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Whydunit

Martin Amis's new novel shakes up the mystery genre

by Chris Wright

After a two-and-a-half-year absence, Martin Amis is back, and he might be hoping for a warmer reception than he got last time. It's safe to say that Amis's last novel, *The Information* (Harmony Books, 1995), did not exactly meet with universal adulation. "The thing with *The Information*," he says, speaking on the phone from his London home, "was that the mood of the press bled into the reviews." Yes, and what an ugly mood it was. A long, spite-filled satire about literary jealousy and cosmic despair, the book received less critical attention than did the author's finances (a gale of oohing and aahing greeted reports of Amis's \$800,000 advance for the book), his relationships (Uzi bursts of tut-tutting when he broke up with his wife), and even his teeth (he spent *how* much on those new choppers?). Certainly, the press did not approve. Amis was jeered, walloped with his own book, tarred and feathered, and run out of town on a rail.

"That hasn't happened this time," Amis says, a lick of relief plowed under by his low, resonant tones.

By his own admission, Amis's new novel, *Night Train*, has gotten a "mixed reception" so far. But at least this time the work is gaining almost as much attention as the author. At 175 pages in a 5-by-8 format, it's not a big book -- anorexic by the standards of *London Fields* and *The Information* -- but it's a big book for Amis and his fans, many of whom (myself included) disembarked from *The Information* red-eyed, muddy-headed, and dissatisfied.

Set in what he describes as "a composite American city," narrated by a female homicide detective, bearing all the noirish hallmarks of the Hammett/Chandler whodamnit, *Night Train* marks a clear departure from Amis's previous work. The night train of the title refers to exactly that: a train that passes by the detective's apartment every night (keeping the rent low, keeping her awake). The night train also carries lots of symbolic baggage as it rumbles and whistles through the gloom.

Of course, no one can climb aboard the criminal mind quite like Amis, but a crime novel? You don't need a degree in literature to realize that this is probably not going to be your run-of-the-mill mystery. The opening paragraph clues us in that we're in for a wobbly ride:

I am a police. That may sound like an unusual statement -- or an unusual construction. But it's a parlance we have. Among ourselves, we would never say I am a policeman or I am a policewoman or I am a police officer. We would just say I am a police. I am a police. I am a police and my name is Detective Mike Hoolihan. And I am a woman, also.

There has been much speculation as to the authenticity of Amis's cop talk here, the use of "a police" causing the most consternation. One reviewer quoted a New York City police officer as saying, "Whoa! This writer should change his name back to Amos and start making those famous cookies again!" John Updike himself weighed in, calling " 'I am a police' . . . the first of a number of American locutions new to this native speaker."

"There's nothing strange about it," Amis says, bristling slightly. "I got a lot of my stuff from David Simon's book *Homicide*. His city is Baltimore, and that's what they say there, and I'll bet they say it in a few other cities, too. It's a wonderful book, and a great help to me. That's where I point people like John Updike." And anyway, he says, "you don't write about how people talk -- you write about how they think, and that's usually on a deeper level than they reveal in normal intercourse."

Hoolihan's talk is anything but normal, and her *syntax*: "Too, I'd washed my hair the night before"; "like many another American"; "a homicide come dressed to the ball as a suicide." Truth is, Hoolihan often sounds less like a female homicide detective than like an incredibly bright London author. "Inevitably," Amis admits, "I bleed into her and she bleeds into me. . . . I've got to talk through her."

This is hardly a problem: Amis is one of the great prose alchemists of our time. Who could object, for instance, to hearing his voice bleed through Hoolihan's homicide hit parade: "So I've seen them all: Jumpers, stumpers, dunkers, bleeders, floaters, poppers, bursters"?

All the same, Amis is insistent that he got the language right: "I do think it's the rhythms of America," he says. "It's not like some American writer who has all these English characters saying 'cor blimey.' I think it's convincingly American." Maybe so, but it would take a slightly odd American to break a piece of terrible news thus: "Colonel Tom, you know I love you and I'd never lie to you. But it seems your baby girl took her own life, sir. Yes she did. Yes she did."

Colonel Tom is police brass. Jennifer, his daughter, has been found in her apartment, naked, dead, propped up in a chair, a gun in her hand, half her head on the wall behind her. The mystery is what made her do it. She was obscenely happy. Her boyfriend, Trader Faulkner, a hunky philosopher, was "the kindest lover on the planet." She was beautiful, brainy, a successful astrophysicist. So what's with all the *wases*? Jennifer was, as Hoolihan puts it, "an embarrassment of perfection."

Not so Detective Hoolihan, who's an ex-alcoholic and a victim of child abuse. "I don't know where my parents are," she says, adding, "I'm five-ten and I go 180." Her boyfriend is so fat "he fills the room." Together they make up "half a ton of slob and slut." Ravaged by booze, her vocal cords charred by countless cigarettes, with dyed blond hair and a face that is "flat, undecided," Hoolihan can only wonder what would make a woman like Jennifer forfeit her life: "She had it all and she had it all, and then she had some more." And then she threw it all away.

Or did she? When Hoolihan discovers that not one, not two, but three bullets pierced Jennifer's skull on the night she died, this becomes a pressing question.

This may sound like a pretty conventional mystery plot, but Amis twists it and shakes it and bangs its head against the wall until the convention is almost unrecognizable. "I found the plotty stuff quite a bit more difficult than I thought I would," he says. "It stretched me, the plot, but on the whole it was a very pleasant writing experience."

The wonderful surprise of this book, given its distressed story line, is what a pleasant reading experience it is. *Night Train* is sometimes heavy with theme, shadowy with nuance, but it is never difficult to follow. When Hoolihan says, "I have taken a good firm knot and reduced it to a mess of loose ends," we know what she means, because we've been with her every step of the way.

Hoolihan and her fellow police *want* this to be a murder. "A made homicide means overtime, a clearance stat, and high fives in the squadroom," she says. "And a suicide is no damn use to anyone." A suicide is of no use to a police because "Ours is not to reason why. Give us the how, then give us the who, we say. But fuck the why." Same thing goes for the reader of a mystery novel. Whoever heard of a whydunit?

When we open a mystery novel, there is a tacit understanding that by the time we close it we are going to have some answers. *Night Train* has been compared to books by Hammett and Chandler, yet there are equal measures of Camus and Pascal in it. *Night Train* is, at its core, an existential novel -- it winds up wringing its hands, questioning our place in the scheme of things. Such a book promises no answers. This tension is what gives *Night Train* much of its energy, but it might drive mystery buffs to distraction.

Amis, though, believes he has made a perfect match. "I think it sort of measures up, myself," he says. "It's a good feeling when you think, 'Jesus, this is a bit of a reckless mix.' I hope that what people see is that this is kind of an upside-down mystery. Perhaps real addicts will realize they've been too conditioned in this genre; perhaps they'll be excited by something new."

As it happens, it's no accident that our suicide is an astrophysicist: the something new to which Amis refers includes ample servings of soupy cosmology. "The death of Jennifer Rockwell was offering the planet a piece of news: Something never seen before," says Hoolihan. Soon we're reading about an impending "revolution of consciousness," our ever-expanding universe. And the mystery expands right along with it. The plot doesn't thicken, it widens. *Get Shorty* this book is not.

We've had cosmological fixation from Amis before, most notably in *The Information*. Does the literary world's arch-cynic really buy into this millennial end-is-nigh stuff? "No," he says, his voice animated. "The *beginning* is nigh." It's almost disappointing: the inventor of the marvelously wicked John Self and Keith Talent has a pair of rosy glasses on. "I think that the beginnings, the stirrings of a new consciousness are everywhere you look, and it's just a happy coincidence that the millennium is marking the point."

Well, cor -- if you'll pardon the expression -- blimey.

Night Train does eventually supply us with answers. Jennifer is not what she seemed. The news her death brings is not good. "This train takes you into the night," goes one of the book's

clunkier passages, "and leaves you there. It's the night train." Hardly the sentiments of an eternal optimist.

"In this book, as in many others of mine, I play the devil's advocate because it's sort of more exciting to take the dark view," Amis says. "But I would embarrass you with my basic optimism about the perfectibility of the species." He seems absolutely deadpan as he says this, but I still wonder if he's pulling my leg. He continues: "I play the devil's advocate, but in myself I think that we're heading for a second enlightenment, that the 20th century will be regarded as an atrocious adolescent period in man's evolution."

Perhaps Martin Amis doesn't, after all, have a mile-wide misanthropic streak. "A sadistic streak," he admits with a laugh, "and a cruelly ridiculing streak -- because we're not there yet, and look how far short some of us fall. But no real malevolence, I don't think." And you believe him.

Updike's review of *Night Train* ends up castigating Amis for being a "scowling, atrocity-minded author" who peddles the "post-human" (whatever that may be). With a cheerful reference to the panning Amis took for *The Information*, Updike begins the review by writing, "I wanted very much to like this book, and the fact that I wound up hating it amounts to a painful personal failure."

Reminded of this comment, Amis soon restores the natural order. "Yeah," he says, sounding bored. "I thought that was a pretty crummy remark. I wasn't bothered by Updike's review. Since he's capable of writing 5000 words without giving the slightest impression of whether he thinks something's any good or not, to get him to say he hated my book in the first sentence is an achievement." Now this is Amis in his element: Amis the scrapper, Amis the street fighter.

Martin Amis is back. For me, *Night Train* is his biggest achievement since *London Fields*, and -- helpless fan that I am -- I consider this something of a personal victory.

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From *Night Train*

Be a police long enough, and see everything often enough, and you will eventually be attracted to one or another human vice. Gambling or drugs or drink or sex. If you're married, all these things point in the same direction: Divorce. Silvera's thing is sex. Or maybe his thing is divorce. My thing, plainly, was drink. One night, near the end, a big case went down and the whole shift rolled out to dinner at Yeats'. During the last course I noticed everybody was staring my way. Why? Because I was blowing on my dessert. To cool it. And my dessert was ice cream. I was a bad drunk, too, the worst, like seven terrible dwarves rolled into one and wedged into a leather jacket and tight black jeans: Shouty, rowdy, sloppy, sleazy, nasty, weepy, and horny. I'd enter a dive and walk up the bar staring at each face in turn. No man there knew whether I was going to grab him by the throat or by the hog. And I didn't know either. It wasn't much different at CID. By the time I was done, there wasn't a cop in the entire building who, for one reason or the other, I hadn't slammed against a toilet wall.

Silvera is younger than me and the wheels are coming off his fourth marriage. Until he was thirty-five, he claims, he balled the wife, girlfriend, sister and mother of every last one of his arrests. And he certainly has the look of the permanent hardon. If Silvera was in Narcotics, you'd right away make him for dirty: The fashionably floppy suits, the touched-up look around the eyes, the Italian hair trained

back with no part. But Silvera's clean. There's no money in murder. And a hell of a detective. Fuck yes. He's just seen too many movies, like the rest of us.

