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Her Long Goodbye

Martin Amis has written a police procedural about a father who seeks an explanation for his daughter's suicide.

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By PATRICK MCGRATH

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This is Martin Amis's ninth novel, and it is about suicide. "Suicide is the night train, speeding your way to darkness. . . . You buy your ticket and you climb on board. That ticket costs everything you have. But it's just a one-way."

NIGHT TRAIN

By Martin Amis.

175 pp. New York:

Harmony Books. \$20.

It's a subject Amis has explored in his fiction before.

"Money," his 1984 comic masterpiece, was subtitled "A Suicide Note" and involved its narrator, John Self, in a gloriously botched suicide attempt: this hapless Englishman tries to end it all with what turns out to be a combination of aspirin, antibiotics and yeast pills. "London Fields," an altogether darker piece of work, published five years later, teems with grim jokes and dire millennial speculation. At its center is a character called Nicola Six, who knows she is to be murdered, who even knows who will do the murdering -- but, rather than try to cheat her fate, goes to elaborate lengths to facilitate it.

"Night Train" attempts neither the scope nor the tone of those books. It is instead a tightly constructed, highly focused and somber short novel: a police procedural that elegantly defers to the conventions of the genre while at the same time sinking its probes deep into the question of human motivation. Like suicide, this too is a familiar preoccupation within Amis's impressive body of work. (As well as the novels, he has published three collections of journalism and one of stories.) And so, thematically at least, "Night Train" does not break new ground. Rather, it isolates and refines Amis's thinking on these subjects.

What is new, in an author who has specialized in charting the swampy bottom lands of the contemporary British male psyche, is his choice of narrator. This is not just an

American, not just a cop, but a female cop: a detective called Mike Hoolihan.

What sort of woman is she? "I used to be something, I guess, but now I'm just another big blond old broad," she says. She describes her legs as "road drills on casters," and her handbag "is like a town dump that's gone through a car compactor." A broad-shouldered 44-year-old ex-alcoholic, Mike takes on the job, as the novel opens, of investigating the apparent suicide of a young woman named Jennifer Rockwell. Jennifer is the only daughter of a member of the police brass called Colonel Tom, who in turn is a powerful father figure for Mike Hoolihan: he saved her life by getting her off booze. Now he wants Mike to explain what happened to his daughter.

Amis has frequently employed a doubling or twinning device in the organization of his books. "Money" contained a character called Martin Amis as well as another called Martina Twain, the two fulfilling similar functions in John Self's story. Elsewhere he has created pairs of mismatched characters locked in competitive relationships, often in the form of an urbane upper-class figure whose fate is yoked to that of a much coarser type -- Gregory and Terry in "Success," for example, or Guy Clinch and the ghastly Keith Talent in "London Fields." Richard and Gwyn, the main characters in "The Information," a mordant and hilarious dissection of literary envy, represent a further permutation of this design. When the final showdown occurs, as it always does, the craftier and more brutish character invariably comes out on top.

This recurrent triumph of the primitive and mediocre over the civilized serves to point up the idea that qualities like integrity, breeding, decency, sophistication and confidence are redundant in the face of emergent social barbarism. In Amis's books, the thugs tend to win, and not only in the social sphere. Physical decay, the fact of mortality, the inexorability of the coming of death: these are the deep-structural certainties that underpin the various forms of cultural breakdown he documents with such relish and wit.

One approach to "Night Train" and its dense constellation of ideas is to see this trope of the double being again brought into play, but this time in an almost Platonic manner; to see, that is, the brainy, lovely and seemingly untroubled Jennifer Rockwell as an ideal form of the tough and battered Mike Hoolihan. Both have had paternal care from Colonel Tom, and this sibling linkage makes Mike not merely eligible but essential for "solving" the mystery of Jennifer's death. These two women, stark opposites in everything from their wardrobes to their lovers to their jobs -- and also, of course, in the matter of mortality -- are now drawn into a haunted intimacy as Mike penetrates the fabric of the dead woman's existence. And what eventually becomes apparent to Mike is that Jennifer has laid a trail for her, that Jennifer knew she was coming. The question, of course, is why.

Amis first properly attacked the problem of motivation in "Money." John Self, a character of vast bulk, vitality, appetites and libido, is a London film director on the loose in New York and hot in pursuit of a deal. Imagining himself about to become seriously rich, he has in fact been set up by his American partner in an elaborate sting operation. When all is revealed, and an explanation sought as to why the partner did it, the Martin Amis character in the book expresses skepticism about even asking such a question -- motivation as a controlling force in human affairs is said to be exhausted, and the idea of gratuitous crime is articulated.

This theme resurfaces in "Night Train." Here, though, it is not a sting operation that needs explanation but an incomprehensible suicide. There would seem to be no reason for Jennifer Rockwell to kill herself. She came from a secure and loving family, and it is with some tenderness that Amis sets up the close tribal warmth not just of the Rockwells but of the police community to which they and Mike belong, with Colonel Tom depicted -- without irony, Mike Hoolihan being a straightforward, if blinkered, narrator -- as a loved and respected patriarch.

The dead woman had no problems in her emotional and sexual life. Her lover, Trader Faulkner, gives Mike a plausible account of the health of their relationship. Mike also interviews Jennifer's doctor, Hi Tulkingshorn, and her boss, Bax Denziger, a physicist at the Institute of Physical Problems, where Jennifer worked in the Department of Terrestrial Magnetism attempting to measure the age of the universe. These sections of the novel are models of economy: clear, strong characterizations established in a few broad strokes, complex clusters of ideas evoked with deftness and panache.

As he did to such extraordinary effect in "London Fields," the closest of his books in theme and temper to "Night Train," Amis employs ideas drawn from astrophysics as a conceptual backdrop to the drama. Life's brevity, its nastiness and brutishness -- particularly at the end of the 20th century -- are thrown into sharp relief by comparison with vast cosmic realities. Stephen Hawking is referred to more than once, his pre-eminence on the subject of black holes being explained this way: "Hawking understood black holes because he could stare at them. Black holes mean oblivion. Mean death. And Hawking has been staring at death all his adult life."

IN a way, the same could be said of Martin Amis. A tone of deep sadness, of grief even, has always been apparent in his work, lending depth and edge to a prose crackling with wit and invention. That same elegiac tone is present in "Night Train," but this time it is unrelieved by the antic flamboyance of the earlier work. This brilliant, painful short novel is, in fact, so profoundly inflected with grief that it achieves in the end a sort of melancholy grandeur.

"Night Train" is at heart a work of dark romanticism, a tale of possession. Jennifer Rockwell, soul of the world, can no longer look upon that world. Mike Hoolihan, salt of the earth, comes to understand why. How will she cope with the information? Death is the ultimate thug in Martin Amis's work. Will it again come out on top?

Patrick McGrath's most recent novel is "Asylum."



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