

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Peter Barry, *I Hate Martin Amis Et Al* (Transit Lounge Publishing, 2011).

An earlier version of Peter Barry's debut novel won the 2005 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for an unpublished manuscript. Considering the content we could speculate as to why it's taken six years to find its way into print, for, whatever else it might be, *I Hate Martin Amis Et Al* is a determined effort to deprecate the world of publishing; perhaps there was a reluctance to take it on? Writers and would-be writers, literary agents, publishers, reviewers – all have satiric potential, and Barry's attacks on them (on us) are both humorous and scarifying. However, Barry complicates the satire by locating his first person narrator, the aspiring novelist Milan Zorec, in the middle of the Bosnian conflict of the 1990s – specifically, Milan becomes one of Ratko Mladic's snipers at the Siege of Sarajevo.¹ In Milan's mind, these two seemingly disparate worlds are relentlessly drawn together. Writing and killing, publishing and war, each shaped by ritual humiliation, jealousy and revenge – these are analogues, to Milan at least, and he implies they are to some degree artistically and morally equivalent.

Barry interweaves Milan's experiences as a sniper with flashbacks and reflections on how he came to be a failed writer; it's this failure that motivates him to go off to Sarajevo. Rejection letters are a common experience for writers who submit unsolicited manuscripts to publishers and agents, as are the delusions entertained while awaiting a response:

Yet in the first few weeks after sending off part of my manuscript, I will open the mailbox every morning with an air of expectation. There will be a letter today, I tell myself, because they were immediately impressed by my novel. They are so in love with the first three chapters, they want me to express post the whole of my 'promising first novel' to them right away. Even better, they want me to come in and discuss my book, as well as any ideas I might be working on, over a spot of lunch. They want me to sign a three-book deal, to know if I could do some promotional work at this year's Frankfurt Book Fair, to invite me to a cocktail party so that I can meet some of their other authors. They want to know if I could make dinner with their chairman, Lord Wordsmith. That sort of thing. (81)

All of Milan's submissions to date have met with rejection, so that he feels 'Rejection slips are my metier' (82). When his latest attempt at a novel is subsequently turned down, the significant people in his life begin to question his pursuit of literary success. His father wonders 'how can someone write about life when they've never experienced it?' (62). Even Bridgette, his girlfriend, tells him, 'I don't mind if you keep trying, if that's what you want, but I think you should get a proper job as well' (89). Bizarrely, the 'proper job' Milan decides on, with encouragement from his Serbian father – a sadist, it must be said, who tells his son to 'Shoot your grandmother

¹ Ratko Mladic, a military commander in President Slobodan Milosevic's regime, was arrested in Serbia in May 2011 and extradited to The Hague to face charges of genocide.

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for me if you see her' (32) – means relocating from London to the hills outside Sarajevo, where, in-between killing people, he hopes to find his unique voice as a writer. 'The sniper novelist hasn't been done before, and that's what will make me stand out' (158).

Once in Sarajevo Milan reads Martin Amis's new novel, *The Information*, and ruminates further on the vagaries of literary success. *The Information*, which revolves around two writers – Richard Tull, self-flagellating failure, and his friend, the wealthy and successful Gwyn Barry – functions almost as an ur-text for *I Hate Martin Amis Et Al*. They share not only a subject but a tone – cynical, bitter, humorous – though Barry's prose, and one could say this about most writers when compared to Amis, is much less self-consciously literary, less pyrotechnical.

The playfulness within Barry's text is one of its hallmarks, and the deadpan humour when writing about writers and books is a great success; the rejection letters he fashions for *War and Peace*, *Hamlet* and *Ulysses* are very funny indeed:

We're sorry, but none of our readers could understand your novel, *Ulysses*. (What are you on, do you mind us asking?) It might also prove a worthwhile exercise if you were to learn the basic rules of punctuation – especially towards the end of your book, where you seem to have given it up completely. We suggest you might benefit from investing in a copy of Strunk & White's *The Elements of Style*. (159)

Less successful is the decision to situate such humour cheek by jowl with passages imagining and/or depicting rape and murder.

And he was waving this half-erect monster around in the air, and describing how he'd done this, that and the other to some woman, and everyone around the campfire was laughing and cheering ... Mladic was applauding as Bukus poured wine over his tool in an attempt, if I understood him correctly, to cool it off. Briefly, I imagined introducing this maniac to Ms Diane, that literary agent's receptionist. He'd be sure to fuck her up good and proper. By the time he'd finished with her, she wouldn't be able to walk again for days. It would certainly stop her laughing at authors for a while. (52)

These passages are equally well done, in the sense that they achieve their desired effect – amusement and repugnance – but the novel seems unbalanced, even schizophrenic, by having both types of passage within it. Milan's premise, which Barry investigates throughout, that writing and killing are somehow analogous, ultimately does not carry much water: they may in ways be similar, but they are not equivalent. I found these elements pulled against each other, and this was deleterious to the novel.

There is enough in Peter Barry's *I Hate Martin Amis Et Al* to suggest that any subsequent publication will likely be challenging and provocative. He is a talented writer with a gift for comedy, and it would be a shame were we not to see more work from him.

Craig Billingham

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