's most irresponsible hospital (if it *is* a hospital), she wanders out into what we later learn is London and begins to discover a strange new universe.

Is this to be a novel of identity, common in the 60's, when so many people were trying to "find" themselves through psychoanalysis or drugs? Or is it to be a satiric glimpse of human foibles as seen through the eyes of an innocent like Oliver Goldsmith's Chinese Traveler in the London of 1762? Are we meant to recognize the "other people" of the title as representing only our poor, pitiable selves, seen clearly and penetratingly by a child-woman who sometimes resembles the peculiarly naive hero of Jerzy Kosinski's "Being There"? What, exactly, is expected of us here, and how does Mr. Amis propose to elicit whatever response he is seeking?

The book details the adventures and misadventures of our heroine abroad, who takes the name of "Mary Lamb" from the snatches of the nursery rhyme she hears recited by one of a group of drunks in her first encounter with the wide, wide world of crazies at large. In succeeding chapters, she is transported from the bowels of London to its esophagus, so to speak, in stages of upward mobility that bring her ever closer to discovering her real self, the "Amy Hide" (Amis Hiding?) who may or may not have been the acquiescent victim of a would-be-murderer. We never learn who this murderer was or is. He is identified throughout as "Mr. Wrong," but in an

anticlimactic confrontation scene, he remains faceless, and we never quite understand whether his final embrace is intended as a kiss of death or of resuscitation, even though Mary ends up with a mouth "full of stars." Since this scene is followed by a reprise of the awakening at the beginning of the novel, are we to believe that Mary/Amy is in a fugue state some amnesiacs suffer?

And who is this *other* person in the book, a voice that erupts interminably, sharing supposedly pithy thoughts on life and death? The very last passage would lead us to believe he is only the inept murderer coming back to do the job good and proper this time. But there are clues all along that he is none other than the godlike author himself, periodically and irritatingly intruding, commenting on action we have already seen or are about to see, and making of himself a general nuisance, as for example: "I'm forever having to cope with these rather puzzling and regrettable people. You'll be running into a few more of them too. But all under my control, of course, all under my protection and control." Or again: "'Well at least *Alan* will be all right for a while,' I hear you murmur. But he won't be. Alan thinks that other stuff was bad. He thinks that other stuff was as bad as stuff could get. He's wrong. You wait.'"

This other person--this sometimes smugly omniscient, sometimes sophomorically philosophical, always disembodies voice that speaks directly to the reader--is only one of the many dismaying "other people" (two words that appear like a litany on virtually every other page) in this short, bitter book. Mr. Amis would seem far too young to have acquired such a dismal view of the world. Perhaps the sun will break through in London one day.

*Evan Hunter, whose most recent novel is "Love, Dad," uses the pseudonym Ed McBain for his novels about crime and punishment, the latest of which is "Rumpelstiltskin."*

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