

ROYAL  
TREATMENT

Check out what  
to see, eat and  
do in London!

The New York Times  
Travel  
nytimes.com/travel

May 26, 1974

## The Rachel Papers

*Not the son of Lucky Jim*

By GRACE GLUECK

Just 20 years after "Lucky Jim," Kingsley Amis's famously funny novel about life at a minor British university, his 24-year-old son Martin has made so bold as to produce a novel himself; though--to say it right off--not really one to give a novelist father the sweats. (It seems quite in the order of things that the jacket bears a blurb from Auberon Waugh hailing Amis *films* as "a new novelist of intelligence, wit and an apparently reckless honesty. . . a formidable and exceptional talent." Is there a club for novelists' novelist sons?)

---

**THE RACHEL  
PAPERS**  
By Martin Amis.

---

We shall, of course, sportingly refrain from referring to Martin's book as "Son of Lucky Jim." And, since we know that novels are meant to inflect, not reflect, real life, we shall abstain from comment on the fact that in this crotch-and-armpit saga of late adolescence the young anti-hero finds his father to be a large order of bastard.

About to be 20 and fighting a last-ditch stand against Manhood, Charles Highway (whose imedium-length, arseless, waistless figure corrugated ribcage and bandy legs gang up to dispel any hint of aplomb") is a hypochondriacal connoisseur of fleshly lapses (his own and others), a compulsive pimple-squeezer, nostril tweezer, used handkerchief inspector and wrinkle enumerator. Here, frinstance is Charles's lyrical description of his mother: "What a heap. The skin had shrunken over her skull, to accentuate her jaw and to provide commodious cellarage for the gloomy pools that were her eyes; her breasts had long forsaken their native home and now flanked her navel; and her buttocks, when she wore stretch slacks, would dance behind her knees like punch-balls." (Commodious cellarage--Jeez! Shakespeare lives.)

Burdened also with asthma, a feeling of personal grubbiness and an itch to write, Charles enters the sexual arena with a certain trepidation, bolstering his confidence by frequent consultations of a folder marked "Conquests and Techniques: A Synthesis." In London to attend a cram school for Oxford, he meets Rachel, a tall, black-haired young beddable (at first suspected-- groundlessly--of being half-Jewish) to whom he lays siege with the spontaneity of a War Office planner.

The classy Rachel's seduction, which Charles styles The Pull, takes place against some sleazily funny counterpoint: Charles's life as a boarder in his sister's prole household; the retchy, pill-popping drop-ins of his school chums, a venereal-alarm visit to a homosexual doctor, his between-the-acts-quickies with a less refined but more generous girl named Gloria. All the while Charles, who finds more abandonment in language than in sex, reports on such matters as his bodily functions, the purchase of plonk (I can't figure out what the hell *that* is, but it comes in bottles), the smell of his room, the physical grossness of his brother-in-law Norman (also suspected by the family of being Jewish).

His enchantment with Rachel fades when he discovers, alas, her corporeality: at one point she wets the bed, at another she sprouts a pimple and finally, from certain clues, he deducts that like everyone else she--defecates! With passing regret, he gives her over to a bumbling American, DeForest Hoeniger, and braces for the journey through Oxford.

Now, it takes a certain comic talent to make Charles the delectably unappetizing creature he is, and Martin Amis has it. What's lacking is the ability to animate the other characters so that they become more than mere projections of Charles, and to provide the kind of plot invention that would make the book more than an easy-reading, mildly funny series of bed-and-bathroom observations. In the end, I'm afraid, even Charles comes off as too much of a type. I'm sure he'll grow up to work for The Times Literary Supplement.

*Grace Glueck is a cultural news reporter for The Times.*

[Return to The New York Times Book Review Table of Contents](#)



[Home](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Site Search](#) | [Forums](#) | [Archives](#) | [Marketplace](#)

[Quick News](#) | [Page One Plus](#) | [International](#) | [National/N.Y.](#) | [Business](#) | [Technology](#) |  
[Science](#) | [Sports](#) | [Weather](#) | [Editorial](#) | [Op-Ed](#) | [Arts](#) | [Automobiles](#) | [Books](#) |  
[Diversions](#) | [Job Market](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Travel](#)

[Help/Feedback](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Services](#) | [New York Today](#)

[Copyright 1998 The New York Times Company](#)