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Martin Amis

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Lionel Asbo - a very violent but not very successful young criminal - is going about his morning duties in a London prison when he learns that he has just won £139,999,999.50 on the National Lottery. This is not necessarily good news for his ward and nephew, the orphaned Des Pepperdine, who still has reason to fear his uncle's implacable vengeance.

Savage, funny, and mysteriously poignant, *Lionel Asbo* is a modern fairytale from one of the world's great writers.

Lionel Asbo: State of England Details

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From Reader Review Lionel Asbo: State of England for online ebook

Kieran McMahon says

People love Martin Amis; The Guardian's Nicola Barker drools over the 'the withering coruscation of his writerly stare' and declares that 'Amis is the daddy'. The Telegraph's David Annand calls him 'stylistically unmatched', The New Statesman's Leo Robson describes him as 'the most ambitious, seductive and, at 62, promising English novelist of his generation', Tim Martin speaks of his 'dazzling catwalk sentences' and Olivia Cole proclaims 'there really is only one Martin Amis and like it or not, we'll all be stealing from him for years to come'. There are times when this love is easy, when *The Rachel Papers* carries you away with its comic verve and its combination of elegance and insouciant filthiness, when *Money* takes your breath away with its exhaustively precise post-modern barrage of disposable degeneracy and its blistering sentences. Lionel Asbo is not one of those times.

Lionel Asbo is a book about two things, or really a book with two main characters; LIONEL ASBO and DISTON/LONDON/GREAT WORLD CITY. The life of the irredeemably thuggish Lionel and the life of the irredeemably grim Diston, the borough of London in which he lives, offer us a fish and a pond from which we are, according to the books subtitle, supposed to intuit things about the STATE OF ENGLAND. About the City Amis is razor-sharp; Diston 'white as Belgravia', 'with its "foul-mouthed pitbulls, the screeching cats, the grimly milling pigeons'. It's a place which lends itself easily to the kind of comic bathos that Amis has always excelled at; 'To evoke the London borough of Diston, we turn to the poetry of Chaos: Each thing hostile/To every other thing: at every point/Hot fought cold, moist dry, soft hard, and the weightless/Resisted weight.'

The character of Lionel Asbo is altogether less piercing. A dog-wielding 'extremely violent criminal' who lives at 'the very hairiest end of debt collection' and 'in certain lights and settings he resembled, some said, the England and Manchester United prodigy, striker Wayne Rooney'. Many reviewers have made the Dickens connection and noted that Lionel Asbo is awash with references to Dickens as well as to Tom Jones, Robinson Crusoe and the other classic social novels of the 18th century. According to David Annand this is 'not only for his close reflection of the society around him. Dickens, he says, dresses up fairy tales in the clothes of social realism (*Great Expectations* has a wicked witch, Miss Havisham; an unobtainable princess, Estella; and an ogre who is transformed, Magwitch)'. The jacket of *Lionel Asbo* states that, like Dickens, it's a modern fairy-tale, and it is perhaps for this reason that Lionel Asbo is such a jarringly preposterous character. For all his initial menace and illiterate lumbering he is neither a properly scary lowlife nor a believable human being, he's merely a bit weird.

Lionel's fairy-tale begins when, whilst in prison, he wins the lottery. This allows him to leave the flat he shares with his nephew Desmond Pepperdine and embark upon a new hotel surfing, lobster-eating life, inaugurating him as a red-top mainstay and, later on, one half of a riff-raff celebrity couple. The relationship with Desmond is the crux of the novel. Desmond occupies a liminal social and moral space between the squalid milieu of his uncle Lionel and an upward mobility; he has university aspirations. Desmond though, bears no imprint whatsoever of any of the cultural climates in which a young person might have lived in the last ten years. He writes letters to newspapers when he could post them online and hardly

uses the internet at all. He has no friends, social networked or otherwise, and never emerges from the page with anything like a recognisable personality. His girlfriend Dawn is similarly translucent and teflon-coated, they talk about their money worries and they talk about Lionel and they have a baby and seem to exist for no other purpose than to do sensible things, in contrast to Lionel's stupid things. Their lives are desperately normal. The thin element of tension in their lives is provided by a sordid liaison between Desmond and his grandmother but it is so heavy-handedly trailed and draped over the story that the big unveiling is neither big nor revealing.

There is a hint of a gruesome grand guignol ending which may have been more interesting than the actual ending, but Amis doubles back and walks calmly away, into dull sentimentality. There is much about this book that is mystifying. Although Amis's facility for luxuriant sentences is much in evidence, it seems that plot, character, insight, even simple research, is all left threadbare in favour of it. I didn't find Lionel Asbo very funny or offensive; in fact it's quite tame. If he wanted to be extreme he doesn't go nearly far enough. There are, at several points in the book, a few tantalising seconds of some unspecified and unspeakable horror, not quite visible beyond a slamming door. These are the closest we get to truly spine-shivering moments, and they are unfortunately only hints of what might have been.

WHAT HAPPENS: Thug wins lottery in prison, becomes celebrity, learns nothing.

IN A WORD: Misfire.

WHY READ?: For the occasional verbal fireworks.

WHY NOT?: Paper-thin plot, piss-weak characters, out of touch satire.

Olivia Cole in GQ:

'As combative and as vicious as ever, skewering the noughties as cruelly, as inventively and with as much screwy black comedy as he did in Money did the Eighties.'

'Verbal hand grenade.'

Sameer Rahin in The Daily Telegraph:

'Lionel Asbo is one of Amis's best novels for years because he feels such a wicked affinity with his central character.'

'Makes you laugh on nearly every page.'

Nicola Barker in The Guardian:

'Amis is the daddy.'

'Is this an offensive book? Hell, yes. Deeply. But then maybe modern England needs offending. Is this a readable book? It's a Big Mac made from filet mignon.'

'It is every inch the novel that we all deserve. So let's give thanks that Martin Amis was bad enough and brave enough to write it.'

David Annand in The Daily Telegraph:

‘Stylistically unmatched.’

‘There are hints, too, of a new sensitivity.’

‘Incapable of writing an inelegant line.’

‘None of the ambition of Money or London Fields.’

‘A cheap, cloth-eared dig at the underclass.’

Leo Robson in The New Statesman:

‘A contentedly throwaway piece of work.’

Tim Martin in The Guardian:

‘Being this out of touch doesn’t bode well for what’s clearly intended as a state-of-the-nation novel.’

‘However grotesque and refracted; as it is, long stretches come off either as daft Little Britain cliché or as reactionary bluster.’

D.J. Taylor in The Independent:

‘Had me roaring with laughter.’

‘Martin Amis is one of those writers about whom it is increasingly difficult to find anything worth saying.’

Theo Tait in The Guardian:

‘Sentimentally incontinent’ ‘Lionel Asbo isn’t a book that you’d press into someone’s hands, like Money or The Rachel Papers.’

‘A thin comedy plot collides with dark, fevered visions, along with some deeply emotional, transparently autobiographical material.’

‘A clueless foray into popular culture and working-class life, conducted with Amis’s trademark gaudy, repetitive insistence.’

‘A serious relapse.’

Emma Brockes in The Guardian:

‘With a few big exceptions – the New Yorker and the New York Review of Books have yet to pronounce – most of the US reviews for Lionel Asbo, Martin Amis’s latest novel, are in. And they’re not pretty.’

William says

My favorite Martin Amis novel since The Information. Lionel Asbo is the Martin Amis of London Fields and Money : dazzling prose, vicious animals, demented, ugly people, violence, and of course, a filthy, harrowing London juxtaposed to a glittering, money’s-no-object London. Surprisingly, though, there is a beautiful flip-side to Amis’ trademark hilarity and disgust, found in the character of Desmond, a thoughtful teenage boy who longs for peace, knowledge, and love (and who is having an affair with his grandmother, Grace -- revealed on page one, so not a spoiler). I’m a huge fan of Martin Amis, and his last three works of fiction left me a bit confused: Yellow Dog was funny but seemed cartoonish and trying too hard. House of Meetings was tremendous, but a somber historical novel about life in the slave camps of the USSR, and The Pregnant Widow, while wise and thoughtful and occasionally funny, didn’t quite pack the punch that I’ve grown to love in Amis’ earlier work.

So yeah, as a longtime admirer of Martin Amis, I’d say he’s fully back in the satirical, sickening swing of things. And the prose has never been sharper. A sample:

" All day, all night (what was the difference?), eyes open, eyes shut (what was the difference?), Des attended the cinema of the insane. In beady pulses and thudding flashes he rehearsed what he supposed were essentially vulpine themes and arguments to do with anxiety, hunger, and shelterlessness, refracted through an urban setting of asphalt and metal, or rubber and cellophane and shattered plexiglas. It was the longest motion picture of all time: and his attention never strayed. The definition was as sharp as a serpent's tooth. The lighting was indecently and lawlessly lurid. The dialogue (sometimes dubbed) and the voiceover and the occasional subtitles were all in the language of Grace."

Final thoughts: a smart, profane, funny, and even loving novel that I thoroughly enjoyed. It may not be as ruthless and riotous as his earlier work, but I like the direction he's heading in.

F.R. says

Lionel Asbo is an ill-educated, skinhead; a (not very successful) criminal, with two ferocious dogs and a native intelligence that makes him a formidable enemy. He hails from Dilston, an area of London where twelve year old girls are routinely pregnant, and if you live to forty you're deemed to have had a rich and successful life. Lionel himself is much bigger and more thuggish than life and dominates any room he enters, so that when he wins a huge amount of cash on the lottery it's impossible for anyone in the country to ignore him.

If the younger Martin Amis has conjured up this character he may have produced a comic creation to match Keith Talent, but things don't work quite as well for the more mature Amis. The character of Lionel is well captured. I've met people like Lionel Asbo. Yet the world around him is nowhere near as well drawn as it should have been. In his high-up literary bubble, it doesn't seem that Amis is prepared to get his hands dirty enough to really capture Lionel's world. As such the area of Dilston remains vague and ill-defined, when it should really be a human jungle; while all the other characters – with the exception of Lionel's insipid nephew, Desmond – are little better than ciphers.

The reviews were (predictably) unkind to this book, with some amusement generated by this resident of New York choosing to write a novel about the state of Britain. However I don't know if I necessarily buy that argument, as surely the world of this book is just too ridiculous to take seriously – this is a comic novel, not a righteous Daily Mail style diatribe. Clearly the author of 'Dead Babies' has not lost the desire the shock (we open with a boy having a passionate affair with his own grandmother), but the whole – despite some funny parts – remains too genteel and civilised to pack much of a punch.

Sandra says

Ho letto un'intervista a Martin Amis su Repubblica, in cui lo scrittore dice, a proposito di "Lionel Asbo": "Volevo scrivere una metafora dell'Inghilterra di oggi, concentrato di frivolezze, volgarità, spaventose sperequazioni economiche, dominata dal culto della celebrità effimera, della rincorsa di un successo foderato di cattivo gusto. Da un lato una povertà endemica, un circolo vizioso da cui è quasi impossibile uscire, dall'altro una ricchezza pacchiana, esagerata, che finisce per diventare ridicola."

Non c'è altro da aggiungere, Lionel Asbo è questo. Non griderei certo al capolavoro, ma le prime 80-100 pagine sono magistrali, la presentazione che Amis fa di Diston, quartiere dormitorio alla periferia di Londra, di Lionel e Des, suo nipote, è geniale, è un ritratto feroce, miserabile e puzzolente di uno scenario

post apocalittico che fa da perfetto sfondo a un personaggio come Lionel, la feccia della feccia: un quartiere pieno di caseggiati strabordanti di persone di ogni razza, di tralicci dell'energia elettrica sfrigolanti e con una discarica di oltre 4 ettari piena di rifiuti elettronici, un quartiere in cui l'aspettativa massima di vita è di 55 anni ed in cui a 18 anni si hanno già 7 o 8 figli, come accadde a Grace Pepperdine, madre di Lionel, un bruto psicopatico che ha cominciato a delinquere dalla culla, crescendo si è dedicato all'alcool e alle droghe, unendovi piccoli reati che lo portano di continuo dentro e fuori dal carcere, con la violenza e l'ignoranza come stile di vita. Poi c'è Des, un bambino dalla pelle color caffelatte, orfano di madre, che ha visto suo padre una sola volta, ubriaco su una panchina, dietro indicazione della madre, Des che sente dentro di lui un'intelligenza nascente, la voglia di sapere, Des che rappresenta la speranza nel futuro che, come un fiore nel deserto, nasce anche a Diston.

Quando poi la miserabile realtà della periferia si fonde con il frivolo mondo dei vip più trash, grazie alla vincita di oltre 140 milioni di sterline alla lotteria da parte di Lionel, il libro comincia a rallentare. Non mi ha coinvolto più come all'inizio, in cui, di fronte all'affresco di un personaggio come Lionel, rozzo e violento a tal punto da arrivare al grottesco, nonostante le sensazioni orribili che suscita, ti viene da sorridere per la mostruosità del personaggio. Si va avanti fino alla fine, a tratti annoiandosi, a leggere la storia del coatto milionario che tenta di barcamenarsi nel mondo dei media camuffando alla meglio quel che è, quando ci riesce, in una realtà sfavillante di alberghi, piscine, saune, sale da gioco, ristoranti e ville faraoniche, che non è Diston ma è uguale, sono solo i soldi a fiumi che ammantano l'immondizia che c'è sotto. Fino all'ultimo sono stata indecisa su quante stelle dare, ho optato per le 4 stelle perché Martin Amis mi ha conquistato con la sua arguzia e la maestria nello scrivere, passando con eleganza da uno stile sofisticato, che credo gli sia proprio (non ho letto altro di lui) a quello analfabeta del protagonista; il dubbio che rimane è se si sia trattato di un puro e semplice esercizio di stile di uno scrittore colto che guarda da lontano i nuovi padroni di questa epoca oscura, ma alla fine poco importa.

Andrew Tolve says

Disappointing really. And in terrible need of an edit. There were times when the prose soared or when the sneering thuggish stupidity of Lionel Asbo was endearing and brutal and funny and savage, or when the frame story of a London thug becoming a lotto lout was enjoyably engaging, but on the whole the book had too much and too little. Too much of glossing over years, when nothing of note happened, or when lots of things happened yet were reduced to one liners. And too little of real character development to make us believe that the characters were real and feeling and worthwhile, rather than the puppets of a writer desperate to make a wry and witty satire of his native England. The pity of it is that I saw Amis read this at the book's big release in Brooklyn, on the East river waterfront, and his reading was so insipid and scattered that I almost thought better of buying the book and having him sign it. "Money," I feared at the time and now know for certain in retrospect, would have been a much better investment.

Tony says

LIONEL ASBO: State of England. (2012). Martin Amis. ****.

Amis has managed to write a satire that explores the depths of a family relationship in a manner that reminds

you of writers from Fielding to Waugh. The family lives in a small backwater village in England named Diston or Diston Town. It's full of people on welfare who live in subsidized housing. Most of them are out of work. Most of them drink too much. Most of them have long prison records. The family in question is that of Grace. At the time we meet her, she is 39-years old. I lost count of the number of her children; she started early at age 12. She was an ardent fan of the Beatles, so she named five of her boys after them (she included the lost Beatle, too). She also had additional children, both boys and girls, and was still randy at age 39. Our first character is Desmond Pepperdine, 15-years old, one of Grace's grandsons. He has been seduced by Grannie, and is living down a feeling of guilt, and not doing very well with it. Desmond is a mixed breed, his father was a native from one of the islands. His mother never married. This was never a problem in Diston Town since marriage was never high on anyone's list anyway. Even Gran never married any of the various fathers of her children – and there were many different ones. Desmond, not having a father to raise him, is alone in the world since his mother died when he was younger. He is essentially raised by his uncle Lionel (the title character), one of Grace's sons. Lionel seems to spend most of his life in jail for a variety of offenses, but tries to give the boy good advice in his way. Things change, however, when Lionel wins the Lottery and becomes a multi-millionaire (or is it billionaire?). Suddenly he finds himself in a different world where he has to adapt to a different life style. It doesn't work. He can't change his spots. His vast new reserves of money only allows him to get away with his old lifestyle in a more elegant manner. He does learn, however, that somebody had been having it off with his mother and makes it one of his goals in life to find out who it is. Desmond knows his uncle and does all he can to prevent his finding out that he is the culprit. Meanwhile, Desmond goes on to develop a life that is more conventional. He goes to school; marries and has a child. Meanwhile, the threat of exposure looms over him. Throughout all of this, life goes on both in the village and in London, where Lionel carries on with his new lifestyle as one of the rich and famous – but with the Mr. Hyde still on the outside. This is a rollicking novel but moves to an ominous ending as the two opposing lifestyles begin to clash and the relationship between Desmond and Lionel begins to deteriorate. At the end you begin to start flipping the pages to see how it will all turn out. Martin Amis is at the top of his form with this novel. Recommended.

;

Paul Gleason says

Bear with me. In 1976, Bob Dylan released *Desire*; in 1997, he released *Time Out of Mind*. In the twenty one years between these records, he released a plethora of disappointingly mediocre and, in some cases, downright bad albums. Have you ever heard *Down in the Groove*? Case in point.

But in 1997, Dylan experienced a renaissance. *Time Out of Mind* was a first-rate album, and Dylan, who's inarguably one of the most important American musicians of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, hasn't looked back since. Since 1997, the man's been on a creative roll.

Dylan's roll brings me to Martin Amis. In 1995, Amis published *The Information*; in 2012, he published *Lionel Asbo: State of England*. After finishing *Lionel Asbo*, I can safely argue that Amis hasn't pulled a Dylan. He hasn't written a great novel since *The Information*, and *Lionel Asbo* most definitely doesn't equal renaissance.

So why has Amis gone from being one of the greatest English novelists of his generation to one of the most disappointing? Why hasn't he lived up the potential for greatness that he first showed in 1984, when the opening scene of *Money* read like nothing that had ever been written before?

As a reader of sixteen Amis books, I think that I'm qualified to propose an answer to the Amis enigma. Amis is a satirist, and at the heart of his greatest novels (*Money*, *London Fields*, and *The Information*), lies a brutally thrilling combination of high-energy prose, black comedy, postmodern innovation, social satire, and a penchant for good ole' plot and character.

Let's take these in order.

1.) High-energy prose. Whereas in the past, Amis made sure that each sentence crackled with rawness and surprise, now at least half his novels with boring sentences that serve as exposition or poor character description. Yikes! This means that the high-energy stuff, which is still occasionally there, reminds the reader that the rest of the sentences kind of suck.

2.) Black comedy. Amis can still be funny, but now he's spotty. The funniest parts of *Lionel Asbo* read as riffs that Amis inserted to add life to his text. But these parts - I repeat - are simply riffs and nothing more. They don't help advance the satire . . . he had the same problem in *Yellow Dog* and *The Pregnant Widow*. And, if the whole truth were to be told, the riffs in *Lionel Asbo* just aren't that funny - they're funny in comparison to the boring rest-of-the-book.

3.) Postmodern innovation. Amis, rather famously, looked to America and underground British literature for his inspiration. Some of his main heroes - Roth, Ballard, Nabokov, etc. - practiced metafiction. In *Money*, *London Fields*, and *The Information*, Amis made some advances in this area. The black comedy, therefore, existed in an innovative context. Amis could get as dark with his comedy as he pleased while maintaining the reader's interest in his structures. In *Lionel Asbo*, on the other hand, Amis' attempts at metafiction fall flat. Instead of creating - as he did in his great novels - he's parodying other fictions: *Great Expectations*, in particular, and also the English tabloids. Which brings us to social satire . . .

4.) Social satire. It's extremely difficult to be innovative and interesting as a social satirist when an author has run out of ideas. Amis is totally out of gas in *Lionel Asbo*, the characters of which read like simulacra of the characters in *London Fields* and *Money*. What I mean is that Amis is satirizing the same stuff that he went after in the 1980s. *Lionel Asbo*, therefore, has nothing new to say. Amis simply uses the techniques of *Money* and *London Fields*, which have declined from metafictional innovation to parody, and adds references to current events. One word: Yikes!

5.) Plot and character. I've already gone over why the characters in *Lionel Asbo* don't work. Now let me turn to the novel's plot, which is one of the most predictable plots that I've ever read by a major novelist. The plot feels like an afterthought - a hook onto which Amis could hang his riffs and, for the most part, boring-ass sentences.

Now I know that it's unfair of me to give such a scathing review without providing textual evidence. So consider this review a tease. If you once believed in Amis as much as I did and held his work in as high esteem as I did, read this book and see if I'm right. I tease you to do so.

But I still have faith in Amis for some reason that I don't understand . . . I'll definitely read his next book. I did purchase a lot of crappy Dylan albums before I got *Time Out of Mind*!

Mark says

If there was an option not to rate this, I would take it.

Possibly the most disappointing reading experience I have had for years. Amis is a hero of mine. I adore the man with a passion: I have even described him as the best writer this country has produced in two hundred years. Reading this brought tears to my eyes.

The most bullying, mean spirited and cynical exercise in ex-patriate carping it is possible to imagine. Nausea is the instinctive response. Followed by sadness.

Yes, I have huge issues with my country - doesn't everyone? - but at least I stand and fight, rather than escape to New York and snipe, like some fat tanned and hirsute racist plasterer outside a villa in Marbella.

Keith Talent was somehow attractive in London Fields. I knew Keith Talent and I have met him hundreds of times on the streets of my home city. But his attempted offspring, Lionel Asbo, and his surreal family of cyphers and stereotypes are exactly that - surreal and invented.

Martin - come back home and see how it really is. And then write about the reality, not something sourced in spite. Remind us how brilliant you were.

Maciek says

In 1998, British Government (under Tony Blair) introduced the Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO) - an act which meant to correct minor incidents which would normally not result in criminal punishment - from loudswearing, loitering and begging to public sex and even urban exploration. During the general elections of 2010, future Prime Minister David Cameron promised to fix "Broken Britain", and after taking office spoke eloquently but harshly about what he perceived to be failure of multiculturalism (can you imagine the American president doing the same?). In July 2011, a high selling tabloid *The News of The World* has been shut down and its staff took under investigation for allegedly illegal obtainment of information - including hacking into the phones of families of British soldiers killed in action. In August of the same year riots shook the city of London, engulfing the metropolis in violence and chaos; photographs of burning double decked red buses remain a haunting image. In 2012 Martin Amis left London for Brooklyn and published his latest novel, *Lionel Asbo: The State of England*. He dedicated the novel to Christopher Hitchens, who was a close friend (curiously it is the second novel dedicated to Hitchens that I've read in a row - the previous one being *Sweet Tooth* by Ian McEwan, which I reviewed here).

Some critics and readers felt that publishing a satirical and critical novel about the State of The Nation and then escaping from the mentioned nation was a real dick move, a betrayal of the country that bred and fed not only him but also Darwin, Dickens and Churchill and holds the world record for the largest empire. Amis has been criticized for exploiting the theme of the underclass from high horse, and running away across the pond - much like a boy who has just done some mischief hides from his enraged mum. There might be truth to that - who am I to judge? - but I think that the author has reached the level where he doesn't pay attention to the critics who grieve that his latest novel is not the same as the novel that they most enjoyed; he just kick backs and writes what he wants to write.

The fact is visible in *Lionel Asbo*, where it is evident that Amis is in many ways, as my English friends would say it, taking the piss. The novel has two main characters: Lionel Asbo, who is a Chav Proper* and deals with extortion along with other shady matters, and is genuinely proud of his achievements - almost

complete lack of education and the record for being the youngest person ever to be given a Restraining Directive - an ASBO, at the tender age of three. His pride is such that he officially changed his name to Asbo (from Pepperdine - "because it was a crap name anyhow") and speaks of the time he spent in prison with tenderness, as someone could speak about college or graduate school. He ends up in prison most of the time, but does not mind - a man knows where he is when he is in prison - and has two pitbulls, whom he feeds steaks bathed in tabasco sauce to make them feel the combative mood, as they are the tools of his trade. The original UK edition, published by Jonathan Cape, has this convincing illustration of him on the cover:

Contrasted with him is Des Pepperdine, his younger nephew - in 2006, when the novel opens Des is 15 and a half and Lionel is 21 - who is under his uncle's care, as his mother has died. Des has never known his father - once, when he is a boy and walks with his mother she spots him sitting on a bench, but he appears to be dead so they go away - and is a quiet boy whom Lionel tries to educate about the way of life in Diston, a (fictional) borough of London where nobody lives past 60 and 40 is considered old age. Lionel educates Des about the merits of benefit scrounging and how to not fall off the dole, how to feed the dogs to make them aggressive enough and of the necessity of carrying a knife, and wonders why Des enjoys going to school instead of breaking a window like any normal boy? What Lionel does not know that Des is having an affair with his grandmother - who gave birth to his own mother when she was just 12, and birthed seven children in total - and is deadly afraid of what his uncle will do if he finds out. So much, that he decides to stage a character and write to the local columnist about it and ask for advice - and then Lionel wins 140 million pounds in the lottery...

Amis certainly has his fun with both Lionel and Des (and other characters whose names are a hoot!), but his portrayal of them did not feel exploitative - I would say quite the opposite: he portrays Lionel with tenderness that he never gave him in his fictional world. Lionel Asbo in his own way does the right thing: he takes his young nephew under his wing and cares for him the only way he knows how: his reputation protects him from bullies, and provides for his well-being. In a place where "everything hated everything", Lionel Asbo is what he is - a baby Asbo, someone born in a sequence of someones who will grow up and die and often never experience everything else. He is a patriot, vowing never to leave England (well, maybe with a small exception for a trip to Scotland or Wales) and understandably so: the environment is deeply rooted in him as he is in it. Although he is presented with a literal miracle - an impossible amount of money almost literally falling from the sky! - it does not prove to be the way out: if anything, it can only turn into a tragedy. Although the novel is very funny and outlandish in many places - it is after all a satire, a fairy tale which is purposefully larger than life - it is also surprisingly poignant and touching. As Lionel becomes the source of media attention (which justifies the US cover by Knopf, which is stylized to resemble a tabloid) the novel does not lose its satirical punch but grows more and more serious, with an inevitable air of tragedy hanging in the air. I will not reveal whether it occurs, or whether any of the characters achieve any sort of solace, as this would be spoiling a novel which I found to be surprisingly good in spite of all the negative reviews. After putting it down (In England and abroad), many readers will look around themselves, asking the question with which Amis opens his book and which resonates throughout it in many ways: *Who let the dogs in?*

*Dave Henson also has some great songs about football (or soccer, if you prefer). I heartily recommend *At Least We're Not As Bad As France*, *The Vuvuzela Song*, *Evaluate The Last Four* and others on his channel!

William2.1 says

Lionel Asbo is a bad thief. He spends long stretches in jail. He's in and he's out, a recidivist. Lionel's nephew, Desmond, is at fifteen years of age seduced by his grandmother, Grace, thirty-nine. It is Des's guilt about this incestuous relationship, and his fear of what Uncle Li (lie not lee) might do if he finds out, that shapes Des's character in early adulthood, which is pretty much the span of the novel. Fortunately, Gran breaks off the affair with Des in order to seduce a fourteen year old! Right, a *younger* man. This fellow goes by the name of Rory Nightingale and Lionel does discover his affair with Gran. Of course, Des is both crushed and relieved to hear the news. Then Lionel wins a £140 million state lottery, providing much needed distraction for poor Des. But then Des and his new love, Dawn, have a marvelously described baby: Cilla. (Fantastic description of this baby and much else) which serves only to redouble his anxiety. Martin Amis writes with all the skill and assurance we're accustomed to from so many other fine books, but his style here is as compressed as I've ever seen it. (There are many beautifully compressed pages in Amis. *Night Train*, to cite just one example, springs most readily to mind.) Amis has always been a great admirer of Vladimir Nabokov, but I think this is the first time he's written a book that echoes that master's peculiarly arch, lean, and very compressed method so well. I speak here merely in terms of narrative compression, mind you, not style. Amis style is unique. As in the unjustly maligned *Yellow Dog* and to a more limited extent in *London Fields*, he has a field day with British dialect and slang. He's a master of it, of that there's no question. However, his penchant dialect and slang can really slow down the non-British reader. Agreed, not every book should go down like Simenon, but having to Google a reference every page two can be a drag. If we are to view the novel as dream, these unquestionably enriching quirks of Amis's, it can be argued, slow the dream down, inhibit it. It's too bad, especially in a book that is in every other respect so sprightly, so headlong and fun. I don't fault Amis. He can only write what he can write. However, my own favorite Amis novels have much less of such encryption: *Money*, *The Information*, *House of Meetings* and *London Fields*. Highly recommended.

J. says

If your experience of 21st century culture includes a lot of reality television, tabloid scandal, celebrity exposé, paparazzi photos... atrocious lapses that center on race, sport, wardrobe, sex, cosmetic surgery, drunk driving, pit bulls, lavish overspending -- anything crassly vulgar and exploitative --- you probably still won't like this novel, but you'll get a lot of what you like along the way.

And Martin Amis doesn't want you to like it; he wants it to stand as an aggressive, warts-plus documentary of our hyperbolic times. Which I suppose it does, but it makes for an annoyingly obvious kind of read.

If you have to stand up and point at the Donald-Trump/Sarah-Palin/Jerry-Springer sort of pop vulgarism, and announce that you think it's in really poor taste, dangerous, even ... maybe you're not breaking new ground.

Maybe you're stating the obvious. In the lurid, over-the-top fashion that it deserves, perhaps, but who really wants to immerse themselves in this embarrassing material ?

That there is a subset of consumers who do immerse themselves in this kind of thing is sad, and I would expect that the participants in this business aren't feeling very honorable about it. But beyond the initial trainwreck shock factor, the grand-guignol distastefulness of it all, why, Martin Amis, would you want to spend time analyzing it ?

Not me. Dumpster.

Jonfaith says

One year ago the London Riots left Tottenham essentially a smoldering crime scene and the first match of the Premier League at White Heart Lane was postponed via the police investigation. The motivations and manifestations of the job and his deeds lie at the core of Lionel Asbo . The credit crunch and News Corp also find their faces bashed in Amis's acerbic romp. I found the novel something I wished to protect, something to shield from our reptile natures and our cannibalistic rituals of convenience and efficiency. Amis makes us ache and chortle. He reminds us of our misery and gives it song.

Barbara Wahl says

Un tipo truce

Questo Lionel Asbo (dove Asbo, acronimo di anti-social behaviour order è il nome da lui stesso scelto) è un tipo truce, un' incarnazione del diavolo odierno: uomo senza grazia, senza pietà, che gode nell'imbruttire l'animo altrui, nell'infierire comunque, su più deboli o più forti, non fa differenza, e vive alternativamente di vendetta e di raddrizzamento del suo onore. Il codice di onore suo peraltro è limpido: fregare, rubare, trionfare, strafare, picchiare, mentire, e, se capita, ammazzare. (Ci ricorda qualcosa ?)

E' un grande didatta per il nipote Des, fatto di tutt'altro impasto e contraltare del demonio.

La ferocia è interessante, il personaggio “imprevedibilmente imprevedibile”, cioè sempre crudele, malvagio e malevolo, al di là dei limiti umani della cattiveria, è affascinante ;Amis è uno stilista, capace di inventarsi una lingua per l'occasione. ma il sospetto che si insinua durante la lettura, è quello del puro virtuosismo; il “cattivo” di Amis, divertente pure, nella sua implacabile brutalità, non si avvicina ai grandi cattivi della letteratura, quelli metafisici alla Raskolnikov, quelli perversi che popolano i romanzi di Dickens, quelli anonimi che manipolano i personaggi di Kafka, i sociopatici dei romanzi della Oates o, prima, i meschini arrampicatori di Balzac.

Manca della dimensione morale, dello spessore – nel male – che fa grande una lettura. Temo che questa sia la ragione della scrittura di questo romanzo: questo ci meritiamo, questo mondo abbiamo creato.

Grande esercizio di stile, se è questo, il libro è un perfetto meccanismo che riporta ad ogni parte la stessa domanda con minime variazioni:

Parte prima “Chi ha fatto entrare i cani?” ...Questa temiamo sarà la domanda...

Parte seconda “Chi ha fatto entrare i cani? Questa sarebbe la domanda...”

Parte terza: “Chi ha fatto entrare i cani? Oh, chi ha fatto entrare i cani?”

e l'ultima parte si intitola : Chi?chi?”

Questa la domanda che inizialmente incuriosisce, poi spiazza, e infine disturba. La risposta verrà. E noi ora ci chiediamo “Ma chi ha creato Lionel Asbo, chi? Chi? Noi?”

Will says

In need of some light relief, I turned to the highly-acclaimed *Lionel Asbo*. The setting is Diston, a bleak and wasted London suburb; Lionel is a thuggish lout with two pitbulls to help him in his unspecified “business”;

his foil is his saccharine-sweet nephew Des, (although he does have a dark secret that he is desperate to keep from Lionel) and Des's relationship with the equally-cloying Dawn.

This is a satire on the current State of England, so should be sharp and make you laugh a lot. And although there are some witty lines, for the most part LA seems neither sharp nor very funny. Amis treats social dysfunction with the finesse of an indignant adolescent (in fact at times I was sure I was reading *The Diary of Adrian Mole*), and as a result the plot and character development is one-dimensional and not even worthy of a spoiler alert.

What saves LA from the Single Star of Doom is Amis's deft skewering of the tabloid press and their obsession with Bad Boy superstars, for Lionel wins the lottery big time (while in prison) and instantly becomes a national sensation. The simultaneous fawning adulation and hyperbolic, hysterical outrage over Lionel's lifestyle is done very nicely, and to be honest, I think this is really all that Amis wanted to write about. The rest is a clumsy pastiche of Lionel's and Des's lives.

And now, in the spirit of the pretentious **A Note on the Type** – (a bit out of place for a Novel of this Type, I would have thought) – I will end with

A Note on the Dialect

“The dialogue is set in Diston Fick Modern, a descendant of the venerable Cockney argot. Characterised by mangled voles and mis-apfrated consonants, it is now spoken frewout England.”

Unfortunately Amis seems unable to carry it off. Instead of actually writing the dialogue as it sounds, which can be hilarious, he “translates” random words, bracketed and italicized – so when Lionel (*Loynoo*) says something (*somefink*) it's repeated like that. The effect is tedious and irritating, and sounds more like an old-school preoccupation with class accents.

In short, Asbo is not so much the rapier thrust of satire as it is the concussion of a dead-blow mallet.

Virginia says

Martin Amis. 5 stars. Always. I'm curious to read the other goodreads reviews of 'Lionel Asbo' because I think if you're not very very familiar with London, or very very interested in London accents, I think this would be a very different book. I'm not saying you HAVE to be familiar with London - it's just that I was always "hearing" Lionel as he spoke, and one of the things I love so much about Martin Amis (and Kingsley Amis) is his ear for exact pronunciation. Much of the comedy for me (and for Des) comes from the way Lionel says things.

"...and now he's finking for a living..." It took Des a moment to work out that Lionel did in fact mean finking (and not thinking).

It doesn't sound right, does it, said Dawn. "Euphoria." No, it doesn't. As if he meant to say "euthoria".

One of my favourite sentences: "Every time Lionel crashed in at night (as if returning to an empty house) Des thought how RESTFUL it must be (if you could imagine such a thing) to have no consciousness of

others."

There are all the Dickens, Fielding and Larkin references (those are just the ones I can spot) and I'm wondering what they mean, if they mean anything. "State of England"? I now read that phrase as in "Look at the state of 'im!" "Blimey! You're in a right old two-and-eight." Perhaps the state of England is what it has always been: ghastly, appalling, violent, squalid but also beautiful, lyrical, magical, inspiring?

A million stars for Martin and Christopher.

Sam Quixote says

Martin Amis' latest novel "Lionel Asbo" is a satirical character portrait of a kind of personality emergent in 21st century Britain: loud, brash, thuggish, stupid, fame-driven and greedy. Lionel is a man who's so proud of his thug background that he's changed his surname from Pepperdine to Asbo (Anti-Social Behaviour Order), of which he's collected many starting at the record-breaking age of 2.

The squalid township he inhabits is the imaginary Diston where nobody lives to their 60s and many women are grandmothers by their 40s. Lionel's own gran, 42, begins an incestuous relationship with her nephew, Des, who is a teenager. Then during one of his frequent stretches in prison, Lionel discovers that he has won the lottery, a staggering 140 million!

Amis' novel is his most enjoyable in years and he's clearly having a good time writing it. Lionel is a fully realised character, his voice is perfect, his character painfully realistic. He's at times charming in a strange way and then changing on a whim to being a cold hearted brute. His calculating mind and overly violent, sometimes sadistic, oftentimes simplistic nature is portrayed brilliantly by Amis as we see Lionel deal with his influx of sudden good fortune and how it warps him, accentuating the violence, ego, and pettiness to a heightened state.

As a contrast, Amis includes Des Pepperdine, Lionel's nephew, who is the sympathetic hero to this story (once the granny affair is put to rest). He claws himself up from his difficult surroundings to educate himself, find a job, and start a family of his own. While his story is the calm in between Lionel's raging storms, I found him to be a less interesting character, mawkish and dull in his own ways.

The book showcases Amis' rich sense of humour, particularly in Lionel's discussions with Des about GILFS (which changes to DILFS when he becomes rich), as well as a Katie Price/Jordan-type character in wannabe-poet/plastic surgery casualty Threnody, a modern day Lady MacBeth with barely any brains. I also liked the faux-newspaper reports on Lionel's antics once he leaves prison and begins spending his money.

The novel works best as a study of a character than a plot-driven novel and while I thought that the last third of the book was boring (as well as the ending which remains Amis' biggest weakness as a novelist), the book is definitely worth reading for its unique voice in Lionel Asbo. Moreover it's an enjoyable and funny book to read from one of the most consistently interesting voices in literature today. "Lionel Asbo" is Amis' best novel in years and well worth a look.

Jane says

well, I am going to take issue with most of the reviewers, who are disappointed in this book. The Guardian, of course, loathes it, and Amis, but then they always have, because he and his writing reject their easy, and stupid, certainties. But I in my turn was disappointed with UK reviewers, who use phrases like "satirical sideswipe at the underclass", and one says that the class of people portrayed is so easy to send up that Amis is shooting fish in a barrel. None of them have understood this book. As far as I can tell only Dickens has been able to do what Amis has done here, which is create characters from what might be called the underclass, but certainly is a criminal subset of class, to which he does not belong, and make them human. I wept for Lionel. The characters, especially the eponymous Lionel, are the opposite of caricature. They are human. There are several nods to Dickens here, including calling the school "Squeers Free". Of course, the background that the dead-tree press reviewers in the UK have is, well, Posher Than Mine. I don't think they've met anyone who talks like Lionel does. And Amis has got certain rhythms of white London speech, The words roll and tumble over you - London has a "white-van sky". Of course it all goes too far. That is what has always been so splendid about Amis. The "good" characters (Desmond and Dawn) as in Dickens, are ciphers. But Desmond, at the start of the book, is having sex with his own grandmother. Dickens never went that far. But think about it - he went a long way towards it.

Pitbulls, of course there are pitbulls. I have never read anything about pitbulls other than in the pages of a tabloid newspaper. I read a certain bit, towards the end of the book, on the tram on the way home today and was gibbering with terror. No spoilers from me though.

Mostly, I laughed. Out loud, and often. And I won't forget Lionel. This book may not describe to us the state of England, as its front cover would have us believe it does, but it tells us a lot about England.

One more from the reviewers, this one David Annand in the Telegraph: "Longstanding Amis admirers are, I think, slightly perplexed at the odd duality of his late work". There you are. Posh and meaningless at the same time.

Kemper says

This book made me such a nervous wreck that I developed a facial tic and had to take antacids while I was reading it.

Desmond Pepperdine is a 15 year old lad living in a very rough part of England where life expectancies are short and violence is common. Des is a bright and gentle boy with a big secret. His 39 year old grandmother Grace has seduced him, and Des is worried that his uncle Lionel will find out.

Lionel took Des in after his mother died a few years earlier. Des loves 'Uncle Li', but he's also terrified of him. He should be. Lionel is the kind of guy who laces his pit bulls' food with Tabasco to make them meaner, and he took such pride in being the youngest person to ever receive an Anti-Social Behavior Order after a violent spree at age 3 that he had his name legally changed to Asbo. He'll put a man in the hospital over some perceived grievance and then complain when his victim has the nerve to file a complaint with the police.

As a career criminal specializing in loan shark collection and reselling stolen goods, Lionel is constantly in and out of jail. Lionel also has a strict policy that his mom is too old to be dating men, and he doesn't like it when he hears from a neighbor that Grace has been seeing someone. Des keeps his mouth shut as Lionel finds another young man to blame and forces Des to help him get his revenge.

Years pass as Des lives with his secrets and tries to establish a quiet normal life by going to college and getting a girlfriend. He still lives with Lionel but with him always in jail, Des usually has the place to himself. However, after Lionel wins a small fortune in the lottery, he becomes a tabloid sensation. Unfortunately, becoming wealthy does nothing to make Lionel Asbo a better person, and dealing with his whims and moods becomes an even worse minefield for Des.

The odd thing is that Lionel doesn't seem quite as monstrous as he should. Amis does a nice job of depicting the affection that Des has for his uncle even as he has absolutely no illusions as to what Lionel is. With Des's secret about Grace and Lionel's skewed logic regarding right-and-wrong, every conversation between the two has an underlying tension that really got to me after a while. And the ending nearly killed me. (view spoiler)

While I enjoyed the story about a bright young man trying to create a life for himself while dealing with the constant threat presented by his sociopathic criminal uncle, I was disappointed in the satire aspects of Lionel becoming famous. It seems like Amis just hits all the obvious points of tabloid culture or wealth enabling someone to act like an asshole. (Which he did a better and more subtle job of in the superior Money.)

As a family story, it's tense and darkly funny. As cultural satire, it seemed obvious and without much bite.

Mircalla64 says

un po' Welsh e un po' anche

Amis guarda da lontano, ma con una grossa lente di ingrandimento, i proletari tra cui Welsh invece è cresciuto
il risultato un po' stride
si sente il sopracciglio inarcato di Amis, il suo disgusto per i "cafoni arricchiti" sembra di vedere all'opera quelli che hanno cacciato Madonna da Kensington
nel complesso i suoi personaggi sembrano fasulli, lo stile è geniale, intendiamoci, lui scrive assai meglio di Welsh, solo che scrive con i guanti, e scrive di gente per cui non basta la muta da pesca subacquea...
subacqueo, subacquea...vabbè :-)

Darwin8u says

Amis can write the darkest satire with a lyrical heart that beats with warm, soft blood. 'Lionel ASBO' is sad, funny, gratuitous, sick and full of life. It is like a Dickens novel was written by William Burroughs.

Covered in grit, the characters in this Amis novel seem at first like bizarre 21st century, Cruikshank caricatures that just keep bouncing back and forth in my head between the real, the surreal and the unreal -- so I keep on doubting my own palsied view of the world.

Anywho, this novel seems like a better-adjusted, less disquieting version of Amis' magnum opus Money. Lionel ASBO has more heart, and just slightly less art. Amis traded a little of the floating world . . . for the heavy. Just please J?z...us don't buy it for Grans.
