
November 9, 2003

Reverse Engineering

By WALTER KIRN

YELLOW DOG

By Martin Amis.

340 pp. New York:

Miramax Books. \$24.95.

No one appreciates a preachy anarchist. No one likes a sermonizing vandal. When the wicked pleasure of negativity yields to the righteous urge toward pedantry, the satirist reaches the limits of his form and, perhaps, of his audience's patience, threatening to become a know-it-all reformer who's due for a little satirizing himself. Martin Amis, with his new novel of pornography, tabloid journalism and sexual politics, seems to have reached this subtle turning point -- and maybe even to have passed it. The mad-dog virtuoso, who draws fresh fire every time he publishes, and has again with "Yellow Dog" (this book was attacked, weeks before its publication, in an oddly overexcited newspaper column written by another English novelist, Tibor Fischer), is in some ways as wild and withering as ever, but Amis is starting to smell a bit like an ideologue, prey to all sorts of hoary liberal nostrums and apparently eager for a tenured post in the progressive global intelligentsia. No longer content to describe our fallenness and show us our paradise lost by implication, he wants to analyze, chastise and correct. Could it be that the bad boy covets a Nobel?

The best part of an Amis novel is meeting his monsters, his freaks, who typically range from the damaged to the terrifying and represent concentrated modern dysfunctions. Here, the damaged character is Xan Meo, a middlingly famous performer and first-time writer whose genetic roots in gangland London threaten to overpower his better angels. Xan is married to Russia, his second wife, and while he tries to be a good father to their children he's racked by dark lusts from his reptilian brainstem -- for other women, for strong sensations generally and for violent dominance over other men. One day he nips out to the pub for a quick beverage and is bashed on the head by someone seeking revenge for an obscure betrayal whose true nature remains concealed for the better part of the book and doesn't really cause the stir it might have when it's finally disclosed. Amis's story structure is like that -- propelled by a mass of intrigues and withholdings whose tensions the reader slowly becomes immune to, guessing that Amis could easily wrap them up in any one of a dozen different ways, which, in the end, is pretty much what he does, and rather awkwardly, too.

Xan's beating results in an injury to his brain whose major symptom is creeping atavism, which happens to be the novel's oft-stated theme. (Themes are O.K. in novels, but not stated ones.) Xan Neanderthalizes. He de-evolves. The topmost layer of his social self -- an assumed political correctness and a thoroughly modern male feminism -- slips off like a snakeskin, exposing his caveman core. He's not aware of this transformation at first, but in time he becomes implausibly aware of it; enough to write a letter to his wife dissecting its anthropological origins. "General thoughts are not my strength, but here's a general thought. Men were in power for five million years. Now (where we live) they share it with women. That past has a weight, though we behave as if it doesn't. We behave as if the transition has been seamlessly achieved. Of course there's no going back. I went back. As if through a trapdoor I dropped into the past."

Clint Smoker, a scabrous journalist for a lurid tabloid called The Morning Lark, never progressed far enough to

regress. He's nothing but a flatulent, nose-picking male id, a hairball with a brain. He's also humiliatingly poorly endowed. According to Amis's old-hat psychoanalysis, Clint's lack accounts for his hatreds and resentments and powers his literary persona as a champion of working-class male cretins and a tireless slanderer of women. Rape victims, for Clint, are always asking for it, merely by waking up female and attractive. Their molesters are guilty of nothing but having red blood. Clint's ravings are blunt, declarative and infectious in the classic Amis mode, winning over our lower selves despite the protests of our consciences. Where Xan is merely a vessel for an argument, Clint is a full-blown, turbocharged grotesque.

The novel's third starring role, and its most memorable, belongs to Henry IX, the stifled monarch of this crackpot kingdom. Henry is numb from the boredom of the job, which Amis portrays as an endless round of visits to the ill, the moronic and the mad, punctuated by meetings with strange advisers whose devotion amounts to self-castration. While his wife and queen lies in a coma, felled by an equestrian mishap, Henry longs for moments alone with his TV set and occasional tumbles with his Chinese mistress. He's a good-natured, ordinary fellow who takes literally his status as the embodiment of his motley subjects, even the least of whom he sincerely feels for, but his life of luxurious claustrophobia has driven him to the brink of daft despair. He's like one of those long-suffering, patient fathers from the golden age of television, but instead of overseeing the Beav or an uppity trio of bachelor sons, he has to absorb the antics of a whole empire.

To link up the fates of this menagerie and fulfill his perceived obligation to provide an overarching vision of damnation, Amis resorts to the old Dickensian tricks: coincidences, mistaken identities, confusions about parentage and so on. The mainspring of these tricky mechanisms involves the possible emergence on the Internet of a film showing Henry's daughter, the future queen, bathing naked in one of his grand houses. Who is behind it? Why? And what will come of it? The answers are tangled and difficult to follow, but the process of seeking them authorizes excursions into most every realm that interests Amis, particularly the rancid subculture of Southern California porn. How he gets there doesn't matter to us, and far too much effort is wasted in the transition, but once he arrives the novel takes off anew, making us wish he'd landed earlier. His detailed taxonomies of filmic sex acts are worthy of a small handbook of their own.

Unfortunately, big ideas intrude on what might have been a collage of poisonous cameos sustained by nothing but their own weird energy. As the story plays out, its chaotic impulses are steered irresistibly toward a single point, the way light behaves as it enters a black hole. And this is the point, as trite as one could fear: men are pigs -- and incestuous pigs at that. For Amis, who seems unable to restrain his urge to burst forth with an explicit polemic that might have raised eyebrows 50 years ago but would strike readers now with no more impact than one more staged lesbian kiss by Madonna, the quintessence of male sexual desire is the deflowering of one's own young daughter. All so-called "normal" male lust tends toward this end and seeks to mimic its barbaric pleasures, or so it's asserted. Well, maybe. . . . Or maybe not. The point is we're past even caring about such charges; our thinking classes have produced so many of them and all to so little everyday effect. More Clint Smoker, please. More oily porn. Let us be the judge of what the whole mess means and what sins, if any, it provokes us to confess to.

But is this novel, as Tibor Fischer put it, not simply bad but "not-knowing-where-to-look bad"? Far from it, actually. Aside from the novel's jagged formlessness and Amis's wearisome fondness for comic euphemism (there isn't an embarrassing bodily function that he doesn't dress up with a fancy Latinism), the writing is still agile and exact, the hyperbole driven and punishing and the characters -- when he lets them be -- charismatically repulsive. The problem is Amis's intellectualism, which sticks out like a parson at an orgy and shrinks and shrivels whatever it goes near.

Walter Kirn's most recent book is "Up in the Air," a novel.