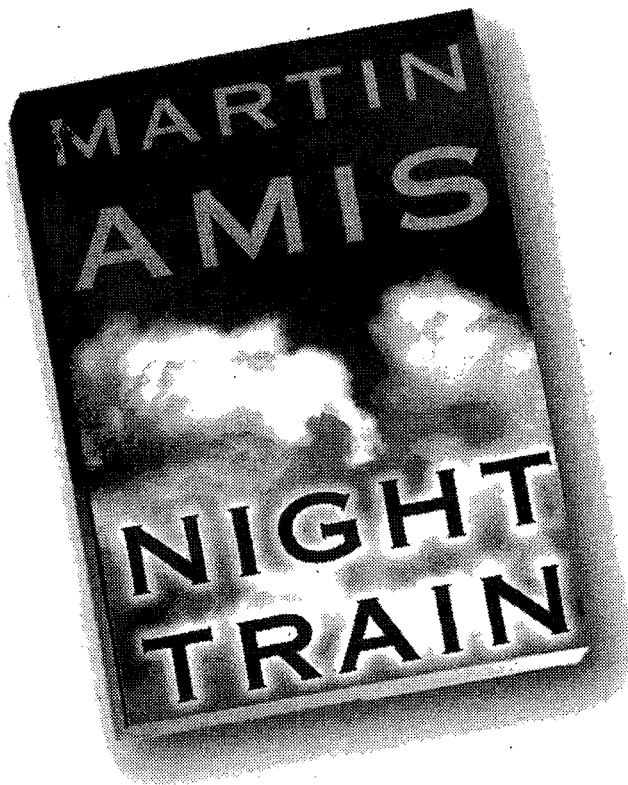


Suicide Is Painless

Night Train

By Martin Amis
Harmony Books
175 pages, \$20

REVIEWED BY J.W. MASON



When sociologist Emile Durkheim examined "Suicide and Cosmic Factors" in his pioneering study, *Suicide*, he was talking about climate's effects on suicide rates. When aging *enfant terrible* of British fiction (and son of novelist Kingsley) Martin Amis writes about suicide and cosmic factors, on the other hand, he means *cosmic*. His new novel, an introductory philosophy text in mystery-novel drag, concerns a motiveless suicide. Jennifer Rockwell is a 28-year-old cosmologist who kills herself for no earthly reason at all.

The novel is written in the form of a diary kept by Mike Hoolihan, a female cop and recovering alcoholic in a "second-echelon American city," who's been assigned to investigate Jennifer's death. Hoolihan's investigation has more than professional interest for her; the two women were friends, and Hoolihan regards Jennifer's father, the city's police chief, as a kind of father figure herself.

Hoolihan is on the case because Jennifer's father can't believe his daughter would kill herself—or, at least, not without some good reason. But as Hoolihan's

investigation unfolds, it becomes clear that Amis' question is not "why?" but "why not?" Why wouldn't any rational inhabitant of the late 20th century, looking at life with unblinkered eyes, simply choose to end it all?

The book consists largely of Hoolihan's interviews and exchanges with fellow cops and with various people in some way connected with Jennifer: her philosopher boyfriend, Trader Faulkner; her boss, famed astrophysicist Bax Denziger; a travelling salesman from Texas she'd apparently picked up at a bar just before the suicide; her doctor; neighbors.

It's Denziger who first points Hoolihan in the right direction, toward cosmic factors:

The universe was still the size of your living room until the big telescopes came along. Now we have an idea of just how fragile and isolated our situation really is. And I believe, as Jennifer did, that when all this kicks in, this information that's only sixty or seventy years old, we'll have a very different view of our place and purpose here. And all this rat-race,

turf-war, dog-eat-dog stuff we do all day will be revealed for what it is. ... The truth is, Detective, the truth is that human beings are not sufficiently evolved to understand the place they're living in. We're all retards. Einstein's a retard. I'm a retard. We live on a planet of retards.

Meanwhile, life among the retards remains nasty, brutish and short. "Every cop in America is familiar with the super-savagery of Christmas Day domestics," Hoolihan reflects. "On Christmas Day, everyone's home at the same time. And it's a disaster. We call them 'star or fairy?' murders." And the dark matter of the universe keeps sliding apart implacably, regardless.

Faced with this appalling whirl of stupidity, pettiness, cruelty and indifference, your best bet is to play dumb, avert your eyes, not take it seriously, or imagine that things could somehow be worse. When Hoolihan was on the bottle, she anesthetized herself. Of her fellow cops, she observes that "our standards, for human behavior, are desperately low." "On the evening Jennifer

Rockwell died," says Hoolihan, "the sky was clear and the visibility excellent." Why did Jennifer Rockwell kill herself? "She just had standards. High ones. Which we didn't meet."

In his insistence on the emptiness and indifference of the universe and the inadequacy of human beings, Amis is really just picking up where he left off in his last novel, *The Information*, which is a kind of distilled essence of mid-life crisis. *Night Train*, if less vertiginous, is a more polished, coherent and interesting work.

In *Night Train*, the effort to understand what motivates a suicide is also the writer's not entirely successful effort to understand what motivates anyone except himself. From Amis' point of view, Jennifer is triply alien: American, a woman and a suicide. Americans have long been Amis' obsessed-over other: In most of his recent novels, he inflicts horrific (and meticulously observed) American travels upon British protagonists, and he has written a collection of essays (*The Moronic Inferno*, a brilliant title he lifted from Saul Bellow) on his own experiences here.

That both the book's subject and its narrator are women is even more of a departure for a writer whose past work has sometimes been taxed with misogyny. It's only a little unfair to say the typical Amis woman is *Success*' "tiny Tessa, a would-be nymphet of at least fifteen to whom you can do whatever the hell you like. (You can kill her if you like—it wouldn't bother her)." You can imagine the hypothesis forming in Amis' head: But what if you couldn't do anything you liked with a woman? Thus Mike Hoolihan, beat cop, "and a woman, also":

When I badge my way from door to door ... and the women see me coming up the path—I don't know what they think. There I am in my parka, my black jeans. They think I'm a diesel. Or a truck driver from the Soviet Union. But the men know at once what I am. Because I give them the eyeball—absolutely direct. As a patrol cop, on the street, that's the first thing you have to train yourself to do: Stare at men. In the eyes. And

then when I was plainclothes, and undercover, I had to train myself out of it, all over again. Because no other kind of woman on earth, not a movie star, not a brain surgeon, not a head of state, will stare at a man the way a police stares.

For years, Amis has been writing defiantly anti-moralizing novels, depicting a zero-sum world where winners win and losers lose, with no possibility of compensation or redemption. Like the pre-Christian pagans, he denies that there is any moral order to the universe, that human beings are in any sense equal, and that suffering and unhappiness are the result of anything but bad luck.

In each of his previous novels, luck, the principle that separates the happy from the unhappy, took a definite form: In *Success*, it was success; in *Money*, by far the best of these, it was money; in *The Information*, it was fame and literary success.

For a long time, Amis' anti-moral sensibility was sustained by a kind of manic energy: He was so amused by the wheel of fortune's ups and downs that he didn't bother to provide his characters with meaningful inner lives or any motivation except ambition. But as Tolstoy, among others, long ago showed (in "The Death of Ivan Ilyich"), those who devote their lives to status and success have no response to life's most intractable problems but nihilism.

Night Train, then, is the flip side of Amis' earlier satires. The seemingly inexhaustible energy has been exhausted; the pagan spirit has cooled to freezing; the wheel has spun down. Amis' satire depended on his characters' single-minded pursuit of whatever goal he set for them, and his delight, in the guise of fate, was in frustrating their hopes. But in a truly empty and meaningless universe, money, success and the rest of the worldly goods he has sent his characters chasing after turn out to be worthless. If winning is nothing, maybe it isn't everything, after all. Just in time then, that in *Night Train* he also seems to be discovering a world with other human beings in it. ■

J. W. Mason is a former culture editor of *In These Times*.

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Grossed-Out Surgeon Vomits Inside Patient! An Insider's Look at Supermarket Tabloids

By Jim Hogshire

Feral House

160 pages, \$12.95

REVIEWED BY PAT ARNOW

This book's lurid title, *Grossed-Out Surgeon Vomits Inside Patient!*, is misleading. While some equally disgusting images appear within, the book is actually a history of the *National Enquirer*, *Globe* and other weeklies that keep shoppers entertained in grocery store checkout lines.

The mainstream press dismisses tabloids as the "bottom of the media food chain," writes Jim Hogshire, a former tabloid reporter. But the six major supermarket papers sell more than 10 million copies a week. If nothing else, by "studying the reading material of perhaps a quarter or more of the population, we can examine the American psyche and monitor the propaganda fed to it," he writes.

Do the tabs have an ideology? Well, they are generally xenophobic and pro-government, but anti-politics, Hogshire notes. They also marginalize blacks. "Tabloid stories, in their bipolar world of darkness and light, are often home to stories that help demonize establishment foes," he argues.

As a good tabloid journalist, Hogshire dishes some juicy gossip of his own about his experiences in the weeklies. He is sensationally conspiratorial, implying that these newspapers have CIA and Mafia connections. "Tabloids spend tons of money on foreign stories," he writes. "They may claim to be looking for lost dinosaurs in the jungles of Zaire or for ancient astronauts in Peru. Curiously, many of the sites are close to hard-to-monitor war zones or areas controlled by guerrilla movements."

Hogshire's analysis can be spotty, but

he has opened the door to a serious examination of a medium that should be taken seriously. ■

The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture

By Neil Foley

University of California Press

326 pages, \$29.95

REVIEWED BY JEFFERSON DECKER

Some of the best work in recent ethnic history focuses on communities where race relations did not develop along the black-white polarities that dominated the conversation in most of the United States. The cotton-farming communities of central Texas are one example: With Mexicans, blacks, Anglos and European immigrants interacting with one another, even the question of who counted as "white" was not always obvious.

In *The White Scourge*, University of Texas historian Neil Foley argues that around the turn of the century, notions of race in central Texas were intimately tied to class and social status: "Not all whites," he writes, were "equally white," because land-ownership was a crucial component of "whiteness." As mechanization of agriculture made the divisions between landed and laborer sharper, white landowners came to see poor whites as alien and inferior. By 1915, some landowners were turning previous racial ideology upside-down—calling whites "thrifless" and "unreliable," compared to "active, energetic, honest, and industrious" blacks and Mexicans.

Unfortunately, *The White Scourge* does not describe racial feelings among ordinary Texans in enough detail, relying too much on a handful of popular eugenicists and a single Socialist Party organizer to support generalizations about public opinion. Foley argues that economics, family life and masculinity

all play crucial roles in the development of racial identity. But by not quoting Texans who make or imply those connections, the analysis feels contrived. ■

Organizing to Win: New Research on Union Strategies

Edited by Kate Bronfenbrenner et al.

Cornell University Press

368 pages, \$19.95

REVIEWED BY DEIDRE MCFADYEN

Labor's resurgence depends on massive organizing. Yet the movement has a dirty secret: Despite the resources being pumped into organizing today, union victory rates are no higher than a decade ago. Unions continue to lose more than half of all National Labor Relations Board elections, and fewer than one-third of the more than 300,000 private-sector workers who attempt to organize each year end up with contracts.

The editors of *Organizing to Win* argue that labor's decline can be traced largely to weak and poorly enforced labor laws and virulent employer opposition. They point out, however, that individual organizing drives often succeed or fail because of the strategies and tactics of the organizers.

In their article, Kate Bronfenbrenner and Tom Juravich point out that organizing drives that use a comprehensive grass-roots strategy are the most effective. Drawing on case studies such as the SEIU's Justice for Janitors campaign in Los Angeles and UNITE's workers centers, the collection's contributors discuss different facets of the bottom-up approach, including industry- and community-based campaigns and the use of rank-and-file organizers.

The conclusion seems irrefutable: As long as most unions continue to run traditional campaigns that rely on gate leafletting, mass mailings and a few large meetings, the labor movement will continue to lose ground. ■