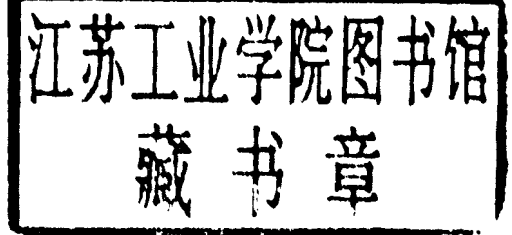


□ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

38

Contemporary Literary Criticism



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Volume 38

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the
Works of Today's Novelists, Poets,
Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters,
and Other Creative Writers

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Contents

Preface 7

Appendix 467

Authors Forthcoming in *CLC* 9

Martin Amis 1949-	11
Jacques Audiberti 1899-1965	20
Thomas Berger 1924-	35
Roy Blount, Jr. 1941-	44
Robert Bly 1926-	49
Octavia E. Butler 1947-	61
Hortense Calisher 1911-	67
Truman Capote 1924-1984	77
Alejo Carpentier 1904-1980	88
James Carroll 1943-	102
John Pepper Clark 1935-	112
Leonard Cohen 1934-	130
Guy Davenport 1927-	139
Samuel R. Delany 1942-	149
Michel del Castillo 1933-	163
Christopher Durang 1949-	170
Sumner Locke Elliott 1917-	176
Nicolas Freeling 1927-	183
Mavis Gallant 1922-	189
James Galvin 1951-	197
Albert Goldbarth 1948-	200
Richard Grayson 1951-	208
Peter Handke 1942-	214
Barry Hannah 1942-	231

Joseph Hansen 1923-	236
William Harmon 1938-	241
Andrew Holleran 1943?-	245
John Irving 1942-	249
George S. Kaufman 1889-1961	256
Alfred Kazin 1915-	269
Camara Laye 1928-1980	284
Claude Lévi-Strauss 1908-	293
Peter Luke 1919-	313
Kamala Markandaya 1924-	319
Stanley Middleton 1919-	329
John Nichols 1940-	336
Heberto Padilla 1932-	348
Robert Pinsky 1940-	355
David Plante 1940-	364
Stephen Poliakoff 1952-	374
Jonathan Reynolds 1942-	387
Ntozake Shange 1948-	392
Thomas W. Shapcott 1935-	397
Isaac Bashevis Singer 1904-	406
Studs Terkel 1912-	418
J.R.R. Tolkien 1892-1973	430
Herman Wouk 1915-	444
Marguerite Yourcenar 1903-	454

Preface

Literary criticism is, by definition, “the art of evaluating or analyzing with knowledge and propriety works of literature.” The complexity and variety of the themes and forms of contemporary literature make the function of the critic especially important to today’s reader. It is the critic who assists the reader in identifying significant new writers, recognizing trends in critical methods, mastering new terminology, and monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion.

Until the publication of the first volume of *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* in 1973, there existed no ongoing digest of current literary opinion. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need.

Scope of the Work

CLC presents significant passages from published criticism of works by today’s creative writers. Each volume of *CLC* includes excerpted criticism on about 50 authors who are now living or who died after December 31, 1959. Since the series began publication, almost 1,800 authors have been included. The majority of authors covered by *CLC* are living writers who continue to publish; therefore, an author frequently appears in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, or the dramatization of a literary work as a movie or television screenplay. For example, the present volume includes Studs Terkel, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his nonfiction work “*The Good War*”: *An Oral History of World War II*; Sumner Locke Elliott, whose novel *Careful, He Might Hear You* was adapted into a critically acclaimed film; and John Irving, whose novel *The Cider House Rules* received much attention from the literary world. Perhaps most importantly, authors who appear frequently on the syllabuses of high school and college literature classes are heavily represented in *CLC*; Robert Bly and J.R.R. Tolkien are examples of writers of this stature in the present volume. Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These are the contributors to the well-loved but nonscholarly genres of mystery and science fiction, as well as literary and social critics whose insights are considered valuable and informative. Foreign writers and authors who represent particular ethnic groups in the United States are also featured in each volume.

Format of the Book

Altogether there are about 700 individual excerpts in each volume—with an average of about 14 excerpts per author—taken from hundreds of literary reviews, general magazines, scholarly journals, and monographs. Contemporary criticism is loosely defined as that which is relevant to the evaluation of the author under discussion; this includes criticism written at the beginning of an author’s career as well as current commentary. Emphasis has been placed on expanding the sources for criticism by including an increasing number of scholarly and specialized periodicals. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers frequently find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by the editors supply them with all the information needed to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. However, complete bibliographical citations facilitate the location of the original source as well as provide all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

A *CLC* author entry consists of the following elements:

- The **author heading** cites the author’s full name, followed by birth date, and death date when applicable. The portion of the name outside the parentheses denotes the form under which the author has most commonly published. If an author has written consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the real name given on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Also located at the beginning of the introduction to the author entry are any important name variations under which an author has written. Uncertainty as to a birth or death date is indicated by question marks.

- A **portrait** of the author is included when available.
- A brief **biographical and critical introduction** to the author and his or her work precedes the excerpted criticism. However, *CLC* is not intended to be a definitive biographical source. Therefore, *cross-references* have been included to direct the reader to other useful sources published by the Gale Research Company: *Contemporary Authors* now includes detailed biographical and bibliographical sketches on nearly 85,000 authors; *Children's Literature Review* presents excerpted criticism on the works of authors of children's books; *Something about the Author* contains heavily illustrated biographical sketches on writers and illustrators who create books for children and young adults; *Contemporary Issues Criticism* presents excerpted commentary on the nonfiction works of authors who influence contemporary thought; *Dictionary of Literary Biography* provides original evaluations of authors important to literary history; and the new *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* offers autobiographical essays by prominent writers. Previous volumes of *CLC* in which the author has been featured are also listed in the introduction.
- The **excerpted criticism** represents various kinds of critical writing—a particular essay may be normative, descriptive, interpretive, textual, appreciative, comparative, or generic. It may range in form from the brief review to the scholarly monograph. Essays are selected by the editors to reflect the spectrum of opinion about a specific work or about an author's literary career in general. The excerpts are presented chronologically, adding a useful perspective to the entry. All titles by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type, which enables the reader to easily identify the works being discussed.
- A complete **bibliographical citation** designed to help the user find the original essay or book follows each excerpt. An asterisk (*) at the end of a citation indicates that the essay is on more than one author.

Other Features

- A list of **Authors Forthcoming in CLC** previews the authors to be researched for future volumes.
- An **Appendix** lists the sources from which material in the volume has been reprinted. Many other sources have also been consulted during the preparation of the volume.
- A **Cumulative Index to Authors** lists all the authors who have appeared in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, and *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, along with cross-references to other Gale series: *Children's Literature Review*, *Authors in the News*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *Something about the Author*, and *Yesterday's Authors of Books for Children*. Users will welcome this cumulated author index as a useful tool for locating an author within the various series. The index, which lists birth and death dates when available, will be particularly valuable for those authors who are identified with a certain period but whose death date causes them to be placed in another, or for those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald is found in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, yet a writer often associated with him, Ernest Hemingway, is found in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*.
- A **Cumulative Index to Critics** lists the critics and the author entries in which their essays appear.

Acknowledgments

The editors wish to thank the copyright holders of the excerpted articles included in this volume for permission to use the material and the photographers and other individuals who provided photographs for us. We are grateful to the staffs of the following libraries for making their resources available to us: Detroit Public Library and the libraries of Wayne State University, the University of Michigan, and the University of Detroit. We also wish to thank Anthony Bogucki for his assistance with copyright research.

Suggestions Are Welcome

The editors welcome the comments and suggestions of readers to expand the coverage and enhance the usefulness of the series.

Authors Forthcoming in *CLC*

Contemporary Literary Criticism, Volume 39 will be a yearbook devoted to an examination of the outstanding achievements and trends in literature during 1985. Volumes 40 and 41 will contain criticism on a number of authors not previously listed and will also feature criticism on newer works by authors included in earlier volumes.

To Be Included in Volume 40

Brian Aldiss (English novelist, short story writer, critic, and editor)—A Hugo and Nebula Award-winning science fiction author, Aldiss recently published *Helliconia Winter*, the third novel in his series about a remote planet called Helliconia.

Jorge Amado (Brazilian novelist and nonfiction writer)—Amado is recognized as one of Brazil's greatest writers, and his works have been translated into over forty languages. He is best known for his novels *The Violent Land*, *Gabriela*, *Clove and Cinnamon*, *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands*, and the recently translated *Pen, Sword, Camisole*.

Ann Beattie (American novelist and short story writer)—In her fiction Beattie records the disillusionment of the "Woodstock generation" as her protagonists come to terms with middle age and a suburban, middle-class lifestyle. Her latest works include *The Burning House* and *Love Always*.

Marguerite Duras (French novelist, dramatist, short story writer, and filmmaker)—Internationally recognized for her mastery of several genres, Duras is perhaps best known for her work in film and her application of cinematic techniques to the novel. Her recent prizewinning novel, *The Lover*, has furthered her reputation as an important contemporary author.

William M. Hoffman (American dramatist and editor)—Hoffman's controversial play *As Is* has been praised for his sympathetic treatment of the tragic effects of AIDS on a homosexual couple.

Garrison Keillor (American novelist and essayist)—Host of the popular radio program "A Prairie Home Companion," Keillor gained widespread recognition and praise for his best-selling novel, *Lake Wobegon Days*.

Etheridge Knight (American poet, short story writer, and editor)—Knight published his first collection of poetry, *Poems from Prison*, while serving a sentence in the Indiana State Prison. The poems in this and subsequent volumes are rooted in oral tradition and feature common, colloquial language through which Knight conveys messages of social protest.

Tim O'Brien (American novelist)—Winner of the National Book Award for his novel *Going After Cacciato*, O'Brien focuses on the theme of nuclear annihilation and social issues of the post-World War II era in his latest work, *The Nuclear Age*.

Konstantin Paustovsky (Russian fiction and nonfiction writer)—Paustovsky's six-volume autobiography, *The Story of a Life*, received considerable attention in both the Soviet Union and the West. This work chronicles his life against a historical background that includes World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the Stalin purges.

Muriel Spark (Scottish-born novelist, short story writer, poet, and nonfiction writer)—Spark is best known for her witty satires which probe themes related to morality. Her recent novels include *Loitering with Intent* and *The Only Problem*.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (American novelist, short story writer, and critic)—This prolific and popular author of the novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* satirizes contemporary America and Darwinism in his recent novel, *Galápagos*, which several critics consider one of his finest works.

Diane Wakoski (American poet and critic)—In her poetry Wakoski often depicts an ongoing search for fulfillment that frequently leads to loss and betrayal. Her latest books include *The Magician's Feastletters* and *The Collected Greed: Parts 1-13*.

Reinaldo Arenas (Cuban novelist and poet)—Censored by the Cuban government for his controversial fiction and poetry and for his homosexuality, Arenas now lives and works in the United States. His recent acclaimed novel, *Farewell to the Sea*, recounts the psychic struggles of a disillusioned writer and his wife.

Ray Bradbury (American short story writer, poet, scriptwriter, novelist, dramatist, and author of children's books)—Best known for his popular and acclaimed science fiction and fantasy short stories, Bradbury recently published *Death Is a Lonely Business*, a detective story which is his first novel in twenty-three years.

Morley Callaghan (Canadian novelist, short story writer, essayist, and dramatist)—Described by Edmund Wilson as "perhaps the most unjustly neglected novelist in the English-speaking world," Callaghan has been active in literature for over sixty years. His latest novel, *Our Lady of the Snows*, like much of his work, is characterized by its journalistic prose style, ironic tone, and moralistic themes.

T.S. Eliot (American-born English poet, critic, dramatist, and essayist)—One of the most important literary figures of the twentieth century, Eliot is recognized as a major contributor to the modern age in poetry and criticism. The twentieth anniversary of Eliot's death has sparked renewed evaluation of his achievements.

Carlos Fuentes (Mexican novelist, dramatist, short story writer, essayist, and critic)—In his internationally acclaimed works, Fuentes draws upon Mexican history and legend to explore and define the identity of his homeland. Among his most recent novels are *The Old Gringo* and *Distant Relations*.

Eugène Ionesco (Rumanian-born French dramatist, essayist, scriptwriter, and novelist)—One of the most renowned exponents of the Theater of the Absurd, Ionesco employs exaggeration and black humor to

explore the alienation of individuals searching for meaning in an irrational and meaningless world.

Peter Levi (English poet, novelist, travel writer, and editor)—A former Jesuit priest whose poetry often employs such Elizabethan and classical forms as the sonnet and the elegy, Levi has also written two adventure novels, *Head in the Soup* and *Grave Witness*.

Janet Lewis (American novelist, poet, short story writer, dramatist, and author of children's books)—The author of *The Wife of Martin Guerre* and other acclaimed historical novels, Lewis has also gained considerable respect for her poetry about the Ojibway and Navajo tribes of North America.

Ross Macdonald (American novelist, short story writer, essayist, and autobiographer)—A prolific and popular author of detective fiction, Macdonald is best known as the creator of sleuth Lew Archer. In his recent volume of essays, *Self-Portrait: Ceaselessly Into the Past*, Macdonald examines his long career and the genesis of his novels.

Boris Pasternak (Russian poet, novelist, short story writer, essayist, and autobiographer)—Best known in the United States for his novel *Doctor Zhivago*, Pasternak is also highly regarded for his poetry, which is often associated with the symbolist and futurist movements.

Anne Rice (American novelist and critic)—The author of the popular novel *Interview with the Vampire*, Rice has recently published *The Vampire Lestat*, the second installment of *The Vampire Chronicles*.

Nayantara Sahgal (Indian novelist, short story writer, autobiographer, and nonfiction writer)—Sahgal's writings are noted for their insightful portraits of life in contemporary India. Her recent novels, *Rich Like Us* and *Plans for Departure*, are considered important additions to her canon.

Martin Amis

1949-

English novelist, critic, short story writer, editor, scriptwriter, and nonfiction writer.

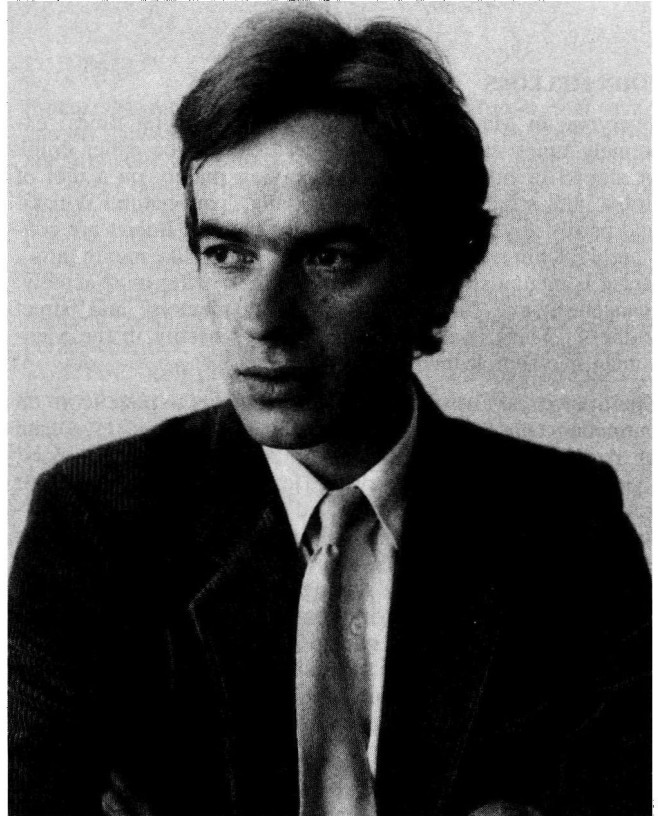
Amis has been hailed as an outstanding young novelist who satirizes the scabrous excesses of youth and contemporary society and displays an irreverent and incisive wit similar to that of his father, author Kingsley Amis. His fast-paced prose is infused with contemporary slang and foul language, and his characters are obsessed with sex, drugs, violence, and materialistic pursuits. Like such satirists as Jonathan Swift and Angus Wilson, with whom he has been compared, Amis is widely regarded as a moralist whose novels admonish against the follies of his age. Jerome Charyn concludes that "Amis is so horrified by the world he sees in the process of formation that he feels compelled to warn us all about it."

Amis's first novel, *The Rachel Papers* (1973), concerns the passing of adolescence and the advent of manhood. The narrator of this work, an obnoxious, self-centered English youth on the eve of his twentieth birthday, relates his misadventures in graphic and humorous detail. Most critics found this work skillfully written but were impressed, as John Mellors states, "more with promise and felicities en route than with achievement." Amis's second novel, *Dead Babies* (1975), is a black comedy about a group of deviant youths who gather at a country home for a weekend of drugs and verbal and physical violence. Amis's characters reject the idealism of the 1960s in favor of the era's excesses by indulging in their wildest fantasies.

In *Success* (1978), Amis presents a less disturbing comedy of manners. *Success* centers on the relationship between two foster brothers, one privileged and one not, and their comparative degrees of social, economic, and sexual success. This novel has been interpreted as an allegorical commentary on the decline of the established order in British society. *Other People: A Mystery Story* (1981) is an ambiguous tale in which Amis relates the dual experiences of Mary Lamb, a young woman suffering from amnesia, and what may be her former self, the reprehensible Amy Hide. Mary wanders innocently into London in search of her previous life only to discover anew the complexities of contemporary society.

Amis's recent novel, *Money: A Suicide Note* (1984), has been praised as his best work. This ambitious and complicated novel contains themes of greed, excess, self-destruction, cultural depravation, sex, and love. Through satire Amis exposes the incessant debaucheries of John Self, a producer of commercials who is on the verge of directing his first major American film. Amis combines metaphor, allegory, caricature, vigorous prose, and a cast of eccentric characters in an intricately designed plot that focuses upon the surrealistic and squalid urban existence of his comic hero. Jonathan Yardley noted that Amis "has created a central character of consummate vulgarity and irresistible charm," adding that Self "emerges as one of the indisputably memorable, not to mention haunting, characters of postwar fiction."

(See also *CLC*, Vols. 4, 9; *Contemporary Authors*, Vols. 65-68; *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series*, Vol. 8; and *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 14.)



© Jerry Bauer

ELAINE FEINSTEIN

Second novels are difficult; following success is difficult; one thing Martin Amis ensures: *Dead Babies* offers no repetition of the joyous hilarity of *The Rachel Papers*. It is more like a declaration of war on the assumptions that made the first book possible. And it is not for the squeamish. To give what seems to me a most telling example of the games Amis now plays with language, the title rises out of a piece of invented and ambiguous slang; don't give me 'all this dead babies'. His purpose in pushing the stylishly foul-mouthed to this point is similar to his intention in throwing his privileged and corrupt adolescents into a future where the really cool can enjoy the last reaches of the technology of sex and violence, while the rest of humanity hangs about raggedly under the stanchions of some overhead bypass. This poor distorted generation, full of hatred for their parents, and terrified of any form of compassion or gallantry, is described with a total ferocity which is nevertheless frequently comic. Giles's opening dream of losing his teeth, one by one, into the mouthpiece of the telephone, echoes through the book to the point where he cannot bring himself to articulate the word 'dentist'. A sexual encounter intended to evoke *Story of O* eroticism collapses with Andy's penis

caught in his zip. Nevertheless, the book is a long way from a romp. Rather as I hope for society that this is no true prophecy, I hope for Martin Amis that the nightmare of this vision will rapidly become part of his past. In the meanwhile, it is a remarkable fantasy. (p. 480)

Elaine Feinstein, "Killing Time," in *New Statesman*, Vol. 90, No. 2326, October 17, 1975, pp. 479-80.*

JOHN MELLORS

Everyone in Martin Amis's sad, savage and (at times) extremely funny satire [*Dead Babies*] 'tends to be either drunk or stoned or hungover or sick'. Living mainly on a diet of drugs, gin, strong champagne cocktails, 'para-natural Whiski' and hardly any food, the degenerates in *Dead Babies* are constantly retching, vomiting and ejecting burps 'like mouth farts'. But it is mental sickness from which they suffer most acutely: 'cancelled sex', 'lagging time', 'faulty memory' and 'street sadness'. Their lives are cancelled very nastily in the Manxsonian mayhem at the end.

The title-phrase is used by Amis's characters to pour scorn on outmoded concepts like jealousy, faithfulness and love, and by Amis himself to describe his cast, the six 'Appleseeders' living in Appleseed Rectory in Hertfordshire and their four guests, a golden-hearted whore and a 'triad' or 'troy' of Americans. The time is the future, into which the dead babies have grown up through a period when 'sexual lassitude and disgust seemed to be everywhere among the young, and two-night stands were becoming a rarity'; but the business of the satirist, as Amis points out in a quotation from Menippus, 'is not prophecy, just as his subject is not tomorrow . . . it is today.' Yet Amis's theme is a conventional one—that relationships without affection are boring, meaningless and sterile. . . .

Martin Amis is obsessed by bodily functions and dwells with loving distaste on the digestive processes and on 'gaping vaginas, rhubarb penises and gouged behinds'. He is witty: 'A cooked breakfast? It would be like going to bed in pyjamas or reading an English novel.' His dialogue is brilliant, particularly the conversations between the *blasés* Appleseeds and Marvell, the earnest American. . . . The description of the obese Whitehead family packing their grotesque limbs into a small car is quite Rabelaisian. But beneath the skilfully presented shock-effects of *Dead Babies*, there is a sentimentally sweet and squelchy centre—a flavour I did not detect in Amis's first novel, *The Rachel Papers*.

John Mellors, "Raw Breakfast," in *The Listener*, Vol. 94, No. 2430, October 30, 1975, p. 582.*

ELIOT FREMONT-SMITH

Dead Babies reads as if it were a therapeutic exorcism of . . . leftovers, in the guise of an adolescent "Philosopher in the Bedroom." It is set "a few years hence" on an English country estate where a motley slew of misfits and grotesques gather for a weekend of pill-popping, various unpleasant and debauchy games, and talk. Endless talk. The "dead babies" are truth, compassion, and reality—things like that—and they just *won't* go away. One supposes it's all meant to illustrate "the end of indulgence, a sort of Gotterdammerung of the gratification culture" (as the jacket puts it)—i.e., growing up. Only it is very hard to care whether these pathetics do or don't. Amis tries to perk up the proceedings with nasty (Genet-al?) acts and

lots of brightwork wit—the tone is polished bitterness—but he seems really to be working through something for himself. Now, its . . . [a] truism that reviewers are prone to make fallacious attributions to authors' minds and motives; but in this case one does hope that *Dead Babies* may clear the way for the fresh, even brilliant, third novel that should be within reach of Amis's considerable gifts and abilities.

Eliot Fremont-Smith, in a review of "*Dead Babies*," in *The Village Voice*, Vol. XXI, No. 4, January 26, 1976, p. 45.

NEIL HEPBURN

Martin Amis's [*Success*] is structurally like a large 'X' on the arms of which his two principal characters, Gregory and Terry, slide ever downwards, in time with the measured wreck of the society that has fixed the rhythm of their desires. Gregory begins with worldly success, at the right-hand top. Terry endures at the left-hand top as much honest awareness of his failure (by the yardstick of bedded girls and spent money) as his knavish character will allow him. Events bring them slithering inexorably down their respective arms, to meet, cross and end with a bump, still on opposite sides, but with opposite fortunes: Terry is now the owner and wielder of a low kind of success, Gregory quaking in the acknowledgment that his sometime superiority not only is not compatible with the new world, but was never even real.

At the crossing-point of their two lives lies the smashed body of Ursula, Gregory's sister, successful at the second attempt in a suicide nurtured in an incestuous childhood with Gregory, and triggered by a more recent relationship with Terry. (pp. 482-83)

These developments are emblematic of the terrible (or, if you are Terry, useful) changes going on in England, where foreigners roam and brawl and reign commercially, young men sleep stoned among the rubbish bags, girls are not only ludicrously available but predatory, and everybody says 'fuck' as often as possible. It is impossible to ignore Mr Amis's use of this last device. Terry, for example, says it very often: it is the badge of his shamed origins, the index of habitual indifference to meaning. Gregory, in his Flashmanesque address to the reader, uses it infrequently, and in order to show his 'aristocratic' contempt for gentilities. And it works, as a symbolic statement of the bastardised Gresham's Law by which the spurious is driven out by the worthless.

Whether Mr Amis prefers this banausic ascendancy to the fraudulent establishment it has destroyed is not altogether clear. His own side of the X is certainly the left, or moral, hand (although the success that *Success* deserves is bound to lend ambivalence to his position there); but by the time Terry has forfeited authorial sympathy and a put-down Gregory been advanced for commiseration, both characters have mutinied, abandoned their roles as 'humours' in a *roman à thèse*, and by their outrageously animated performances in the foreground have all but obscured the panorama of manners they were intended to throw into relief. This is a pity, if it softens the ferocity of Mr Amis's assault on the apocalyptic folly of the age. But it is pure gain for the reader untainted by the urge to have his conscience flayed. For the novel is corrosively funny, and brilliantly observed. (p. 483)

Neil Hepburn, "Tonto," in *The Listener*, Vol. 99, No. 2555, April 13, 1978, pp. 482-83.

PAUL ABLEMAN

Martin Amis's third novel [*Success*] concerns two young men who share a London flat. Gregory is handsome, witty, elegant and derives from landed gentry. His foster-brother, Terry, is a product of the slums. . . . The novel spans a year in their lives and is divided into twelve sections, corresponding to the passing months.

The book is narrated alternately by Gregory and Terry. Presumably the intention, analogous to that of Durrell in the 'Alexandria Quartet', is to provide different perspectives on the same sequence of events. But for such a device to engage and hold the reader's interest, the events themselves must be interesting. Unhappily much of the action in *Success* is pedestrian and the necessity to plod through it twice becomes tedious.

Terry has a girl friend called Jan. Gregory calls her June. This is a fair sample of the level of variation of perspective. There is, however, a ponderous differentiation of diction. Gregory talks like a super-dandy out of Firkbank and Terry like a super-yob. Neither of them is very convincing as a person but this drawback is somewhat mitigated by the reader's growing perception that the book is a parable about the decline of the old order in England and the new raj of the yobs. Strange things, which a critic should not reveal, happen to Terry and Gregory as the year proceeds. There are revelations. . . .

There is not . . . much erotic relief in *Success*. In dismal compensation, there is an abundance of what unenlightened folk would call bad language. (p. 23)

This schoolboy flaunting of 'rude words' is distressing, and not merely as a symptom of imaginative poverty or poor taste. The right to use such words in literature has been laboriously won over centuries. *Success* is the kind of novel that gives libertarianism a bad name. If the puritan backlash, clearly gathering strength, should succeed in once more muzzling writers, it will be this kind of self-indulgence that will be partly responsible and Mr Amis may find that the characters in his next book are only f. . . d up or even, admittedly no great literary loss, mucked up.

There is a lot of sloppy writing. Gregory says of Terry: 'His teeth . . . taper darkly into the metallic hecatomb of his jaws.' A hecatomb is, of course, an animal sacrifice and not a kind of mausoleum. . . . But such matters, albeit material, are quibbles.

Much more damning is the fact that it is hard to discern any purpose behind *Success* other than the desire to write a novel. The split narrative belts on, desperately hoping for something good to turn up. Here there is a plod through Beckettland and next a meander through Kafka country. One could, in fact, relate fragments of the novel to a whole spectrum of modern masters. But stylistic versatility doesn't necessarily generate a work of art.

And yet *Success* bristles with evidence of talent. 'When I said that pathetic thing to Gregory and stumbled down the stairs, whose face burnt the hotter with embarrassment and remorse? Mine, mine. Why? I'll tell you why. Because I have no pride, and they merely have no shame.' The build-up is adequate, if not elegant, but the final epigram is subtle and haunting. . . . And there is much more detail one could praise.

But alas Mr Amis distrusts his own creative imagination. There is a sub-text to this book, a surreal, lyrical novel about the eerie quality of urban life as ancient norms crumble and machines evolve like drosophilae. But Mr Amis only harvests it

in moments when his guard is down. Then he remembers that he is the most with-it penman around and quickly shifts his narrative back to the plane of trendy cynicism. It is hard to escape the feeling that subconsciously Mr Amis regards *Success* as a stance rather than a novel. (pp. 23-4)

Paul Ableman, "Sub-Texts," in *The Spectator*, Vol. 240, No. 2815, April 15, 1978, pp. 23-4.

TOM PAULIN

[*Success*] is a constrained re-write of *Dead Babies*, that savage and brilliant satire which is set in a place of "shifting outlines and imploded vacuums . . . of lagging time and false memories . . . street sadness, night fatigue and cancelled sex." This consumers' hell is also the setting of *Success* which transforms London into a state of nature inhabited by the ugly, the nasty, the brutish and the short. Central to Amis's vision is a sense of deprivation which annihilates the past and makes the present moment seem an exhausted bundle of vicious, fetid and desperate energies. . . . The only constants in this dead secular world are "self-pity, self-disgust, and self-love"; innocence is transformed into a baby-like boiled egg, and life has a scratchy, scurfy texture that infests the rhythms of Amis's prose.

Take, for example, the "chippy" and disgruntled Terry's remarks in *Success* about the cool, "naturally stylish" Gregory:

I want details, I want details, actual details, and I want them to be hurtful, damaging and grotesque. I nurse dreams of impotence, monorchidism and premature ejaculation. I lust for his repressions and blocks; I ache for his traumata.

Here, as too often elsewhere, Amis heaps up verbal triplets and refuses to write well. But in a valueless world style may be a value that he is deliberately rejecting—he prefers a hectic, spasming prose-style whose jerks and contortions resemble the death throes of an electric eel. It's this abrasive lack of co-ordination and the fact that the two central characters, Terry and Gregory, duplicate Quentin and Little Keith in *Dead Babies* which make *Success* a sporadically impressive but disappointing sequel. Nevertheless, Amis's sense of the way in which Terry's personality is the result of a derelict childhood represents an original revaluing of traditional notions of childhood and maturity. Terry has a murdered baby for a sister, a schizophrenic foster-sister called Ursula, and he remembers lying in bed "like a shrivelled grub", another withered baby. He is, he insists, comprehensively "fucked-up", and here Amis draws on Larkin's "This Be The Verse" in order to explore a condition of radical cynicism. His exploration isn't merely personal and neurotic—it is deeply sensitive to the mood of the late 1970s, and anyone who belongs to Amis's generation must recognise his understanding of where we are now.

This is apparent in Gregory's remark: "The world is changing; the past has gone, and from now on all is future tense." A remark which adapts these lines from Peter Porter's "A Meredithian Treatment": "The past is dead, the future dead, the now/Is here, an apotheosis of girls begins." Porter's poem critically catches the atmosphere of the 1960s, and Amis darkens that climate of liberation in order to explore what it's like to live in a cultural dead-end. Everything in this terminal world is grubby, glossy and expensive—it is like Terry looking at one of those magazines "in which girls show the insides of their vaginas and anuses to the world for money." The streets

are "like a dead newsreel reshown nightly", and this city of consumers and transients at times resembles Eliot's "twittering world" of torpid commuters. It may be that Amis is attempting to take the negative way through the hell he depicts, but there is a helpless uncertainty in his treatment of it. Far from subverting or qualifying his demonic competence he tends to recommend it, and this is one of the reasons why *Success* is a comparative failure. . . . *Success* depends on the cultural associations of the word "chippy", which is defined as "minding being poor, ugly and common." It's a term that recognises and colludes with the authority of class, and it passively submits to the condition of being an anxiety-ridden *petit bourgeois*. Here and in the description of Terry and Ursula as "below-stairs lovers" Amis harks back to previous class-structures (the Edwardian period, the 1950s) and this confuses the contemporaneity of a narrative which is at times reminiscent of Larkin's *Jill*. In the character of Gregory, Amis appears to be exacting a personal revenge on all the gilded fools whom he must have beaten long ago and who must therefore be scarcely worth bothering about now.

There are a few amusing moments in the story. . . . But at other times the introverted narrative lags and becomes boring. Perhaps this is because a story of two sophisticated and demented adolescents is bound to seem rankly narcissistic and eventually pointless. Like a tramp who shambles about cursing at himself, Amis's novel occupies a sort of twilight zone where neurosis only occasionally makes a statement about the essential conditions of life. This is because self-disgust is a narrowing perspective which reduces reality to the spectacle of someone squeezing spots into a steamy mirror. (pp. 74-6)

Tom Paulin, "Fantastic Eschatologies," in *Encounter*, Vol. 11, No. 3, September, 1978, pp. 73-8.*

VICTORIA GLENDINNING

[In *Other People: A Mystery Story*] Martin Amis has written a modern morality. At least I think he has. A pretty, blonde young woman wakes up having lost her memory, not only of her own past but of everything. She does not even remember what shoes are for—or mouths, or clouds, or money. She has only the present, which she accepts unselectively; and like Alice in Wonderland—and Sartre—she finds that her chief problem is other people. She drifts into the company of tramps, alcoholics and criminals, 'the lost, the ruined, the broken, the effaced'. They just think she is 'simple'. Her pilgrim's progress lands her in a church hostel, then a squat, and, worst of all, a flat where classy rich drop-outs are drinking and drugging themselves to death—the seven deadly sins in person. Her lovers can remember the act and actions of love, but not love itself. And of course, she can't remember either.

She calls herself Mary Lamb—an innocent name. She thinks she is good, not bad. She hopes she is good. But she is haunted by her forgotten past—the past 'which always gets you in the end'. . . . (p. 319)

Other People ends as it begins, with an awakening—but whether into life or death I am not sure. The novel is aptly subtitled 'a mystery story'. It is quite hard to understand. The author is aware of this, and his slightly exasperated voice-over is heard at intervals, helping us along: 'I generally find I've got some explaining to do, particularly during the early stages.'

This is a very literary and word-mongering novel, and Mary's major disillusion concerns literature. She reads avidly; books

seem to take her out of her arbitrary present, even if they 'didn't quite explain how you lived with other people'. And then she realises books are not 'special': they are about the dirty present of power, boredom and desire, too. 'She felt that books were about the ideal world, where nothing was ideal but everything had ideality and the chance of moral spaciousness. And it wasn't so.'

That is a major loss of faith, for her, for an author, for anyone. This novel is full of pain, jokes and questions. It could only have been written by someone who was very highly intelligent and thoughtful. It is indeed punctuated by 'thoughts'—speculative, laconic, excellent passages about drunks, clothes, death, unrequited love, cities. It is not like anything else that I have read by Martin Amis.

As a fable, an investigation into 'how to live with other people' and the possible values of innocence and of 'good' and 'bad' it is, in its sad, funny and sidelong way, peculiarly interesting and effective. But you could be a deal less intelligent and aware than he is and be a better novelist. Intelligence and awareness may even block the passage. . . . This may be a good book but a bad novel, the work of a 'writer' rather than of a novelist. But he is never dull, and *Other People* is—and are—worth grappling with. (pp. 319-20)

Victoria Glendinning, "Lamb's Tale from Amis," in *The Listener*, Vol. 105, No. 2702, March 5, 1981, pp. 319-20.

ALAN HOLLINGHURST

One has heard a certain amount about the familiar being rendered strange by a . . . [process belonging to] so-called Martian poetry. In *Other People* Martin Amis brings back the technique to the novel from which it in part sprang—in Dickens's vivid reification—and where it perhaps more properly belongs. . . . Amis's device for isolating and poeticising the familiar is to make his protagonist an amnesiac: recovering consciousness after a critical 'event', Amy has lost her habitual associations with the ordinary and sees it as pregnant with a coded and ambiguous power. Human action appears 'ulterior, having a great and desperate purpose which firmly excluded her'—and one of the mysteries which the book unfolds is her re-initiation into adult life. The influence of Dickens is again felt in the protection of the girl in a stunned, unnatural innocence and circumstances of depravity and violence which she does not understand.

The Martian technique can turn on its user: it celebrates the phenomenal suggestiveness of things, but bring it to play on a human subject and the wit of the writer can seem to be achieved at the expense of the human subject's witlessness. This suits Amis fine—but it does give rise to certain questions about knowledge: like Virginia Woolf, Amis elides authorial free-ranging intelligence with the restricted reactions of the protagonist, and it is often hard to see where one becomes the other. Would an amnesiac think of cars as 'daredevil roadsters' or invent the elaborately overwritten descriptions of the sky, aeroplanes, the night, which recur through the book? The question is not really a censure, for it leads to a central issue of the novel: the identity and purpose of the narrator. The careful reader will soon pick up hints, and many aspects of the story have been ingeniously arranged. . . . [A] lot of the time the peculiar relation of Amy to Life seems used as a cover to produce comic or strange effects which do little to further the story, just as Amy herself shows curiously little interest in her

life before she lost her memory. Of course the comedy, expectedly centred on 'the act of pain or sadness', sex, is often hilarious—especially in the character of Russ who works with Amy at a café and acts out fantasies of being molested by film-stars: 'Leave it out, Sophia . . . Aah! Raquel! Will you—Get off my—bloody—?'

Amis showed in *Success* how he can manipulate and ironise the individual and self-protecting comedies of life into a picture of experience charged with pain and fear. But in *Other People* the manipulation finally seems over-ambitious, and something appears to have gone wrong in the later part of the book: the whole thing becomes factitious, obscure, unsatisfactory. It remains more of a 'Mystery Story' than, one suspects, was intended.

Alan Hollinghurst, "Opening Eyes," in *New Statesman*, Vol. 101, No. 2608, March 13, 1981, p. 21.*

PAUL ABLEMAN

The heroine of *Other People* is a good girl called Mary Lamb who used to be a bad girl called Amy Hide. 'Amy', of course, hides in 'Mary' as Mr Hyde hid in Dr Jekyll while another good Mary, in a nursery rhyme, had a little lamb. At the start of the book, Mary, suffering from total amnesia, flees from a hospital after, as Amy Hide, having been nearly murdered by a sadistic psychopath. But what is a sadistic psychopath doing in the world of nursery rhymes and little lambs? Demonstrating, I suspect, that Mr Amis has not really come to terms with his own creative orientation and remains determined to present himself as a cool, cynical modern who flinches at nothing.

Abroad in an utterly unknown world, like a water baby in the ocean or Alice down the rabbit hole, Mary embarks on a fabulous adventure in social climbing, mounting swiftly through the realms of winos, squatters and working folk to the heights of bourgeois bohemians. . . .

Enter the Fairy Prince, or just Mr Prince, a police officer charged, for metaphysical, one is forced to conclude, rather than official reasons, with reanimating her memory and preparing her for a new encounter with The Psychopath. Ultimately, in full possession once more of Mary Hyde's persona, in a deserted warehouse which echoes the final locations of those characteristic modern fairy tales—television crime dramas—Mary is delivered again to her destroyer who turns out to be . . . her creator, Mr Prince. . . .

Does it all work? Not really. The attempt to conflate realistic, not to say violent and sordid, incidents like rape, assault and suicide with wide-eyed fantasy sometimes results in sentimentality and this is the deadly enemy of the true fairy tale.

For all that, the book has genuine merit. For one thing, Mr Amis's prose is resourceful and, at its best, displays substantial lyricism and power of surreal imagery although it is somewhat hit-or-miss and can plunge dismally into bathos. There is, moreover, a sense of improvisation about the whole book as if the author had leaned too heavily on sometimes flagging inspiration. The last few pages, for example, generate the shoddy enigma of an author's refusal to clarify his meaning rather than the authentic one of a mystery too profound for clear expression. . . .

Still, for all its faults, *Other People: A Mystery Story* does say something about life, dreams, hallucination and, yes, the mystery of other people.

Paul Ableman, "Fairies and Violence," in *The Spectator*, Vol. 246, No. 7967, March 21, 1981, p. 22.

GEOFFREY STOKES

The great virtue of *Other People* is that Amis has harnessed his cleverness, turned it into a vehicle for the compassionate exploration of the world—and of the received ideas that shape it.

Not that he has entirely given up his old tricks. Former literary editor of *The New Statesman*, where he was largely responsible for fostering "Martianist" poetry, Amis has always been somewhere between shamelessly and proudly literary. . . . [It] seems clear that his title is a deliberate echo of Sartre's definition of Hell. The triangular dialogue (with the reader addressed as a passive third) and the cyclical epilogue suggest *No Exit* as well, and the narrator at one point notes that "There will have to be a hell for each of us." (p. 46)

[*Other People* ends ambiguously]—when Amis subtitled it *A Mystery Story*, he wasn't just whistlin' "Dixie"—but perfunctorily, a little as though Amis had lost the courage of his Manicheanism. And a lot as though he too had abandoned hope in the saving grace of art.

But not of artifice. For each of the ambiguous readings the last few pages allow, Amis has planted clues aplenty beforehand. Some are sly literary allusions, others subtly chiming verbal echoes. A few things are clear, though: the only way out of hell is imagination—the ownership of which is itself a kind of punishment. To imagine the twin Princes of Darkness and of Peace as real is to suffer; to discover that they are not only real but fungible, even identical, is to suffer exquisitely.

Amis, having invented it, doesn't back away from that pain, and at this moment of Western malaise, *Other People* would stand as a brave book no matter who had written it; Grand Themes are automatically suspicious. But it is particularly brave for Amis—an author securely ensconced on a comfortable level of the literary world—to break free, daring to fall on his face. Though he stumbles occasionally—the overbroad caricature of the BBC newsman would have been far more at home in an earlier book—he remains *integer vitae*. Instead of giving the finger to life, he is trying to embrace it.

It is too early to tell whether *Other People* might not be just an aberration in an otherwise predictable literary career, but it's certainly not too soon to hope it signals a permanent change. (p. 47)

Geoffrey Stokes, "Manichean's Fate," in *The Village Voice*, Vol. XXVI, No. 24, June 10-June 16, 1981, pp. 46-7.

EVAN HUNTER

Martin Amis's fourth novel is titled *Other People: A Mystery Story*. There are mysteries galore in its pages, but the book faces no danger of being lost in a bookshop's genre section. Mr. Amis has more "serious" matters on his mind, it would appear, and he sets about exploring them by presenting us with an amnesia victim who awakens in what seems to be a hospital and does not know who, where, or even *what* she is. Barefoot, bewildered and released onto the street by what is surely the world's most irresponsible hospital (if it is a hospital), she

wanders out into what we later learn is London and begins to discover a strange new universe. . . .

The book details the adventures and misadventures of our heroine abroad, who takes the name of "Mary Lamb" from the snatches of the nursery rhyme she hears recited by one of a group of drunks in her first encounter with the wide, wide world of crazies at large. In succeeding chapters, she is transported from the bowels of London to its esophagus, so to speak, in stages of upward mobility that brings her ever closer to discovering her real self, the "Amy Hide" (Amis Hiding?) who may or may not have been the acquiescent victim of a would-be murderer. We never learn who this murderer was or is. He is identified throughout as "Mr. Wrong," but in an anticlimactic confrontation scene, he remains faceless, and we never quite understand whether his final embrace is intended as a kiss of death or of resuscitation. . . .

And who is this *other* person in the book, a voice that erupts interminably, sharing supposedly pithy thoughts on life and death? The very last passage would lead us to believe he is only the inept murderer coming back to do the job good and proper this time. But there are clues all along that he is none other than the godlike author himself, periodically and irritatingly intruding, commenting on action we have already seen or are about to see, and making of himself a general nuisance, as for example: "I'm forever having to cope with these rather puzzling and regrettable people. You'll be running into a few more of them too. But all under my control, of course, all under my protection and control." . . .

This other person—this sometimes smugly omniscient, sometimes sophomorically philosophical, always disembodied voice that speaks directly to the reader—is only one of the many dismaying "other people" (two words that appear like a litany on virtually every other page) in this short, bitter book. Mr. Amis would seem far too young to have acquired such a dismal view of the world. Perhaps the sun will break through in London one day.

Evan Hunter, "Mary Lamb and Mr. Wrong," in The New York Times Book Review, July 26, 1981, p. 9.

ERIC KORN

[In the nonfiction work *Invasion of the Space Invaders: An Addict's Guide*, Amis's obsession] (and mine), still perhaps unfamiliar to Trappists or remoter Hebrideans, is with those mesmeric machines that at the drop of a coin (usually two) proffer a screenful of bug-eyed beasts to be annihilated by buttons, vehicles to be steered by wheels or joysticks or levers, chirruping creatures to be guided through mazes; whatever the ingenuity of the programmer can devise.

The novelty and entrancement is that the challenge grows more severe as the player's skill advances. Amis gives a vivid history of the onset and course of Space-Invader Fever, the expense of spirit—and time and cash—in a waste of game.

Video-champs aren't true addicts either (nobody calls Overt a jogging addict, or Verdi an operahead). When Amis complains that it cost him a fiver to conquer the first wave of Space Invaders, and a fiver apiece for the next nine waves, he is demanding admiration not sympathy. . . .

[This] is a fetchingly handsome book, its prose and pictures full of apt flash and wallop. Amis evokes with glum delight

the foul locales, louche habitués and impoverished jargon, the horrors of addiction: then he appraises the various games and the dodges for scoring, as if a sermon against lechery were bound up with a sex manual.

His survey is canny, passionate and splendidly partial; valuable for "Defenders", still the serious one. . . . He despises non-combatant games like "Frogger" (be kind to Amphibia) or "Donkey Kong" (be kind to Fay Wray); he praises "Missile Command" with its intricately beautiful patterns (and the thunderous finale that provokes epileptiform seizures) but absurdly travesties "Pac-Man", imagining that the gobbling monsters are the Pac-Men, which is not unlike a Student's Guide to Melville discussing a one-legged sea-captain called Moby Dick. . . .

He is properly appreciative of "Tempest", an almost abstract ballet of flickering forms and giddy perspectives. "Tempest" has nearly escaped the blast-them-from-the-galaxy format: the objective is to make geometry. This is the wave of the future, or one wave; another is ever more realistic simulation. . . .

Martin Amis feigns horror but is enjoying himself too much, in this enjoyable book, to be heeded. He doesn't perhaps grasp the deserts of eternity that videogames imply. All are potentially infinite: the reward for playing well is to play forever. Boring? But of course; boredom is the name of the game. Amis is the second best writer in English (after Amis) on bores and boredom: but English doesn't distinguish between boredom, a simple social plague, the herpes of the mind, and acedia, boredom self-imposed and self-destroying, a desperate tedium that dries lakes, flattens mountains, bleaches sunsets; behind the buzz and glitter, this is the real face of the Invader.

Eric Korn, "Space Bores," in The Sunday Times, London, September 26, 1982, p. 33.

IAN HAMILTON

'Dollar bills, pound notes, they're suicide notes. Money is a suicide note.' So says John Self, the hero of *Money: A Suicide Note*, and what he means is that money is destroying him. Self-destruction (along with several of its hyphenated pals: indulgence, interest, loathing) has become Self's hobby, what he does in his spare time, and what he spends his money on. But it's money's fault that this is what he spends his money on. It's money's fault that he hasn't got anything better to do with his spare time. 'The yobs are winning,' said a character in Martin Amis's *Success*, and one could almost take this as the 'burden' of his work so far. In earlier books, there have been yobs aplenty, and from the beginning Amis has scrutinised the species with some ardour. With John Self, though, he shifts the enemy to centre-stage, so that this time he can give him a real going-over.

When the book opens, Self has just arrived in New York to direct a big-money feature film, called *Good Money*. Back home in London, he has won a small reputation for his scandalous TV commercials (extolling the pleasures of junk food, tobacco, porno mags etc), and he has even collected an Italian prize for a short documentary called *Dean Street*. He is one of the new men, the uneducated media slicksters who took over in the Sixties, a practitioner and a product of junk culture. . . . Self makes lots of money but he 'pisses it away'—on rubbish food, rubbish booze and rubbish sex. He needs money very badly, but he can't control it. . . .