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Synthetic grit

by [James Wolcott](#)

Review of *Night Train* by Martin Amis

Martin Amis isn't the first literary novelist to roll up his sleeves and crack his knuckles to compose a thriller. Graham Greene and Somerset Maugham indulged in cloak-and-dagger affairs. James Jones, the author of such heavy-going group studies of manpower in action as *From Here to Eternity*, *The Thin Red Line*, and *Some Came Running*, tore loose late in his career with a private-detective yarn called *A Touch of Danger*, an unintentionally hilarious outing in which Jones's hero—called Lobo, no less—beds a fine lady named Chantal and informs us afterward that “her lovemaking had the same style and class as the rest of her.” Aiming higher and also missing by a mile was Norman Mailer, whose *Tough Guys Don't Dance* offered nastier portions of sex and violence, steeped in Mailer's pretentious notions of evil. Susannah Moore, normally a novelist of designer-perfume sensibility, went feral with *In the Cut*. Amis's own father, the late Kingsley Amis, tried a couple of whodunits, *The Riverside Villas Murders* (the murder plot being the novel's weakest link) and a fizzled experiment late in his career called *The Crime of the Century*.

It's tempting to chalk up such slumming expeditions as acts of expediency--attempts to score a commercial success after some literary setbacks. (By the time Jones did *A Touch of Danger*, he was desperate to regain footing following the mortifying failure of *The Merry Month of May*.) After *The Information*—an ambitious novel whose critical reception was pockmarked by revelations about his personal affairs (divorce and remarriage, a grown daughter he never knew he had, costly dental work), and which failed to sell well despite all the hubbub—Martin Amis may have wanted to turn to something simpler and more marketable. Taking on a thriller also can be an effort to recapture some primitive magic in writing—to rid the mind of literary over-refinement and complexity, and to recapture the adrenaline rush of rutting-animal fiction by rough-stuff artists such as James M. Cain and Jim Thompson, whose slim novels were written fast and still read fast. It can be a way for a writer to pare the fat from his prose, down to the savage bone.

Certainly Martin Amis's thriller, a police procedural called *Night Train*, can't be dismissed as a literary gent's joy ride. It's too little fun for that. Soberly, conscientiously, Amis has set numerous difficulties for himself in telling this story, performing in various forms of drag. Set in a generic “second-echelon” American city (i.e., urban hellhole), *Night Train* is narrated by a generic police detective and recovering alcoholic named Mike Hoolihan, who, despite the name (and here's the twist), is a woman. She is, in fact, a whole lot of woman. Applying makeup, she muses, “I used to be something, I guess, but now I'm just another big blonde old broad.” The case that haunts blondie is the apparent suicide of a peerless beauty named Jennifer Rockwell, found naked in a chair with a .22 at her side. The daughter of a career cop, Jennifer had everything to live for, as the cliché goes, blessed with not only a stunning body but also a humming brain. A whiz at math and physics, she

was a member of the astronomy department at a local university, where she was enjoying a highly sexed relationship with a colleague, Trader Faulkner. (An in-joke: Trader Faulkner is the name of a British actor who costarred in *A High Wind in Jamaica*, a movie Amis himself appeared in as a child.) The case seems cut-and-dried, as all such fictional cases do, until the autopsy reveals three bullets lodged in the deceased's head, making suicide unlikely (how do you shoot yourself three times?); later, traces of Lithium are found in her system. (More mischief: the coroner's name is Dr. No.) Mike squares her shoulders and sets out in search of Jennifer's killer, her only suspect being Trader Faulkner. As John Updike noted in his London *Times* review of *Night Train*, the absence of other suspects—the paucity of subsidiary characters—gives the novel a cramped feel compared to standard thrillers. But of course Amis isn't writing a standard thriller. He's trying to subvert and contort its conventions from the inside, through sheer virtuoso Style. The actual clue-gathering and puzzle-solving are less vital to Amis than putting over a complicated charade. He's a literary figure attempting a genre experiment, a Brit trying to sound American, a man trying to impersonate a woman who bears a man's name:

Long ago I learned that I cannot get the good guys.

I am one of the good guys, and I go out there and get the bad guys. I can get the bad guys.

But I cannot get the good guys.

I just cannot get the good guys.

Despite such Joan Didion-ish passages, the man-woman business proves less vexing for Amis than his American impersonation. He puts on a good bluff, but little things go wrong, like names. (Mike has an ex-boyfriend named Deniss. An American might spell his name "Denis" or "Dennis," but "Deniss" makes the reader blink.) He also doesn't have a firm grip on the lingo, hitting an off-note in his opening paragraph, in which Mike announces, "I am a police," insisting, "it's a parlance we have." When John Updike queried this usage in the London *Times*, citing it as "the first of a number of American locutions new to this native speaker," Amis angrily retorted in an interview, "Bullshit!"—claiming that they use that parlance in Baltimore, for example. I happen to have grown up near Baltimore, and I don't recall ever hearing a cop or state trooper refer to himself as "a police" (and it isn't a usage bandied about on TV's "Homicide," shot on location in Baltimore). The obscenities and ethnic putdowns sprinkled across *Night Train*--references to Japs, slopes, jigs, and faggots—also have a synthetic grit, like plastic Mamet.

If Amis's story carried more interest and momentum, these minor off-notes would call less attention to themselves. The problem is that everything about *Night Train* calls notice to itself because it exists solely as an act of exhibitionism—of showmanship. Gifted pros in the crime field, from Ruth Rendell to Donald Westlake, are confident enough in their powers of verisimilitude and methodology (how locks are broken, how certain medications can be lethally mixed) not to feel the need to nudge the reader and emphasize their works' authenticity. It would destroy the lifelike illusion of unfolding developments that they usher onto the page. Amis, however, twitches beneath his multiple masks. Self-conscious about the form he's infiltrating, he insists time and again that he's giving us the sordid goods fresh from the abyss, not counterfeit TV and movie dramatization. He makes numerous scoffing references to cop shows, culminating in a passage where his female mouthpiece dismisses the layman's fetish for motive in homicide. A veteran police like her knows there's no "why" to murder. "I'll tell you who wants a why. *Jurors* want a why. They want reruns of *Perry Mason* and *The Defenders*. They want *Car Fifty-Four*, *Where Are You?*" If only those sissy couch potatoes could be as existential as us make-believe cops!

The old "Perry Mason" series, admired by such disparate types as Ayn Rand and the hip art critic

Dave Hickey (who has a superb tribute to “Perry Mason” in his recent collection *Air Guitar*), was at least an honest entertainment with lustrous dark shadings of Fifties and early Sixties Los Angeles. Its stories were logical devices which left no loose ends. No mere craftsman, Amis finds the search for neat answers intellectually shallow; he makes *Night Train* deliberately, defiantly inconclusive. After much wheel-spinning within the small circle of Jennifer’s acquaintances and surviving relations, the mystery of her murder defies solution and explanation. Instead, we are meant to attribute it to a cosmological crisis and a spiritual malaise induced by the philosophical fallout of her study of astronomy. (Talk of black holes in the universe leads Mike to characterize this case as “all hole.” Critics of Amis’s misogyny might suggest that this is how he typically portrays women—as all hole.) Jennifer’s gesture of despair somehow infects Mike like an information virus from beyond the grave.

I’ve seen bodies, dead bodies, in tiled morgues, in cellblocks, in district lockups, in trunks of cars, in project stairwells, in loading-dock doorways, in tractor-trailer turnarounds, in torched rowhouses, in corner carryouts, in cross alleys, in crawlspaces, and I’ve never seen one that sat with me like the body of Jennifer Rockwell, propped there naked after the act of love and life, saying even this, all this, I leave behind.

So it’s adios, earth. “Suicide is the night train, speeding your way to darkness,” Mike tells us, and in the novel’s final pages she falls off the wagon and boards her own night train to oblivion (*Night Train* also being the name of a brand of cheap booze). Which pretty much rules out a sequel.

A Touch of Danger didn’t prove a breakthrough or breakout for James Jones (though some of his later work was creditable), *Tough Guys Don’t Dance* didn’t inject any jazz into Norman Mailer’s *Harlot’s Ghost* and *Oswald’s Tale*, and I suspect *Night Train* will lead nowhere for Martin Amis. It seems to leave him in the same bind—or hole—he was in before. A writer who made his reputation with whiplash wisecracks and a bravura show of pouty, insolent youth in novels such as *The Rachel Papers* and *Money* (perhaps his best book, despite going astray with a lot of Nabokovian bumbling involving a doppelgänger), Amis has made strenuous efforts to mature. He has confronted unthinkable horrors like the Holocaust (*Time’s Arrow*) and nuclear destruction (*London Fields*), immersing himself in humanistic clouds of gloom, like his friend and mentor Saul Bellow, to whom and to whose wife *Night Train* is dedicated. (Amis’s devotion to Bellow is a little oedipal drama all its own, since Kingsley haughtily dismissed Bellow as a muddler, referring to *Herzog* as “a pretty pissy book.” Bellow has become a substitute highbrow father figure.) The problem with Amis as a novelist lies deeper than the maturation process or his subjects.

For better and worse, he is primarily a monologist, a riff artist; his novels always read as if they were written in the first person. He’s incapable of writing scenes in which characters are at cross-purposes, competing for their own interests. His media-saturated sensibility is sharp, cunning, and often deadly accurate, but it always functions as commentary, not fully rounded presentation. The comic stagecraft of English fiction, a tradition that runs from Jane Austen, Dickens, and Trollope to P. G. Wodehouse, Anthony Powell, and Kingsley Amis, is missing in Martin’s *oeuvre*, where the one-liners are the work of a lone assassin.

There are shrewd observations in *Night Train*, as when Mike visits the local university and notes, “Sexual allure is a physical problem that the students are no longer addressing. In my day, at the Academy, the women were all tits and ass and the men were all dick and bicep. Now the student body has no body. Now it’s strictly sloppy-joe.” But they’re general observations with a comic flip. Despite one of his early novels being titled *Other People*, Amis has never seemed that interested in other people, and as his fame and sense of literary privilege have grown, he has become even less so. Compare *Night Train*’s cookie-cutter characters with Nelson Algren’s lowlifes or Ed McBain’s precinct cops, and Amis isn’t even in the same ballpark. He maintains a glass shield between himself and the passing scene; he practices keen surveillance, overcompensating for his detachment with

lyrical rollcalls (like the passage about dead bodies quoted above) intended to simulate sympathy. (“Message: I care,” as George Bush once said.) In time, I suspect, Amis will slowly drop the pretense to fiction and devote himself to lofty journalism. The narrow focus of his personal vision points toward punditry.

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