

Amis and Envy

By Ed Morales

The Information
By Martin Amis
Harmony Books, \$24

With The Information, Martin Amis seems poised to make a profound comment on the nature of the writing business, the unnerving inevitability of aging, and, well, death itself. At least it appears that the information he refers to is Death: Death of the English Novel, Death of Western Civilization, Death of the White Guy. The word that's obviously missing from this title is *Superhighway*, but Amis, who still writes his novels in longhand, seems to want no part of postmodern debate about technology and media, opting instead to offer this tidbit of crucial information: "The history of astronomy is the history of increasing humiliation." The sun doesn't revolve around Martin Amis!

The plot—there really exists very little plot—revolves around Richard Tull, a miserable, failed novelist turned book reviewer approaching 40, filled with envy toward his old friend Gwyn Barry, whose vapid, talentless prose has produced international bestselling novels about a p.c. Shangri-la called Amelior. Tull's obsessed with destroying Barry, by exposing him as a plagiarist, by sleeping with his wife, the Lady Demeter, by having thugs of dubious color beat the living crap out of him. It doesn't matter that all of these plots fail, for Tull is the living embodiment of failure, for his "history of humiliation was long—was long and proud." So it's not so surprising that Amis, who believes that "failure is more interesting than success," has Tull spend almost 400 pages wallowing in great "Gobis and Saharas" of failure.

The Information, which fails as the grand roman à clef that Amis's dual talent as novelist and journalist has promised, comes to us under a storm of attendant publicity about its roots in real life. All over Britain the headlines screamed of the infamous DENTAL IMPLANT SURGERY, paid for by the 500,000-POUND ADVANCE secured for *The Information* when Amis, after LEAVING HIS WIFE, dumped his long-standing agent, Pat Kavanaugh, and signed on with the loathsome Andrew Wylie, THE JACKAL, THE ROBERT MAXWELL OF AGENTING. That Kavanaugh was married to Amis's longtime novelist-pal and tennis buddy Julian Barnes, who was widely regarded as the model for the insufferable Gwyn Barry character, only fueled the hysteria in and around the Groucho Club.

Barnes and Amis are old friends and share games of snooker much as Richard and Gwyn do in *The Information*, but their real-life relationship is the inverse of the one in the novel. Gwyn, the alleged model for Barnes, has Amis's fame and

wealth, while Barnes's work, although not as obscure as the hopeless Tull's, is certainly less surrounded by publicity circuses than Amis's. Amis insists in the *Guardian* that "both Richard and Gwyn are me," but it's hardly necessary to consult the overseas press to come to the same conclusion: Dividing oneself into any number of characters is a time-tested literary ploy, and Amis's meditation on the capacity for great success and dismal failure that coexists in most writers is one of *The Information's* strong points—it's a kind of "There but for the grace of King-ley go I" gambit, a bit of humility

that is a clear victory for a writer whose most consistent and recognizable voice is that of a pissy crank with delusions of grandeur. The Richard/Gwyn dynamic also parallels the tortured dichotomy of the envier and the envied that functions as a motif in his earlier work, that is, John Self and Fielding in *Money*, Samson Young and Mark Asprey in *London Fields*, and even the bifurcated narrator of *Time's Arrow*.

Just as the Nazi doctor central to *Time's Arrow* seems to be afflicted with a schizophrenia that produces a detached self who narrates against the flow of time, Amis seems to be detached from some unfashionable resentment that results from the current path of history. Having grown up liberal in the '60s—he reminds us early on that in England, "All writers, all book people, were Labour..."—as he enters middle age, he seems annoyed and frightened by the way the racial landscape is changing. There is an Oxford Posse paranoia going on here, apparently giving voice to his speculated frustration about not winning the Booker Prize, which of late, has gone mostly to the writers of color (Ben Okri, etc.) who constitute a minimovement that's referred to as The Empire Strikes Back.

Hence Richard Tull's voluminous nervous titters over Lady Demeter's "distinct liking for—our colored bretheren"; whining sarcasm such as "How did people ever get the idea that *white skin* was any good at all, let alone the best?"; and Letterman-esque bombs like "I myself have a bro

in my head—Yo!—who, after much ritual handslapping, takes over when I'm tired or can't come..." While some might find this a self-deprecating reference to Tull's sexual impotence—and writers of color like Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi are his friends—it's still pretty thinly disguised nastiness. And what am I to make of the assertion that one of the greatest of all of Tull's humiliations was to have his latest tome, *Untitled* ("with its octuple time scheme and its rotating crew of sixteen unreliable narrators"), picked up by the treachingly multicultural Bold Agenda press, located on Avenue B in my neighborhood? The big joke is that the other writers on board at Bold Agenda are named—*très p.c.*—John Two Moons (nudge, nudge, a bloody American Indian) and Shanana Ormolu Davis (another colored lady). Poor Richard.

To be fair, the Tull saga is not the only focus of Amis's narrative—just before Tull's halting masochism gets old, Amis switches gears and goes with Barry for a while, which saves *The Information* from kissing the pavement like a 5 a.m. drunk. An impudent Welshman with no insight or talent, but a prodigious gift for seduction, Gwyn Barry represents the unabashed greed that Amis, being a proper Englishman, feels squeamish about claiming as his own—a squeamishness that might explain the British press's obsession with his cosmetic dentistry and his rich American girlfriend, the writer Isobel Fonseca. Carrying on an affair in his own house, right in front of Lady Demeter, and also providing the climactic shock of infidelity that allows *The Information* to lurch into its denouement, Barry, the winner, ties up all the loose ends, whereas Tull is about unraveling.

Still it's Tull who in the end provides the book's giddiest moment, literally stuttering as his battered intellect attempts to spit out the final humiliation: his assignment to do a magazine feature on Barry. "Although Barry was no... He had a reputation as a. He made no secret of his love of. To him, the fairer," blurts Tull, on his information deathbed. And it's through Tull that

we are treated to Amis's signature loping, polyrhythmic repetition, to his romps through the satire of Dogshit Park, to his incredible dexterity with language, all the while never forsaking the class struggle:

Richard sat in Coach... Hundreds of yards and hundreds of passengers away, Gwyn Barry, practically horizontal on his crimson barge, shod in prestige stockings and celebrity slippers, assenting with a smile to the coaxing refills of Alpine creekwater and sanguinary burgundy with which his various young hostesses strove to enhance his caviar tartlet, his smoked-salmon pinwheel, his smoked-salmon barquette, his prime fillet tournedos served on a timbale of tomato and a tapenade of Castilian olives—Gwyn was in First.

That's entertainment all right. So it would be nit-picking to mention the business about the "street kids" to whom Amis turns his ear in the goes-nowhere subplot—more nasty business about Tull having to resort to the "Other" to carry out one of his fiendish plots to "fuck Gwyn up"—and the shallow characterization of all the major female players: Tull's long-suffering wife, Gina, Tull and Barry's American-born literary agent, Gal Aplanalp; Tull's suicidal mistress, Anstice; and of course, Lady Demeter. Even when Amis spouts a lot of rot about nothing, he's worth waiting 20 pages for another mind-blowing, style-laden passage, and after slogging through to the bitter end, it was abundantly clear to me that Amis is not confused about whether he is the suc-



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successful novelist or a failed reviewer. Still Amis should take more of a cue from his own journalism and provide a little more of the kind of information that gets us to read novels: stuff like plot and a character's transcendence.

—Richard Gehl

A MARROW VICTORY

Rule of the Bone
By Russell Banks
HarperCollins, \$22

"What a stupid wasteful thieving little bastard I've turned out to be," bemoans Bone, the 14-year-old Johnny Too Bad of Russell Banks's most recent clear-eyed glance into the moral abyss of lower-middle-class America. An equally transparent attempt to sample and update *Huckleberry Finn*, *Catcher in the Rye*, and (even) *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, *Rule of the Bone* is a touchingly evocative bildungsroman of yet another spunky white boy saved from evil adults by the redemptive power of the Other.

When we first meet Bone he's known as Chappie, or Chapman—one of those unlikely literary non-names, like Holden. His father's abandonment, stepfather's sexual abuse, and mother's ignorant denial all shape Chappie into an upstate New York modern primitive, a

pierced and mohawked mall rat. Kicked out of his home for stealing his mother's coin collection for "skunk," Chappie crashes in a squalid biker's sequest, where he deals "smallhead" grass. "[F]or a kid away from home it was an interesting way of life," notes Chappie with characteristic understatement. "The bikers for instance kept you pretty alert."

In this novel of intricate checks and balances, Chappie discovers reflections in a homosexually inclined biker who dies attempting to save the little guy's life; and in a preadolescent girl named Froggy, the doped-down sex toy of Buster Brown, a shape-changing evil stranger. *Rule of the Bone* is a name game full of subtle allusions to fairy tales and nursery rhymes. After rejecting the nickname "Zombie" and flirting with "Pod-Boy," Chappie daydreams a Lost Boys scenario of islands and pirates and endless childhood. To seal a new deal with himself he

acquires a crossbones tattoo to mark his new phallic identity.

Which is when *Bone* begins to rock. Or, more precisely, slank. Like a juiced-up remix of American lit, full of echoes, absences, and violent silences, the novel makes a sharp left turn back to Jamaica's Rastafarian culture with the appearance of I-Man. Far from a fetishized icon of African culture, I-Man is a cunningly drawn, ganja-fueled natural man with a cunningly understated rude bwoy streak. Having authored *The Book of Jamaica*, the best novel about that alien Caribbean planet since *The Harder They Come*, Russell Banks is no stranger. Which is very strange indeed.

Bone's real education begins with his herb-boy apprenticeship to I-Man on the island, where Bone's real father lives as a safari-suited drug dealer. Banks illuminates the various strata of Jamaican society with prismatic grace, from white Mobay trustafarians to the stern ganja farmers of Cockpit country,

so named, according to I-Man, "because it's always been the place where the Rastafarian ascendants of the old African Ashanti warriors satta fe de control de universe." After setting a psychological (and historical) score or two, Bone learns how the thoughtful appreciation of difference through the plentitude of one's own cultural identity can forge a royal road to enlightenment. (For Bone, this eventually amounts to hearing Charles Ives as the symphonic equivalent of dubwise invention.) Bone's early take on I-Man's one-love philosophy intuits this: "I told him I wasn't really into going that far yet but maybe when I was older and had put travel to foreign lands and sex and eating meat and some other important experiences behind me I'd be willing to check out the depths of understanding where everything and everyone was the same. For now though I was still into differences." That's a rule Bone can live with.