

Muddled Brilliance

Finding the Significance in Martin Amis' New Novel *Yellow Dog*

Samuel Carlisle

12/1/2003

Lapses in judgment from a major voice always seem the most confusing to gauge. Glaring faults from a lesser author, one whose renown is safely bound to expire or one who doesn't personally speak to you, can be passed off with a guiltless lashing of criticism. But authors of more consequential ilk, ones capable of saying something quite extraordinary, can sometimes err while still giving us something with considerable weight and verve. So how do you appraise a novel whose luster is muddled with shortcomings? What do you say when the work is amply meaningful in parts and yet slips in its overall experience? One approach, muddled itself, is that significance, like experience, can reside in bits and pieces of a blemished whole. In Martin Amis' new novel, *Yellow Dog*, you can acknowledge these flaws while still appreciating its notable significance.

Martin Amis didn't, as many reviewers have charged, terminally botch his latest work. Contrary to Michiko Kakutani's statement in her *New York Times* review, *Yellow Dog*, did deserve to be published, and it very much deserves to be read. But she also had much ground to stand on maintaining that "Amis's celebrated love of language wilts in these pages into silly and mindless wordplay". There's something off balance about *Yellow Dog*, something that could have worked better, some poignancy thwarted by an overly ambitious telling of the story. The rich potential in *Yellow Dog's* writing should be readily apparent to any reader, but it may take a perceptive forgiveness to grant its worth in the face of its limitations.

The largest and most ever-present barrier to appreciating the book is actually how well written it is. Amis' prose, usually subtly concise and full of meaning through suggestion, has here become so crammed with observation and wit that the story can't help but lose prominence due to the very words ambitiously telling it. In every single sentence, over-filling every paragraph, characters aren't allowed to breathe, raise an arm, or turn in their seat without an analogy to accompany their movements. A video tape can't fall to the ground without a digression that it landed in "clear contravention of all life's laws (which demanded that every dropped object lands the wrong way up)". It may seem odd to criticize a writing style that, when taken in more modest proportions, lays a charmed omniscience onto the world (a central part of the experience of reading). But the hyper awareness of describing and analogizing the most minute of human ephemera reaches a critical density in *Yellow Dog* that frazzles the overall story. And it reaches this point early and never leaves it.

And there are more *auteur* distractions before you can get to the protein of the novel. There's a naming scheme that can only be described as hopelessly cute. There are characters named And and He, complete with the obvious self-creating word play their names create. Xan's American wife is named, ironically (I guess), Russia, while the King's servant, Bugger, is a completely chaste man. *Yellow Dog*, 's thesis, about sex and violence in the absence of social restraint, is conveyed through sometimes blatantly didactic

dialogue. And the thrust of the novel is blurred throughout by "suspenseful" subplots better fit for "edge of your seat" movies. For instance, not only is the book interspersed with clips of an airplane headed for imminent disaster, but there's another subplot about a comet that may catastrophically crash into the earth. Neither event is ever tied into the rest of the story except in their generic amplification of suspense as the other stories climax.

And still, despite all these ample hindrances, there's much that engages and entertains in the book, and an ending momentarily strong enough to make the whole work seem to succeed.

Once you settle in to the tartness of its prose, *Yellow Dog*, has some very compelling themes to expound. The crux of the novel, throughout its many tangential subplots and underneath of its blinding writing, is the lowlier sides of libido, the totalitarian stranglehold that sex can have over our psyches, superseding all other personal values. Or, more specifically, it's about the hold sex can have over the male mind. The novel's overt point is that the de-personalizing violence innate in male lust and in male behavior is never more than a discarded social taboo away.

At the center of the story is Xan Meo, a famous actor and now author, whose brute genetic inheritance is about to catch up with him. Successful to a fault, Xan describes himself as "the dream husband: a fifty-fifty parent, a tender and punctual lover, a fine provider". >>>



© 2003 Samuel Carlisle