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Dinner with Martin Amis

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The one time I had an opportunity to meet Martin Amis, I ended up taking heroin instead. I'm not especially proud of this fact, it was a kind of accident, but also perhaps a lucky swerve from the more difficult experience of having to have dinner with Mr Amis himself. It was the very late 90s and I was teaching undergraduate courses in Creative Writing and Literature at the University of East Anglia. The university was, and still is, famous for having nurtured the talents of a generation of British writers – think Ian McEwan, Kazuo Ishiguro – and the department regularly hosted dinners for the writers who came down from London to give talks and public lectures. It was while working here I would learn some things that would take me decades to unlearn, and which to an extent I am still unravelling.

I was working, largely, in a world of men, most of whom were privileged white men. Although there were some female academics in the department, the main tutors in the writing department at that time were men, the writers who came to speak were mostly male, and the *grand fromage* of the whole department had developed something of a bad reputation with the ladies. It was the poisoned duckpond of the late 20thC. And yet, it was the water in which I was swimming, and it's hard to atomise the water while you're trying to stay afloat. To an extent, this is an attempt to explain how I survived as a queer woman trying to make good on the freedoms, however limited, that the women who had gone before me had won.

I was nervous about the dinner with Amis. What could I say to the self-styled bad boy of English letters, with whom so many of my male contemporaries were enamoured? I was ambivalent about his lugubrious prose, and his caricatures of women and the working classes, and although I approved of his scathing critiques of capitalism, I was much less convinced by his world view, and all the stories about his teeth and his sexual conquests. There was something cynical, and self-serving about his work, and he depicted a world in which women were largely sexualised adjuncts to the male ego, or mysterious cyphers never to be fully understood. His work, and the cultural response to it, seemed to embody Simone de Beauvoir's observation that 'representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth.'

Writing done honestly in service of the art leaves the writer naked on the page. But then, once faced with their own naked apparition, it then behoves the artist to work to fill in these glaring gaps, rather than to pretend as if they didn't exist at all. That must be the nature of the work if it is to have aspirations to art. But I was beginning to realise that for men, or rather for a certain type of literary man, this was not at all the objective. They were not pushing into the art, digging something out of the rag and bone shop of the heart. They were instead enjoying a lifestyle where their endeavours gave them social status and plentiful access to young women.

London Fields was written in 1989 but set in 1999, about the same time as my supposed dinner with Martin Amis. In it, there is a character named Nicola Six who knows that soon, she is going to be murdered, but she does not know by whom. The *murderee* – as Amis calls her. Or rather the writer who is writing the book. It's meta like that, because of course it's postmodern. It's written in a bombastic third person which reduces everything to

the spectacle of language, a technique which doesn't deliver characters who are realist – or natural – but instead caricatures owned by the narrative voice. The effect is sort of like listening to the riffings of someone in the grip of mania. The writing can't resist all those little poetic, tic tocks of the language. The three trips of the tongue, sometimes when I'm writing I hear it in the echo chamber of my own head: the resonances of syllables, the infinite possibilities of words and sounds and metaphors that could go off in so many directions, like fireworks, whoosh! But when you write so far above the characters, they can never become real. And although this is often the point, it means that the narrative voice becomes a slippery, tricky know-it-all. To dig Mr Amis, you have to really enjoy this kind of style.

And then in the middle of all this, there is Nicola Six, porn-y in her underwear in the bathroom, with her 'intimate preparations', re-growing her hymen, and looking like the 'vamp in the ad, just before the asshole in the helicopter shows up with the chocolates.' Rendered like Lara Croft, a fantasy woman of the late 80s. When I complained of the sexism of her character, I remember being told by the young men I studied with that of course he's not writing about *you*, it's *ironic*. But then I would see their copies where they had underscored the passage: 'The demeanour of the glamour model proclaimed that you could do what you liked with her. The demeanour of the fashion model proclaimed that she could do what she liked with you.' Nicola Six is a fantasy woman, one I now realise those young men had never met either: biddable, omniavailable, impossibly attractive, emotionally perfect, the product of pictures pinned on locker room doors, or bedroom walls, the aesthetics of boys' schools and lad's mags.

At around that time I had been moonlighting at another university, teaching a course on Women and Literature in the twentieth century. The academic staff at this institution

were 80% male and my course was oversubscribed. I had over 50 – mostly female – undergraduates on a Friday afternoon. At the end of term, the Dean offered me more teaching, but on the condition that I remodelled the course into Contemporary Literature instead. “You know, add in some more contemporary texts like Martin Amis, Ian McEwan. After all,” he said, cheerfully, “feminism has been assimilated, hasn’t it? So it can all be blended together into the contemporary.”

On the auspicious day of the Amis visit, I was in the school office on the second floor, photocopying something. Probably for class, though it could have been the thousandth draft of my novel. I was standing in the doorway, idly looking down the corridor, while the machines heaved away behind me. The green-grey drab of the old institutional carpets. And then he came through the double doors, in a scene that I can only remember as an outtake from a bad gangster movie. Flanked by two blonde women who were both much taller than him, wearing their glamorous London fashion, he was short and swaggering in between them. The whole scene required a soundtrack. Maybe some oleaginous funk, or an aggressive Britpop guitar riff. I saw him and he saw me. And in that spilt second of recognition, I thought: ‘oh my god, that’s Martin Amis.’ And in return, he winked at me.

‘Awright,’ he said, in a distinctly faux south London accent. The publicity girls flicked me shied glances. And then they swept on past towards the Graduate Studies Room.

In an instant, I knew what awaited me. I had been to enough London parties to understand how important it would be to dress competitively for the occasion. Which in my uniform jeans and t-shirt I most certainly was not. I foresaw how I would wind up at the edge of the table, probably stuck with a Professor who would want to talk about shipbuilding in Jane Austen. Martin Amis would hold forth, several drinks down, now

shrugged into the occasion, enjoying the inspection and attention, and his braying accomplices would laugh like he was the most interesting person on the planet. And, even if I could hear anything over my social anxiety, what would I say to *him*? What did we have in common? I was not the kind of skinny blonde he might want to impress, I disliked his books, and now that I had actually seen him in the flesh, I was even less excited by the idea of eating some tepidly fancy food with a Famous Writer. What could I hope to gain from this? I had met him now – kind of – and ringing in my ears was that strange mockney accent.

Awright?

A queer writer friend of mine at the university once observed that when she encountered literary men of a certain type, they often coarsened their language around her, as if, in the presence of a woman who didn't conform to normative types, they must suddenly drop the pretence of civility. This phenomena has proved itself to be true throughout my life, I know as much from being a barmaid, as if a queer woman can only exist if she is co-opted as male. Her sexuality and persona become an entirely male invention, and she, by default one of the lads. Men suddenly start to treat you as a pseudo-bloke, they say things around you about fucking and fancying women that they wouldn't say in front of straight women. As Monique Wittig observed: 'the discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak on their terms.' This was what I feared awaited me. Worse than being ignored, I dreaded a matey encounter with Martin Amis who might be rather too pleased to talk to a lesbian. And yet, in the social hierarchies of the university, it was an honour to be invited to one of these dinners, it was like being made, without the requirement of a contract killing.

As I was contemplating, my mobile phone rang loudly. It was my friend Barbara.

Barbara was a poet and an artist, and she was like a spirit, or a mischievous jinn:
whenever she showed up, interesting things happened.

'Guess what?' she asked me.

'What?'

'Well you could say that life has just put the dip into serendipity.'

'Huh?'

'Well it was under a bush. I thought it *was* the bush if you know what I mean.'

'Not really.'

'Well I *found* something.'

'Found what?'

'Well I thought it was the meadow, but it turned out to be the horse that eats the grass. Like Prince. If you know what I mean.'

It took me a second, but I did know what she meant, part of the pleasure of talking to her was the poetic riddle of her language. Horse was slang for heroin, I knew that much from listening to Prince: *In September my cousin tried reefer for the very first time, now he's doing horse, it's June.* 'Siiiiii-iiii-gn of the times?' I kind of sang back at her.

'You got me.'

'It was all wrapped up in cling film and I didn't see it till it was too late. Five of them.'

What she was trying to tell me was that she had picked up, accidentally, five bags of heroin under a bush outside her apartment. She lived in a sketchy housing association across the Wensum river, where single men were often re-homed after they had gotten out of prison. It was unsafe, and she was very vulnerable there. There were often fights, arrests, and now this.

'Well throw it back.'

'I can't. There's police everywhere with dogs. They'll think it was mine if they see me.'

'Well give it to them.'

'And have everyone round here think I called the Police? No thanks.'

'What are you going to do about it then?'

'Well that's why I was calling you.'

The moment expanded into the thought. Perhaps this was the solution to the Martin Amis problem that I had been searching for.

'Come round to mine then. I'll see you in a bit.'

So I made my excuses – family emergency – and got a taxi from the Porter's Lodge back to my house. The driver, I remember, was especially garrulous when he found out that I was a writer, he laughed.

'Who's that famous writer bloke who works there?'

I said his name.

'Yeah, that one. I've taken him to some places I can tell you.'

And he laughed to himself and looked at me in the drivers mirror, and for moment, and not for the first time, I felt ashamed of my profession.

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Some readers might think that what I did was an act of self-sabotage. Perhaps I should have gritted my teeth through the dinner. How does getting high solve anything? I'm especially conscious of a kind of hypocrisy here too, valorising my own decadence, just like Amis, and

Burroughs and all the Beat poets and the other boys who told you getting high was cool. And to be queer and to confess to this too, invites another kind of opprobrium. Rates of drug abuse in the LGBTQ+ community are disproportionately higher than other groups. 25-30% of the LGBTQ community abuses substances compared to 10% of the general population. Unsurprising when the statistics for mental health, bullying and harassment are also all so much higher.

Constantly having to deal with the straight mind is tiring, and the edges of the world are sharp if you're queer. Sometimes all you want is not to stand out: to not have to say *her* when everyone assumes your partner is a man; to not be silenced when a group of men are objectifying women and assuming your consent; to not be followed by aggressive men when you are holding hands with your partner, or hit on by women who assume that because you are gay, you must find them attractive. And so it goes on. Sometimes all you want is not to think. Wanting to drop out is a logical reaction to this state of hyper-vigilance. It's exhausting.

But I was curious, too. I wanted to go Lethe-wards like Keats. I wanted to push to the edges of my personality. The self is mercurial, full of darkness and wonder. To keep it in a behavioural, statistical box, seems in a way also an invention of the straight mind. Jack Hamblestam talks about forgetfulness as a queer survival strategy, a way of 'jamming the smooth operations of the normal and the ordinary.' A way of resisting the logic of linear time.

We sat in my living room looking at the five bags on the coffee table. This needed a soundtrack of some kind, perhaps it even has one in my head. Velvet Underground, or Bowie or Lou Reed, or something jarring and psychedelic.

Five bags of brown.

All the associations, all the history – from music to Empire, from the Opium Wars to the Romantic Poets, collided on my coffee table. Opium’s medicinal purposes were mentioned by everyone from Pliny to Avicenna. But heroin is not quite opium, not the organic sticky brown stuff – the tears of latex that drip from the green seedhead when it is scored – *lachryma papaveris*. These bags started there, but through various chemical processes they become a powder, and they could be cut with anything. The residue of a poppy that once grew somewhere in Afghanistan or Pakistan or Turkey, lay on my coffee table in Norwich. How did it get here? I remember we wondered about some of these things, as we boiled the kettle for tea. Of course, we were going to get high. It would have been rude not to.

What happened next is quotidian. The anxious whine in my head calmed, exactly as William Burroughs described: ‘it hits the back of the legs first, then the back of the neck, a spreading wave of relaxation slackening the muscles away from the bones so that you seem to float without outlines, like lying in warm salt water.’

I stared at my bright orange walls (it was the era of home makeover shows) and felt as if I were in a bubble, insulated from everything. I was quite nauseous too, but that didn’t seem to matter. We chased the chemical plume across foil and smoked it sprinkled in a spliff. At the end of one bag we stopped, stupefied, and went to sleep. All night I had bizarre, opiated dreams.

After Barbara left the next morning, with four bags of heroin, I thought about the heroin all day, and for a few days later. About how we could do some more, just a small bit, and how nice it would be to feel like that forever. I frightened myself. These thoughts were unbidden, I could see how easy it would be to just take another pinch, and another, then

another until my life had entirely gone from view. I heard the siren call to the soft dark place where nothing hurt, not even my life. I heard it as the physiological warning of the addiction that would surely come soon if I did it again. For one night, I allowed my whole house to become narcotic, and for that one evening, nothing seemed to matter. Not my job, not my sexuality, not my writing, and certainly not having dinner with Martin fucking Amis.

I wonder why I think of this story so much, a shiny dinner party pebble in my pocket, smoothed by all the years of retelling. Perhaps as a lucky escape or a lucky charm. A reminder to myself to keep faith with who I used to be, and of what has had to be endured. In the years that have passed, the world of literature has undergone a radical transformation. We no longer need the mediation of a few newspaper review pages, a small coterie of influencers, or the luck of word of mouth. The internet broke up these literary bro-opolies, although of course imperfectly and in its own problematic and corporate ways. Writers who complain that it is no longer possible to imagine characters different from themselves without being subject to accusations of appropriation are missing the point entirely; because it's now totally possible for the women or working class characters Marin Amis so loves to inhabit to actually talk back – to articulate their own reality, to be read, to be heard, to participate. In some ways, everyone's a writer now, it's an epochal shift, of which the publication of this essay is in itself a part. But in this new landscape of textual subjectivity, where our hypervigilance can make us twitchy, finger on the Twitter trigger, now, as then, how well we are able to listen to each other is still the biggest catch.