

*Yellow Dog* by Martin Amis (Jonathan Cape, R240)

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Near the beginning of Martin Amis's latest novel there is a moment of pure Amis: the protagonist, a forty-seven year old actor-turned-writer named Xan Meo, is on his way to the pub for a solitary celebration of the fourth anniversary of his sanity and sobriety: "And he sniffed the essential wrongness of the air, with its fucked-up aftertaste, as if all the sequiturs had been vacuumed out of it. A yellowworld of faith and fear, and paltry ingenuity. And all of us just flying blind."

That, no doubt intentionally, sums up the moral universe of this novel, indeed of all Amis's novels. It's not wholly nihilistic: some "faith" sustains the "fear", some "ingenuity" persists, and the "wrongness" does at least imply some absent "rightness" – but we are "flying blind", having lost our moral bearings long ago and far away.

It's not an attractive vision, and this is not an attractive novel. Its themes are revenge, more specifically between the sexes, and incest, more specifically between father and daughter. Sex, in other words, is here for the most part the unscrupulous and heartless exercise of power. Its most graphic manifestation is in pornography, the manufacture of and variations on which are unsparingly described. As for relations between males, that is largely a matter of beating each other up: in the second paragraph of the book we have the stark sentence: "Male violence did it."

What male violence did in this instance was to turn Xan from a model husband into a valueless, potentially violent sex maniac with a disturbing interest in his four-year old daughter. Beaten up in the pub, Xan emerges with brain damage and a dislocated sense of values – making him, ironically, a model citizen of the kind of world he inhabits, a world of pornography, blackmail, yellow journalism and what he describes as "the obscenification of everyday life".

Running parallel to Xan's story are three apparently unrelated plots: the penile anxiety of one Clint Smoker, the most vicious of yellow journalists; the quandary of Henry IX, king of England, whose fifteen-year old daughter has been filmed naked in her bath; and flight CigAir 101 to Houston, doomed to destruction by a vengeful corpse in its hold.

In England and America *Yellow Dog* has attracted the kind of hostile review usually reserved for unreconstructed Nazis or child molesters (it has also been hailed as a masterpiece). Many of the unfavourable reviews complain of the lack of structure, the way in which four apparently unrelated strands co-exist. But this criticism is superficial, in ignoring the coherence of the common themes I have mentioned. Indeed, technically the novel can't really be faulted: the various strands are if anything over-meticulously plotted to come together at the end. Furthermore, Amis can turn a sentence like nobody else, and capture an impression with unrivalled precision: "Clint visualised a succession of fierce little hussies, with lips crimped in ceaseless calculation."

The problem is elsewhere, in the almost complete lack of humanity of the characters: stripped of pathos, humour, dignity, they are grotesques, as two-dimensional as characters in a morality play.

There is, at the centre of the book, a vision of hostility between the sexes so intense that to refer to it as a battle seems too mild. It achieves its most graphic expression in

pornography, which functions here as a kind of grotesque mirror of exploitative sexual relations in general. Karla White, a porn star, explains some of the different genres: “Cockout is a sub-genre, within Hatefuck. Much prized for its rarity, Cockout occurs when the man actually succeeds in arousing the woman – to such a point where she stops calling him a piece of shit and starts offering encouragement or even praise.”

Amis is not, of course, offering us this vision for our delectation: it is presumably a considered critique of a culture of commodification and competition, in which the supposed act of love becomes Hatefuck.

Whether we grant Amis his premise that this is all part of “the essential wrongness of the air”, or see it simply as Puritanism gone rancid, depends on whether we are persuaded by his attempt to imagine an alternative. Xan Meo, we are given to understand, does love and desire his wife; and he dotes on his infant daughters. This fragile structure supports such good news as the novel contains – and even then is undermined by the kind of sentimentality which is always surprisingly close to the surface of Amis’s attempts at tough-mindedness. (The reformed Xan counsels a retired porn star: “It sound soft, and trite – but have a baby. When I look at you I always look for your children. That’s what your breasts are looking for too: they’re looking for your children.”)

Amis does try to dignify the proceedings with a Theory, which he makes Xan, now recovered from his moral aberrations, expound to his wife in a letter of supplication and entreaty: “Men were in power for five million years. Now (where we live) they share it with women. ... It would be surprising if women weren’t a little crazed by their gains in power, and if men weren’t a little crazed by their losses.”

So these men and women, a little crazed by the possession or lack of power, destroy each other and the world around them. It would be a devastating vision if we could believe in it, but the men and women are too transparently the puppets of this vision to make us care for them; and not believing in the men and women, we don’t buy the vision either. Coming from one of the leading exponents of the English novel, it’s a dispiriting performance.