

Reflection on Martin Amis, *The Information*
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The Information came out in 1995, which is at least 10 years ago. The dust jacket has quotes from both Saul Bellow, who says he has the inventive genius of a Joyce or Flaubert, and John Updike who says he is trying to construct a large, reaching ambitious set of books-trying to cover the world in fiction. He received heaps of praise for this novel, which he worked on for 5 years. I enjoyed much of it and found it muddled at the same time. Several reviews have noted that it sags in the middle. That's a bit of an understatement to me.

The Information has flashes of a great novel. The descriptions of different places, especially the club scenes, are funny and entertaining. His send up of the literary world is cleverly done. The dialogue between him and his sons (daddy have you always been bold?) made me laugh, as did the image of him trying to keep cigarette smoke out of the car as he hung his head out the window while chain smoking 15 cigarettes.

While funny at many points, the characters in the book all seem to be in toxic relationships with one another and I could have used a bright spot. The way Richard talked about women and the lack of any developed female characters took away from the enjoyment of the book for me. Richard began as the loveable loser but ended up more loser less lovable to me. I still am unsure if Amis was working from his character's perspective, saying something about society, or simply has no regard for women.

In trying to get this paper started, I looked at what other critics have said. I particularly enjoyed a review by Christopher Buckley in the New York Times written shortly after the book came out. The rest of this paper will be mostly lifted from that review.

There's been a whole lot of keening in the British press lately about Martin Amis's new novel. The cause of all this fuss and feathers is that -- brace yourself -- he fired one agent (the wife of his close friend, the novelist Julian Barnes), and hired another, Andrew Wylie, an American now referred to in the British papers as "the Jackal" and "the Robert Maxwell of agenting," who got him a juicy advance for the British edition, rumored to be close to \$800,000. To a literary novelist like Mr. Amis it is giant clams indeed. Skeptics are already predicting that HarperCollins, the book's British publisher, will never earn that money back. At any rate, the result of all this has been an unseemly, indecorous and envious caterwauling such as has not been heard since William Golding

won the Nobel Prize in 1983. As Gore Vidal famously put it, "Every time a friend succeeds, I die a little." Every now and then you're reminded what a teensy little sceptored isle Britain is. Maybe it's just a case of Amis envy. Still, you wonder: Don't they have anything better to worry about?

You have to hand it to Mr. Amis on a couple of counts. First, the tempest in this particular teapot perfectly befits the subject of the book, literary envy. Second -- Americans will grasp this point without difficulty -- if you can get \$800,000 for your novel, buddy, go for it. Since he arrived on the scene in the 70's, Mr. Amis has been the bad boy of the lit scene. All power to him if he can continue to pull it off at the age of 45. He's a novelist with a plan. There is arc and design to his career. He's said as much in interviews. Off to a frisky start with "The Rachel Papers" and "Dead Babies"; then a nice, steady build with "Money" and "Success"; turned a bit heavy in "London Fields." Now we have the midlife crisis novel. "Five years in the making," the jacket announces.

He comes highly pedigreed, but his terrain is the junkyard of the human psyche -- in this case, the London literary scene. The main character is Richard Tull, 40-year-old book reviewer, editor and failed novelist, Salieri to Gwyn Barry's Mozart. Gwyn's latest novel has made him so hot that Richard, ostensibly his best friend, is positively melting within. He has a lovely wife, two swell young boys, one of whom he smacks when Gwyn hits the best-seller list. (Probably the only hilarious instance of child abuse in literature.) He has a job as editor of a small literary rag and also works at a vanity press. He has written a number of increasingly obscure novels. He smokes, does drugs, drinks, copes and cries himself to sleep at night. He is also impotent. His latest novel, entitled "Untitled," is so impenetrable that everyone who tries to read the manuscript is stricken with fearsome neurological problems before reaching page 10.

Gwyn -- who, according to a recent exhaustive article in *The New Yorker* on the whole Amis fracas, is not, repeat not, modeled on Julian Barnes -- has been Richard's closest friend since they roomed together at Oxford. The gods have smiled on Gwyn. He is as successful as Richard is not. To top it off, he is married to the Lady Demeter de Rougemount, a rich and beautiful perfect wife. The reader begins on Richard's side.

Richard's only consolation, in fact, is that Gwyn's writing stinks. Which of course is why he is so rich and famous. Poor Richard finally can take no more. He resolves to inflict damage on Gwyn.

He starts out by searching all over London for a Sunday issue of *The Los Angeles Times*, and dumps it anonymously on Gwyn's doorstep with a note saying: "Something to interest you here. The price of fame! Yours ever, John," knowing that the vain Gwyn will spend hours -- days -- searching through the tonnage of newsprint for his mention.

This escalates to crunchier means of revenge, The game gets dicier, larger, more unpredictable until the law of unintended consequences kicks in with a bloody heel.

Is an envious writer enough to sustain a whole novel? Surprisingly, yes. Mr. Amis is quite dazzling here. "The Information" drags a bit around the middle, but you're never out of reach of a sparkly phrase, stiletto metaphor or drop-dead insight into the human condition. And there is the humor; Mr. Amis goes where other humorists fear to tread.

Questions about The Information

1. Amis is often grouped with the generation of British-based novelists that emerged during the 1980s and included Salman Rushdie, Ian McEwan and Julian Barnes. His work has been heavily influenced by American fiction, especially the work of Philip Roth, John Updike and Saul Bellow. How does he compare to these writers?
2. What exactly does The Information refer to?
3. Richard Tull is consumed by envy of his supposed best friend Gwyn. Is his revenge plotting enough to sustain the whole novel ?
4. There is a lot written about writing and reading here: *men and women read differently, writing is about denial, writing is simply for pleasing the reader...* Richard doesn't seem convinced that anybody reads his work. Reviewing books, as Richard does, is an unworthy pursuit. Gwyn is treated like royalty, yet by all accounts is not a good writer...then there's the inane book tour. What is Amis saying about writing and what it means to be a writer? What is good writing?
5. Most relationships in the book seem quite toxic. Do you agree? Do any of them develop to something better?
6. Have you read any other books by Amis? How does this compare? Would you read another by him?