



# archives

## Issue Six

### Style Over Substance

**John A Dern. *Martians, Monsters & Madonna: Fiction and Form in the World of Martin Amis.* Studies in Twentieth-Century British Fiction, Volume 2. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2000.**

**Erica Hateley, Monash University**

*The burgeoning postmodern condition forces a reevaluation of the novel as a form; contemporary formlessness has created a new and seemingly endless range of interpretations under which the forms of the past coalesce. Martin Amis, whose novels and stories "live" this phenomenon and inform this study, has discovered an art form in the literature of decay, where traditional fictional elements, such as time, voice and motivation, have been corrupted by the twentieth century and the revitalized anti-novel. Style has overcome story in the world of Martin Amis – and perhaps in the "real" world as well. – Back Cover Blurb*

I would like to start by saying that I am always happy to see extended criticism of contemporary authors published. As a fan of contemporary British fiction in particular, I was eager to read John Dern's recent volume dealing with the work of Martin Amis. To date, Amis has been the subject of relatively few extended volumes of criticism, which seems surprising when we consider that Amis has been one of a select group of authors – including Ian McEwan, Graham Swift, Salman Rushdie and Julian Barnes – at the forefront of British literature for the past few decades. Amis certainly has no shortage of either fans or detractors, and his work almost inevitably comes up in any debate which takes place in the academic or popular press regarding the 'state of the novel' in Britain today. Amis has made a name for himself over the past thirty years as the producer of confronting, often guttural, fiction that challenges readers to re-examine their understanding of socio-cultural norms, and demands readers' moral involvement, whether that comes in the form of disgust or agreement. His work consistently evokes extremely passionate responses, with the startling exception of John Dern.

In *Martians, Monsters & Madonna* John Dern sets himself a difficult task: to offer a focused reading of Amis' fiction in order to produce a general theory of Amis' body of work. To his credit, Dern attempts to take one of the most frequently leveled criticisms of Amis' work and use it as the basis for defending what he perceives to be Amis' aesthetic project: "style over substance." Dern of course uses a variety of terms for this symptom, including "formsmanship" and "style superseding story/plot", even citing Amis' infamous comment that: "I would certainly sacrifice any psychological or realistic truth for a phrase, for a paragraph that has spin on it: that sounds whorish, but I think it's the higher consideration." (106) I would have to say that this is probably a fair assessment of much, though not all, of Amis' fiction. However, I would expect to see this as a central argument in a study of an individual novel, or an undergraduate essay. In an irony that I would dearly wish to be intentional but fear isn't, Dern's own work must ultimately be described with the same sentence, due simply to the fact that his central point cannot possibly hope to encompass the complexity and sheer volume of Amis' work to date.

Unfortunately, Dern offers little in the way of innovative readings of Amis' fiction, and bases his entire work on some very problematic foundations.

Chief among these is his very simplistic conflation of Amis' journalistic narrative voice and his fictional one. My own critical bias may be coming into play here, I have always been of the opinion that when someone sets himself to producing a fiction, that fiction will probably be narrated by an identity far removed from his own. Dern disagrees with me, arguing that "Amis' fiction can be better understood by first analyzing some of his essays" (2): this is problematic for me because Dern does not limit his reading of Amis' non-fiction to 'illuminative' but turns it into 'foundationalist'. I must confess, that from this point on (which you may note comes on page 2) Dern and I were destined to be at odds on the meaning of Amis' work. I sympathise with Dern's obvious love of Amis' prose, and his wish to incorporate as much of it as possible in his critique. I must also note that Dern is obviously familiar with much of Amis' body of critical and opinion writing, and as far as he takes it as the basis for his own critical position, uses it reasonably effectively. He never really convinces the reader that this is an appropriate path to take, but having taken it, we must accept this as our starting point.

Dern's *critical* starting point is one which faces almost all critics of contemporary literature: the defining of postmodernism. This is a thorny issue for any critic, and I must say that Dern handles it with some aplomb, and it is only upon a re-reading that the reader is left with the realization that Dern fails to establish a clear understanding of either modernism or postmodernism through which to read his criticism. Within the limited critical discourse that he establishes, Dern quite correctly states that "The postmodern condition would, in its culmination, paradoxically bring the study of itself to extinction, for there could be no sense of unity or similarity." (16) Unfortunately, rather than engage with the difficulties presented by this statement, Dern effectively rejects 'postmodernism' in favour of 'anti-modernism', a concept he retrospectively applies to, and then borrows from, the "Angry Young Men" of 1950's British literature.

Anti-modernists take up a position straddling modernism and postmodernism: They partly accept the postmodernist idea of reader-oriented as opposed to author-oriented novels, as well as the freedom of the reader to be bored with obfuscation. However, they reject any notion of the author's death, under which an author becomes a mere player in his own work rather than an authority over it...How does anti-modernism affect Martin Amis? Amis incorporates the best of both modernism and anti-modernism into his work. From modernism he takes inflections of techniques (including stream of consciousness) and uses the condition's primary exponent (Joyce) for satire in *The Information*. From anti-modernism, he takes openness, plain speaking and a bleak, Larkinesque view of society. (31)

If Dern's text has been attempting to argue for classifying Amis' work as participant in the Modernist movement - either with or against it - this critical typology would have been satisfactory, if not entirely so (bearing in mind Amis' consistent formal and thematic experimentation). This move, I believe, is motivated by Amis' parentage rather than any overly convincing connection between Amis and those who we generally identify as the great Modernist authors, and essentially evades the central project of the text which presumably was to "reevaluat[e] the novel" because Amis' fiction "live[s] the phenomenon" of postmodernism. I would be happy to disregard these elements as mere differences of opinion if they led to really cogent and interesting readings of Amis' fiction, but with few exceptions, Dern's text ultimately reads as an 'Amis-primer' suitable for padding an assigned essay if you perhaps haven't quite read the novel yet.

To be fair, the relative lack of critical materials on Amis, and the diversity of his fiction, makes a coherent thesis on them very difficult to produce. Dern attempts to counter this by using the common method of breaking the corpus down into simultaneously thematically related and chronological groups. This at times seems forced as – with the exception of Chapter 2, "Narrator and Rogue" which reads Amis' 1989 novel *London Fields* – the chapters insistently address the novels in chronological order. As a result, the supposed thematic connections between works and sections seem simplistic or unconvincing.

One of the great weaknesses of Dern's writing is his deployment of critical and theoretical background. He often uses critical quotation merely to reinforce his own perspective – or worse, in place of independent perspective – and his choice of critics seems limited to James Diedrick's *Understanding Martin Amis*, Malcolm Bradbury's *The Modern British Novel* and, for definition of terms or concepts, David Lodge's *The Art of Fiction*. I do not mean to imply that any of these texts is inherently flawed, but the fact is that all three are written with the intent of providing 'survey' criticism, particularly the latter two. Deidrick's text is intended for an undergraduate and lay audience, Bradbury's is faced with the challenge of

attempting to briefly summarise and track developments in British literature across decades, and Lodge's volume is a collection of articles originally written for a lay audience that first appeared as newspaper columns. Each of these texts achieves its goals admirably and entertainingly, but does not necessarily constitute an adequate (nor entire) critical basis for a text which is presumably intended for an audience with a pre-existing critical competence or knowledge. Furthermore, when Dern is ostensibly offering his own interpretations of Amis' fiction, we are more often than not presented with an abbreviated discussion of Amis' plots interspersed with commentaries from these earlier critics. The final product gives the reader the sense that they should have confined their reading to these earlier critics and not bothered with Dern's survey, particularly when we are left with the feeling that neither Amis' fiction nor the earlier critical texts have been subjected to rigorous intellectual enquiry.

This feeling is only compounded when we reach Dern's final chapter. "Critics" does not, as one would expect, seriously engage with earlier criticism, but is seemingly only interested in the filial relationship between Kingsley and Martin. The justification? "Two of the most important considerations would naturally be criticism from one's father and dealing with the eventual, indeed inevitable, comparisons of one's work to one's father's." (150) This issue is little more than an interesting footnote's worth of material, but forms the basis of the entire chapter, coupled mainly with Amis' own critical work, and the fracas that broke out in 1994/1995 over Amis' very public change of agents and the ensuing breakdown of his friendship with Julian Barnes, all of which in my humble opinion has almost nothing to do with Amis' fiction. Dern returns again here to Martin Amis' own critical writing and finally acknowledges the inevitable discrepancies between Amis' critical and fictional narrative perspectives. However, rather than consequently admitting the tenuous status of his own argument, Dern attempts to turn this into a questionable conclusive argument: "The paradox, then, is that Amis the modernist critic defends the anti-modernist and postmodernist conditions into which literature has (d)evolved. It is a signal example of his own fragmented, postmodern mindset: his ability to hold these positions simultaneously (and parody them in his fiction) and to find not only meanings but also applications for them reveal his own semi-conscious postmodern condition." (160/161)

That said, you may get the impression that I feel this an unreadable, and un-recommendable piece of criticism on Amis. However, I would like quickly to focus on what I see as the strongest and most convincing piece of criticism in the entire volume. Pages 86 to 94 deal with Amis' 1984 novel *Money: A Suicide Note*, and while this section contains the problematic elements which plague the entire volume, Dern nonetheless manages to produce an interesting and entertaining reading of the novel. I came away from this section feeling that I had gained a truly new perspective of Amis' novel, and if this had appeared as an article I would have been praising Dern's work.

We all bring our biases to any narrative, and critical narratives are no exception to this rule. Unfortunately, Dern and I obviously have different critical biases and, while I cannot ultimately say that I enjoyed reading *Martians*, *Monsters & Madonna*, I can say that the project is a noble failure that deserves attention even though it often exemplifies the attitude the author credits Amis with: style over substance.

For the 'Amis-anoraks', who must have a complete collection at any and all costs, this book may be purchased from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) nor [www.peterlang.com](http://www.peterlang.com)

More information about Martin Amis can be found at <http://martinamisis.albion.edu>. This site is maintained by James Deidrick, author of *Understanding Martin Amis* and includes extensive primary and secondary bibliographies as well as a discussion board.

Copyright © Monash University 2003. All rights reserved.

[about](#) | [current issue](#) | [archives](#) | [acknowledgements](#) | [submissions](#) | [contact us](#) | [links](#)

This page has been approved by the [Colloquy Editors](#)

Last Date Modified : 29 May 2003 - [Caution](#) - [Monash Home](#)