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## Death by request

London Fields by Martin Amis  
Jonathan Cape, £12.95

**Christina Koning**  
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### Guardian

This book is a cheat. A con-trick. From start to finish, all 470 pages of it, it's an elaborate tease. A whodunnit without a motive. A meditation on the way the world ends which turns out to be just another metaphor for the writing of fiction.

Like Roth's Nathan Zuckerman stretched out on his play-mat, Martin Amis is obsessed with the act of writing. Or not writing. Of course, he's obsessed with a lot of other things, too: nuclear weapons, ecological disaster, sex, love, death. But even these are grist to his mill. Even these become metaphors for writing.

Amis's well-publicised opposition to nuclear weapons (exemplified in his last collection of short stories, *Einstein's Monsters*) has given rise to a lot of speculation about new directions in his fiction, but on the evidence of this novel these are yet to be explored.

London Fields comes on as a novel of ideas about the post-Einsteinian world but in fact it's the same mix as before: baroque (and savagely funny) low-life episodes alternating with lyrical descriptions of the moronic inferno. Stripped of its superficial concern with millennial anxieties, it's the usual boy-meets-girl (or, in this instance, girl-meets-boy) stuff, given a sardonic twist.

Set in London in 1999 (although it could be any time now or in the near future, so little do the events of history impinge on the action) during some unspecified nuclear and/or ecological crisis, the novel deals with the efforts of a young woman, Nicola Six, to liase with her murderer at a certain time and place known to her in advance. All that is left in doubt is the identity of the killer: will it be yobbish Keith Talent, petty criminal, 'cheat' and darts fanatic, or Guy Clinch, rich, good-looking and hopelessly ineffectual? The opening scenes establish the scenario (she knows where and when but not who); the rest of the book plots the trajectory of Nicola's - and the century's - journey towards annihilation.

Despite attempts to establish her as a real person (the reader is invited to accompany her not only into the bedroom but also into the lavatory, to discover the truth of Jonathan Swift's horrified realisation about Caelia for himself) Nicola remains an automaton, a beautiful puppet with a nice line in black lingerie and literary criticism, whose death can arouse no terror or pity because it is a foregone conclusion.

Nicola, like her creator, is a bit of a tease. As part of her strategy for systematically humiliating both men in order to provoke one of them - Keith or Guy - to murder, she cons Guy out of a large amount of money, on the pretext of helping her childhood friend 'Enola Gay' to escape from war-torn Cambodia. Simultaneously, she works him up into a frenzy of lust, in what must be the most interrupted coitus in literature. Since neither she nor the reader know which of her two admirers will be the one to administer the coup de grace, Nicola is obliged to practice similar tactics on the luckless Keith, satisfying his craving for pornographic videos and flattery just enough to keep him coming back for more.

More than once in the course of the book Amis's unease at the deterministic nature of his fable betrays itself. Nicola's king-sized deathwish ('Begging for it. Praying for it') is stated, never explained. Instead, Amis takes refuge in that familiar device for disowning authorial responsibility, the writer as a character. Samson Young, his Bellovian alter ego (Jewish, American, with a bad case of writer's block) is the fall guy left with the messy

business of disentangling motives and attributing blame, while the real author gets on with the enjoyable part of the job: describing the set-pieces; doing the police in different voices.

It has to be said that what Amis does well, he does better than anyone else you can think of. The set-piece scenes, like the darts match in the Marquis of Edenberry, or the conversations between Guy and Keith in the Black Cross, the seedy West London pub, which is the character's main rendezvous, are realised with all Amis's considerable powers of comic invention. It is his evocation of the smells and tastes of poverty - the texture of poverty - that the book is most effective and not in its ostensible concern with the horrors of global warfare.

If the Black Cross pub stands at the centre of the little universe whose four points are the dwellings of the four main characters (extremes of poverty and wealth conveyed with typical Amisian mirror-imagery in the contrast offered between crumbling council-block and Georgian terrace) the figure of Keith Talent, latest incarnation of the John Self/Terry Service/Little Keith persona in Amis's galere, is the book's real centre. When set beside this alarming vitality, his fierce instinct for survival, the other characters seem insubstantial.

Keith dominates the action. In spite of his villainous propensities, his inarticulacy, his grotesque behaviour, he comes across as eminently human. Amis's sympathies seem most fully engaged when he is describing Keith's centre of operations: the pub, the congested streets (like something out of one of Philip K Dick's wilder nightmares) the bedrooms of his various paramours and the hideously cramped flat where he lives with his wife and baby. The scenes involving Guy Clinch and his family - his bossy wife Hope and monstrous offspring Marmaduke mirroring Keith's downtrodden Kath and ethereal daughter Kim - are shadowy by comparison. Like Guy himself, you find yourself itching to get back to the wrecked streets and the fetid pub, where the action is.

This book is a con-trick. It leads you to expect one thing, and offers you another. It breaks its own rules of consistency and plausibility. It fails to integrate its supposed theme (the devaluation of human life by the imminence of universal death) at a structural or narratorial level. And yet it is a powerful book. Some of the best writing in it occurs in those passages which deal with what it feels like to live in a society whose technologies can no longer sustain it. Like his creation, Keith Talent, Amis's preoccupations are 'modern, modern, modern'; more than any other British writer of his generation he gets to grips with the postmodern condition.

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