

# REVIEW ARTICLE

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## True Crime

*Night Train*. By Martin Amis. New York: Knopf, 1998. 160 pages. \$29.95.

*My Dark Places*. By James Ellroy. New York: Vintage, 1996. vii, 429 pages. \$19.50 paper.

"I AM TAKING A GOOD FIRM KNOT and reducing it to a mess of loose ends" (*Night Train* 139). This is the epitaph Mike Hoolihan, the narrator of Martin Amis' new novella, *Night Train*, bestows upon the unexplained death of a young woman. When asked whether his father, the late Kingsley Amis, read his fiction, Amis the son would often reply that his father refused to read any book that did not begin "a shot rang out." *Night Train* might be taken as the clever son reading a mystery to his father. In it, there is not one shot, but three, which ring out, killing Jennifer Rockwell, "an embarrassment of perfection" (7). The problem is that this is death by suicide, not misadventure, and it is the suicide which becomes the mystery. James Ellroy's *My Dark Places* (1996) is more explicitly the story of a child and a parent, in this case, a non-fictional treatment, half autobiography and half investigation, of the 1958 murder of his mother, Jean Ellroy, and the shadow this cast on his own life. Ellroy is, of course, best-known as the contemporary heir of hard-boiled detective writers such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Jim Thompson; his 'Los Angeles quartet'—*The Black*

*Dablia* (1987), *The Big Nowhere* (1988), *L.A. Confidential* (1990), and *White Jazz* (1992)—offered a sprawling and labyrinthine underground history of the city. While Amis and Ellroy obviously come from different traditions and different spheres of contemporary writing, *Night Train* and *My Dark Places* share the same aesthetic, many of the same concerns, and, in the end, the same vision of mysteries that frustrate solution.

After the under-rated, if bloated *The Information* (1995), *Night Train* sees Amis working on a smaller canvas and consciously within the discipline of a genre, *noir* fiction. I say ‘discipline’ because one of the great joys of Amis’ previous writing has been its undisciplined character. He is the master of the clever digression, whether on pornography in *Money* (1984), darts in *London Fields* (1989), or the perils of reviewing for small magazines in *The Information*. With *Night Train*, Amis has adopted the staccato voice and stylistic conventions of detective fiction: “I’ve seen them all: Jumpers, stumpers, dumpers, dunkers, bleeders, floaters, poppers, bursters” (4). There are few sharper writers than Amis and the reader is always reminded of his parodic style: “I had a bunch of great lines ready. Like: *I was quit when you came in here. I’m twice as quit now.* But this was Colonel Tom I was talking to. So I spoke the plain truth” (18–19).

The mastery of the *noir* genre is, of course, what has made Ellroy’s reputation. In the past, with, for instance, *White Jazz*, he has tried to extend its boundaries, sometimes to the point of narrative incomprehensibility. *My Dark Places* is sometimes an aesthetic confessional, in which Ellroy acknowledges that he can never escape from the stylistic limitations and thematic concerns of *noir*, even when writing memoir and homage. He admits to growing up on “kiddie *noir*” (133), of having a “tabloid sensibility” (128), and, ultimately, of relying upon narrative as his “moral language” (153). Ellroy uses a quote from one of his literary forebears, Ross MacDonald, to begin *White Jazz*: “in the end I possess my birthplace and am possessed by its language.”<sup>1</sup> *My Dark Places* is, in part, about that latter possession.

In its conventional form, of course, *noir* writing and film has reflected a modernist sensibility and agenda: asserting order and

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<sup>1</sup>James Ellroy, *White Jazz* (New York: Knopf, 1992) 1.

meaning in a disordered world of “crime, corruption, psychosis and desire.”<sup>2</sup> The autonomous protagonist, usually a detective, imposes meaning by his or her resolution of a crime, “attempting to create some order out of chaos, to make some sense of his world.”<sup>3</sup> In different ways, both *Night Train* and *My Dark Places* offer a postmodern version of this, specifically through the frustration of any solution to the disorder. What happens when there is no end to narrative?

In *Night Train*, the mystery, the disorder for the protagonist, is why Jennifer Rockwell committed suicide. There is no apparent reason for this. She was a brilliant astrophysicist, a beautiful woman with a fulfilling relationship, someone who would “always leave you with something” (39). No one can explain why she would put three bullets in her head, not her lover, her parents or, in the end, the detective, who is haunted by something her boss had said: “My Mike Hoolihan is going to come and straighten this out” (139). But Hoolihan is unable to straighten it out, unable to explain why Jennifer died. There are false leads and false clues. In the end, there is nothing except the fact that Jennifer committed suicide: “Here’s what happened. A woman fell out of a clear blue sky” (61). This speaks to the emptiness of contemporary life, the darker mystery of its incomprehensibility: “you’ve tied yourself up into all kinds of knots trying to make a mystery of this thing. It’s garbage, as you know. Some little mystery, all neat and cute. But there’s a real mystery here. An enormous mystery” (59). It is also about the impossibility of having the power or autonomy to order the contemporary world. As Hoolihan says to herself, “This way I don’t prevail” (139).

Generally, Amis’ experiment works. There is, however, an occasional problem with voice. Odd Anglicisms intrude on Amis’ attempt to emulate American English. Few North Americans will use ‘shite’, for instance, when they can say ‘shit’. Sometimes, as well, the genre can only awkwardly support Amis’ larger concerns. Perhaps it is time, for example, that Amis either put to bed the fixation with cosmology which has infused his work since *Einstein’s*

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<sup>2</sup>J.P. Telotte, *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1989) 35.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Profririo, “No way out: Existential motifs in the *film noir*,” *Sight and Sound* 45.4 (1976): 217; see also Victor Li, “Policing the City: Modernism, Autonomy and Authority,” *Criticism* 34 (1992): 261–81.

*Monsters* (1987), or simply do a course in physics. A broader difficulty is the lack of emotional purchase in *Night Train*. It is hard to be moved by the novella—appalled and impressed, perhaps, but not moved. In part, this is because the characters never quite leave the page as more than caricatures; in part, it is simply Amis' own limitations. He is among the great comic novelists of the late twentieth century, yet when he tries to be poignant, the effect is strained, if not somewhat pompous. Recently, Amis has written of the "extraordinary affective power" of Saul Bellow's work.<sup>4</sup> This power is a depth his own work has yet to plumb. To a certain degree, the ability to move readers rests upon the kind of nakedness that risks ridicule; much of Amis' achievement to date has rested upon ridicule itself. The sympathy we might have for Richard Tull in *The Information*, for example, is founded on bathos rather than pathos. He has yet to produce a character which bridges the two, such as the Pnin or Humbert Humbert of one of his other literary heroes, Nabokov.

By contrast, *My Dark Places* is, at points, unrelievedly naked in its poignancy. There can be few self-examinations as raw as Ellroy's personal journey from the murder of his mother in 1958, through his childhood, adolescence and maturity as a speed freak, sexual voyeur, neo-Nazi, petty criminal, psychotic drunk, and, finally, reformed crime writer. Ellroy's obsession with crime is the one constant through this journey and he (often monomaniacally) traces this to the still-unsolved murder of his mother.

Geneva Hilliker Ellroy was found strangled, her body dumped by a school yard, after a night of drinking at a local bar in the "white trash heaven" of El Monte, near Los Angeles (*My Dark Places* 23). As a ten-year-old, Ellroy was "relieved and strangely happy" (16) at her murder, seeing it as a "gift" (101) which allowed him to leave El Monte and live in Los Angeles with his estranged father, a "Hollywood bottom feeder" (129). His mother remained, however, a psychological and sexual touchstone for Ellroy: "I hated her and lusted for her" (112); "she hot-wired me to sex and death" (249). Ellroy's obsession with crime writing (both fictional and non-fictional) arose from his obsession with his mother. Reading and eventually writing about crime became a means of keeping her alive; the language and narrative of crime became, therefore, an

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<sup>4</sup>*Observer* [London] 17 Aug. 1997.

act of sexualized maternal worship: “every book I read was a twisted homage to her. Every mystery solved was my love for her” (116). One particular fantasy/exorcism was Ellroy’s fascination with the so-called ‘Black Dahlia’ case, the brutal and unsolved murder of Elizabeth Short in 1947, which became the basis of Ellroy’s first major novel. After the publication of *American Tabloid* in 1995, Ellroy decided to give up ‘writing’ his mother in a fictional *noir* narrative and embarked upon ‘writing’ her non-fictionally, launching a reinvestigation of her murder.

From the very beginning, Ellroy consciously deploys and is limited by the style of his genre. The portrayal of his mother veers between the pulp lyrical—“a cheap Saturday night took you down” (2)—to the clinical, reproducing, for instance, the horrific details of her post-mortem, coldly tracing the ligature marks, bruises and other violations of her body. Where Amis’ aesthetic style in *Night Train* is spare and economical, as if silence and space can capture the mystery of Jennifer Rockwell’s death, the writing in *My Dark Places* has a sprawling, unbordered energy; this is a *noir* narrative where the relevant and the meaningless rub against one another. In photographic terms, where Amis is a Lee Friedlander, carefully framing the shot to capture the odd angles and reflections of American life, Ellroy is all Weegee, his portraits of death and its grubby foot-soldiers messy and spontaneous, at once striking and banal; here violent death is a disposable commodity. At several points in *My Dark Places*, for instance, Ellroy simply lists leads in murder investigations or, even more strikingly, the tangential crimes which fill out the background to the investigation of his mother’s murder: a surreal and grotesque fractal of rapes, assaults and murders, each wrapped up in its own sordidness and irrationality, inspected once and then discarded, stories leading nowhere.

Ellroy’s own story leads nowhere. He assembles new facts about his mother’s murder, possibilities, but no solution. The only closure to the case is a toll-free ‘1-800’ number, waiting for more information. As with Amis’ Hoolihan, Ellroy does not “prevail”; he is unable to reorder this chaos. The work closes on a contradictory note, an investigation leading only to the collection of more facts, most of dubious relevance, but with Ellroy trapped by the narrative: “I will not let this end” (427).

As with *Night Train*, *My Dark Places* is, ultimately, a postmodern *noir*, an acknowledgement of the impossibility of order

and resolution. Unsurprisingly, Ellroy's understanding of his mother becomes more complex, not less so, as the investigation goes on. His "good firm knot" becomes a "mess of loose ends." There is, however, poignancy amid these ruins, grounded in affection for the strength of his mother as an independent woman in a world of abusive men: "everything I learned made me love you more dearly" (429). If he is forever trapped by the narrative of his mother's death, it is at least a narrative of love: "I'll learn more. I'll follow your tracks and invade your hidden time. I'll uncover your lies. I'll rewrite your history and revise my judgement as your old secrets explode. I will justify it all in the name of the obsessive life you gave me" (429).

Central to Ellroy's account is an engagement with his own misogyny and the misogyny of American society. As many accounts have suggested, gender is a central theme in *noir* writing and cinema. The modernist heroes of hard-boiled fiction are inevitably male heroes, the figures of dread, *femmes fatales*, actors in what Janet Wolff and Lynne Segal have seen as the gender politics of threat and marginalization in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>5</sup> As Elizabeth Cowie has suggested, women in *noir* are sites of "desire and destruction."<sup>6</sup> One of the dark places in Ellroy's memoir is exactly this: women, and in particular his mother, as objects, whether of lust or violence. This is demonstrated first of all in Ellroy's explicit engagement with male violence. Rejecting, for instance, the rationalizations of serial killing—"men did not kill women because they were systematically abused by the female gender" (203)—Ellroy emphasizes what he sees as the more banal and horrific pattern of male violence: "men killed women for lawn mowers and crockpots . . . men killed women because the world ignored and condoned it" (211, 216). It is also shown through the narrative, the elusive search for ideas and identities of the female victim (whether Elizabeth Short or Jean

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<sup>5</sup>See, for instance, Janet Wolff, "Angry Young Men and Minor (Female) Characters: The Idea of 'America' in 1950s Popular Culture," in *Resident Alien: Feminist Cultural Criticism* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995) 135–52; Lynne Segal, "Look Back in Anger: Men in the Fifties," in *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*, ed. Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988) 68–96.

<sup>6</sup>Elizabeth Cowie, "Film Noir and Women," in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993) 160; see also Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre and Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 1991).

Ellroy), in which a masculine eye reconstructs what masculine violence destroyed.

A common criticism of Amis has centred upon the apparent misogyny of his writing. In novels such as *Money* and *London Fields*, for instance, he both exposed the language of misogyny and was complicit in it with the characters of, respectively, Selina Street and Nicola Six. In *Night Train*, Amis appropriates a female voice; Mike Hoolihan is a woman. This might be seen as a significant departure, both in the genre and for the particular writer. Yet, consciously or unconsciously, Mike Hoolihan retains a masculine eye. When she talks, she speaks as a man, making cheap and stale jokes, for instance, that her mother “had the look now associated with highly politicized feminists” (2). This is particularly true of Hoolihan’s description of the victim. Jennifer Rockwell is, predictably, physically “perfect,” entrancing to the male eye. Her body is described as “beautiful—you wouldn’t pray for a body like that” (10), as “Playmate of the Month .... a sports body with tits” (29). In some ways, this is simply part of a larger joke for Amis. Hoolihan is consistently mistaken for a man and so her own gender identity is fluid. But one never quite believes in Hoolihan as a woman, so what is the point of making her one? While Ellroy uses *noir* to illustrate consciously the limitations of the male eye, *Night Train* reveals this complicity despite Amis’ efforts.

There is a famous story of William Faulkner, the screen-writer for Howard Hawk’s *The Big Sleep* (1946), phoning Raymond Chandler, the author of the original novel, in confusion at the plot, unable to understand why a particular character was killed and who killed him. Chandler had no idea, refusing to reduce the narrative complexity of the work. Both *Night Train* and *My Dark Places* are important examples of genre writing as serious literature, exposing the strengths and limitations of the form. As they show, and as Chandler realized, it is the insoluble mystery which proves most compelling, the “loose ends” which resist being tied in a “good firm knot.”