Living the bomb: Martin Amis's nuclear fiction

Rebecca L. Bostick

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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Living the Bomb: Martin Amis’s
Nuclear Fiction

by

Rebecca L. Bostick

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of the requirement for the degree of

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in

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The Thesis of Rebecca L. Bostick for the degree of Master of Arts in English is approved.

Chairperson, Beth Rosenberg, Ph.D.

Examining Committee Member, Evelyn Gajowski, Ph.D.

Examining Committee Member, Darlene Unrue, Ph.D.

Graduate Faculty Representative, Elspeth Whitney, Ph.D.

Interim Dean of the Graduate College, Cheryl L. Bowles, Ed.D.

University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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Abstract

Living the Bomb: Martin Amis's Nuclear Fiction examines the importance of nuclear issues in Amis's fiction, particularly Einstein’s Monsters and London Fields. Critical attention is given to Amis’s concept of "thinkability," his political agenda and the effect of nuclear weaponry on his literature. Amis’s nuclear symbolism is examined and the corrupt effect of nuclear weapons on our powers of creation (literal and artistic) and the environment is illustrated. Finally, Amis’s anti-nuclear philosophy is linked with feminism: both espouse pacifism and a reinventing of gender roles in a post-nuclear world.
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Chapter One
Introduction

Consideration of Martin Amis's nuclear themes may be overdue, but it is particularly apt now, just after the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and later, Nagasaki. Society has begun its first consideration of these events in retrospective light. This year, the first apologies were made to Japan for the horrors of the atomic attacks in World War II. This year, despite much protest, the Enola Gay was put on display at the Smithsonian alongside a historical summary of its role in the war. This year, nuclear issues were paid attention; their role in history and impact on society is finally becoming recognized. Because Martin Amis's work has been written under the shadow of such events, it is appropriate that this thesis examining his nuclear literature should follow such an anniversary. Amis has said he lived for four peaceful days before nuclear weapons came to his consciousness, then the bomb dropped in Russia, "deterrence was in place" and nothing has been the same since. Amis is right. But if we reflect, as he has in his fiction and essays, with one foot in the disarmed future, and another steeped in the radioactive past, we may make sense not only of Amis, but of
our own nuclear lives.

While it is important to separate Amis's techniques from his moral commentary, both work to support his anti-nuclear stance. Amis's mood is postmodern and pessimistic, with disconnected narratives, self reflexive authorial intrusion, a multiplicity of voices and views, and a final exhaustive thrust toward destruction in any form. Yet Amis stops short of excessively difficult postmodern conventions. Polyphonous narratives overlap, often repeating the same episode from a differing point of view and thus, claiming plural realities. Though often linked with Nabokov, Joyce, and Flaubert, his material is ultimately more accessible in part because he favors understatement rather than overstatement. Instead of relying on elaborate techniques, Amis uses metaphor and allegory to illustrate his points and keep the reader engaged. Certain postmodern images become characters themselves. Critics avow that Amis cannot write a sentence without extending his view to the sky, the clouds, the universe and galaxies, but rather than authorial indulgence, in cases such as these the images are playing a role. Amis rarely mentions the Bomb, but we feel its presence nevertheless. The landscapes become supporting characters, cities lend persona and moral standard to Amis's thoroughly corrupt settings. Without the threat of nuclear weapons, we might say Amis's books breathe with life, but due to the inevitable power of destruction he fixates upon,
we must confirm that all is dying: not just characters, but the world they, we as readers, and Amis himself inhabits.

Martin Amis does not write about the Bomb. Nor does he write compulsively and politically about nuclear weapons. Though critics have lambasted his nuclear-themed short story collection, *Einstein's Monsters*, he does not objectify the Bomb to use as a plot construction or vehicle for political posturing. Instead, Amis shows us how nuclear weapons are already at their sinister work. While we live in their sphere of possible annihilation, while we breathe the toxic air they emit, while we destroy one another and ourselves with our damaged nuclear psyche, we become nuclear beings. According to Amis, "we're all unwittingly and glandularly thinking about the nuclear threat" (qtd. in Michener 110). Its effect on our psyche, if not obvious, takes place at a deeper, primitively conscious level. The existence of the Bomb has put us in this state, but a nuclear explosion is unnecessary for mankind's eventual destruction. Amis convinces us we hold the power of such weapons in ourselves. Yet this nuclear logic is dangerously circular. Without the Bomb, this life-denigrating consciousness would not exist. Because of the Bomb, our "moral contracts are inevitably weakened" (*Einstein's Monsters* 7). The weapon which was invented to enforce peace accomplishes its goal through its potential for annihilation. And thus the Bomb has destroyed us, not with its tonnage of explosives, but with its threat.
There need be no Hiroshima for nuclear weapons to show their infinite power, as co-existence in a nuclear world has accomplished what the device itself could not. We are, in effect, living the Bomb.

Admitting nuclear weapons into our consciousness is the crux of "thinkability." The damage is inflicted through a pollution of our thought process. Nuclear destruction, once literally unthinkable is now an established possibility. For Amis, considering nuclear weapons as an option, however remotely viable, is a dangerous step toward their ultimate use. Yet this consideration is imperative in order to enter into a dialogue with nuclear weapons. Only in exchanges of nuclear possibilities can humanity progress beyond mutually assured destruction. Amis's dialogue consists both of polemic and nuclear symbolism. Remnants of our nuclear age, including major figures and historical events are incorporated into London Fields, successfully drawing attention to the nuclear question and admitting thinkability into the nuclear equation. Chapter Two will examine the importance of this "thinkability" for Amis and his readers.

Since discussions of nuclear war, including Amis's, never center on disarmament, but rather deterrence--implying an eventual catastrophe which needs averted--we must admit nuclear weapons have found their niche in our lives. The acceptance of eventual destruction inevitably weakens our hold on humanity. Our civilization, which has been
previously valued and heralded as supreme, now stands to be lost in one moment’s act. This necessarily changes our focus on the humanities, on humanity. Amis rallies against the endangerment of humanity, yet his characters do not. Most welcome the destruction, the catastrophe, the climax which will bring the calming denouement. In this sense, Amis’s fictions are eschatological; they need the end to precipitate and motivate all which leads up to it. In Money, John Self (our selves, the postmodern dirty Everyman), catapults toward the loss of everything women, family, friends and the final insult, money. Chapter Three will illustrate eschatology at work in London Fields, where Nicola Six, Keith Talent, Guy Clinch and Samson Young synchronize their trips toward the end because the present passes too swiftly and hurtfully to experience at any greater length. The hectic pace of the present is undeniable in the novel, where immediacy prevails and speed dominates. The climax, the crisis and catastrophe mean more because we are hurtling toward them at blinding speed. Capitalizing on the frantic momentum of the twentieth-century, Amis underscores the quick pace of life and life’s inevitable end. Time, like man, is another endangered species. London Fields ends prior to The Crisis; though we are led up to it and around it, Amis never leads the reader through the end. Hope of avoidance and deterrence motivates Samson’s final letter to the future, which finishes the novel. Amis stops
just short of widespread catastrophe, as I suspect he hopes governments will do as well. Chapter Three also questions ‘Amistime’, where all actions occur at a quicker pace, but physical time grinds to a halt.

In a world where destruction is imminent, the death of God, the author and the subject (recent victims of critical study) are incomplete without the death of another abstraction: truth. Amis champions this death and exploits the resulting subjectivity in London Fields. Truth and reality are necessarily subjective and have been replaced with representations of reality instead. The synthetic is substituted, when possible, for the genuine article. In Money, Martin Amis writes the character of Martin Amis into the novel. Such self aggrandizement is not egocentric but reflexive. Which Amis are we to trust, the author or the author’s fictive creation of himself? Samson Young, the narrator of London Fields is a writer unable to create. The story, according to Samson, is true. Amis is fictionalizing about a writer who cannot write, who instead fictionalizes a story which is merely a chronicle of reality. Traditional notions of truth and humanistic objective standards disappear in this setting. Amis relies on the reader to separate fact from fiction, yet Amis is never far from reality himself. Critics tend to champion or denigrate his work depending on the accuracy of his portrayal of twentieth-century life. Because Amis thrives on depicting
the nasty underside of humanity and discussing still-taboo subjects such as sodomy, feces, and of course, nuclear weapons, he has been labelled a realist. I would caution that his reality is entirely subjective, depending on one’s perspective in and outside of the work. Transcendence is absent in postmodern literature and the distance necessary to gain an understanding of events is lost for many of Amis’s characters. Creation, like truth, is expiring. Biological and artistic creative powers have been nullified by that creation which dominates all others: the nuclear bomb. Chapter Four examines London Fields’s stifled powers of creation and truth.

Because the nuclear exchange is not necessary for our destruction, Amis has also shown how war is not crucial to world degeneration. The world is weary and the weather has gone mad in Amis’s fictions. The twentieth-century is blamed for the toll on our environment, as is the nuclear presence. In his millennium-focused narratives, we are aware that much damage has already been done. If the end is craved by some, it is because the planet has been rendered uninhabitable. Nature is out of balance and essentially exacting revenge for our treatment of her. The planet as punisher is a frequent Amis image and we can’t help but feel environmental guilt. Chapter Five focuses on Amis’s sympathies with Mother Earth and explains how the planet is both murderer and "murderee."
Finally, Chapter Six considers Amis’s nuclear preoccupation and the symbiotic relationship between his fiction and feminism. Refuting Adam Mars-Jones’s *Venus Envy*, I will explain how Amis’s objectives are not far removed from feminism, though he is least often identified with this school of thought. The complex critical reaction to Nicola Six has practically ignored her feminist traits and in uncovering her strengths, I will find the feminism in the anti-nuclear message of *London Fields*. On a broader spectrum, Amis nearly always frames the nuclear question in filial language. Anti-nuclearism attacks the fathers who created the problem while environmentalism champions the mothers who are permanently tainted by the nuclear presence. In repudiating the role of the father and privileging the role of the mother, Amis’s argument is compatible with much feminist thought.

Ultimately, I believe Amis is hopeful for the future. His tone is cautionary to the point of alarm, but the prevailing endnotes are full of hope. We must have hope; without it we are beyond redemption. The final pages of *London Fields* consist of a letter to the future, hopefully presuming a future will exist. I suspect Amis has embraced the bomb, the "nuclear question," as he calls it, for moral reasons. If, in reading a narrative set in the presence of disaster, we can avert disaster ourselves, his goal is realized. If we recognize our half dead planet in London
Fields, Amis is successful. If we begin minutely to question our late twentieth-century realities and acceptances of mankind’s capability for destruction, Amis may sleep more peacefully. But without questioning the nuclear presence, in life and art, we begin where Amis begins, lost in "thinkability."
Chapter Two

Thinkability

Though Amis is not a primarily political writer, in the author's note of *Einstein's Monsters*, he does admit he wants "to get [his] chip on the table" in the debate about nuclear weapons. "Thinkability," the introductory essay which follows, establishes Amis as a firm opponent of nuclear weapons and as a strong political voice in the debate. In his non-fiction, he confronts the issue of weaponry with uncompromising contempt. In his fiction, nuclear themes are subtle and relegated to the background, yet Amis is taking a risk in writing about them at all. The subject is persistently unpopular in 'serious' literature and the dangers of substituting polemic for substance are grand. This chapter will explain why Amis's writing about weapons, both fiction and essay, is purposive and political. The political intent of his fiction is easily seen once his concept of 'thinkability' is fully understood. I will examine his use of nuclear symbolism and allegory to show how Amis replicates our own experience with nuclear weapons. Finally, I hope to establish that Amis is playing politics when he writes of nuclear weapons, but that he is morally justified in doing so.
Despite the prominence of nuclear war as a political issue, such a war is only fully present in our minds.

Nuclear weaponry depends, more than any weaponry in the past, upon structures of information and communication...the phenomenon is fabulously textual also to the extent that, for the moment, a nuclear war has not taken place one can only talk and write about it. (Derrida 23)

It is the ultimate rhetoric because nuclear war exists only so long as we discuss the possibility. No nuclear war has ever been waged, yet the potential of such action motivates our policies and protests. Nuclear weapons are a certainty, but the uncertainty of a full scale nuclear war lies in its prominence as a text. The war itself, the exchange, cannot be practiced, attempted, or concluded, because to do so would destroy both text and con-text. It exists in our imagination and through its textual capability derives the power to motivate. Amis must recognize the awesome power in this arrangement. Though we cannot control nuclear war, the initiation or the outcome, we can control the nuclear text. Through the words, we can impact the weapons. Because war itself is a text and we the rhetoricians who drive it forward, we can impact its progress. This is why discussions of the nuclear world, weapons and wars are crucial to literary critics who recognize the power and fluidity of text. Depending on whether we consider Mutually Assured Destruction or Strategic Defense Initiatives, we come to know nuclear weapons differently. There is a difference between Strategic Arms Limitation Treaties and Non-
Proliferation Treaties; one glamorizes weapons and admits our need for them, the other denounces the epidemic of arms possession. The rhetoric has always controlled the perception of nuclear weapons and the risk of war. Therefore, writing about the nuclear question is polemic. Though Amis’s motivation may not be specifically political, his moral aim is to draw attention to nuclear war, to reshape the nuclear text through his consciousness.

Jacques Derrida explains the necessity of considering the nuclear question:

> What allows us to think the uniqueness of nuclear war, its being-for-the-first-time-and-perhaps-for-the-last time, its absolute inventiveness, what it prompts us to think even if it remains a decoy, a belief, a phantasmic projection, is obviously the possibility of an irreversible destruction, leaving no traces of the judicio-literary archive--that is, the total destruction of the basis of literature and criticism. (26)¹

This may explain why literary criticism has not dealt with nuclear affairs thus far, because confronting the potential destruction of one’s vocation is tantamount to living with a terminal illness. However, since the power lies within the text, the text must begin to admit nuclear weapons into discussion. Amis is bargaining with eventual disaster, granting importance to nuclear issues, all the while attempting to understand their effects in order to confront them. "Although we don’t know what to do with nuclear weapons or how to live with nuclear weapons, we are slowly learning to write about them" (EM 4). Writing is the first
step toward a dialogue with weaponry and Amis’s fictions prove that one does not have to write science fiction fantasies in order to write about nuclear weapons. In the preface to his short story collection, *Einstein’s Monsters*, Amis claims "roughly half of what follows in this book was written in ignorance of its common theme" yet "soon after I realized I was writing about nuclear weapons...I further realized that in a sense I had been writing about them all along" (21). He criticizes mainstream writers for not contemplating nuclear weapons because he senses the importance of such debate. Ignoring the immense threat of nuclear weapons "is like failing to get the point about human life" (5). Ignoring nuclear weapons ignores the value of life. Derrida asserts that anti-nuclear activists "are ready to prefer any sort of life at all, life above all as the only value worthy to be affirmed" (30). Certainly life ought to be valued without the exclusion of other positive affirmations. Nuclear weapons give value to themselves to the detriment of other assets. Life, on the other hand, ought to be the theme behind all other values. Yet when we bring nuclear weapons into the discussion, the focus shifts from life to death. "I feel it [nuclear weaponry] as a background, a background which insidiously foregrounds itself" (EM 23) to the exclusion of other themes. The question becomes not 'why write about nuclear weapons' but 'how can you help but write about them?'
During the composition of *Einstein’s Monsters* and *London Fields*, Amis the journalist was monitoring America’s Republican Administration and the ongoing cold war debate between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev. As a correspondent for *Esquire* magazine, Amis detailed the results of a hypothetical nuclear exchange in October 1987’s "Nuke City" and followed up with coverage of the 1988 Republican Convention. His harsh criticism of Reagan is clear. He is "an old media man who has foreclosed one arms treaty, broken out of a second, and is whittling away at a third; a babbling, bloopering illusionist who now bestrides the spoils of the biggest buildup, or spendup, of the planet" (104). These sentiments (and subsequent depictions of America) have led to Amis’s reputation for being "anti-American." Questioning the wisdom of an American regime, however, is far different than hating America. Amis’s problem with America has always been our blind affinity for nuclear weapons. With them, "you gamble the future to serve local and temporary ends. You show American willingness, American resolve to bet the planet" (109). Britain, too, has a nuclear campaign, but it consists only of joint nuclear tests with America. America has been the driving force behind the arms race and Amis accurately vilifies Reagan for his role in perpetuating the Cold War. Like Amis, Reagan embraced the power of rhetoric to promote a nuclear plan. "In 1983 came the President’s ‘vision,’ the Strategic
Defense Initiative, soon to be nicknamed Star Wars; a different fiction, a kind of science fiction, was consolingly emplaced" (104). Reagan focused on a winnable war and first strike capability, while Amis refuses to submit to American logic of acceptable casualties. "A first strike is morally impossible. But so is a second strike" (EM 25), which explains why deterrence is a moral failure. If the main objective of weapons is rendered invalid, their presence becomes a battle not between nations, but within, thus, "the arms race is a race between nuclear weapons and ourselves" (28). Their effect is not felt in an explosion, but an implosion. Already they have poisoned our bodies, our morals and our planet. Without a first strike, the weapons are victorious.

Amis is "sick of nuclear weapons" (3) for a number of reasons: the money spent on their development, the toxins they emit, their ideological capacity for destruction, their psychological impact, their impossible deterrence, their inability to be comprehended. "They are everything because they can destroy everything" yet "they are unbelievable, they defy belief" (Esquire 99). However, we are forced to believe in them and to consider their massive possibilities. Thinkability becomes necessary to accept their existence and through this acceptance, to deter. Amis isn’t against nuclear WAR, but nuclear weapons which "cause death even before they go off" (EM 28). The effects are evident without
a nuclear exchange because their presence alone compromises humanity. "Our moral contracts are inevitably weakened" (7) because nuclear weapons have rendered life unimportant. No action compares to a nuclear explosion, according to Amis, thus all action becomes permissible. "How do things go when morality bottoms out at the top?" (7). All father figures and paternal images are destroyed by nuclear weapons. Repeatedly, Amis admonishes his father’s generation for creating such a beast. Amis’s criticism is aimed quite specifically at the previous generation which developed nuclear weapons but also at patriarchy in general for failing to have come to a better solution for the world’s ills. He is left assuming responsibility for an ill he cannot bear to pass along to his own children. According to Amis, the horrifying psychology of nuclear development is that "it takes all kinds to make a world. It takes only one kind to unmake it. My father was of the latter school, though in an unrecognizably younger world, caught up in fresher historical forces" (London Fields 324). Governments, whose primary role in a democracy is to ensure the safety of their citizens, have betrayed that trust, according to Amis. Living with the knowledge that all life could be wiped out at any moment necessarily changes the value of our existence and irreparably alters our moral codes.

Critics have not been kind to Amis’s preoccupation with nuclear weapons. Einstein’s Monsters received a mixture of
enthusiastic praise for the attempt to master the short story genre and confusion and distaste for the subject matter. The stories were deemed "oversympathetic" to nuclear war and Adam Mars-Jones challenged Amis’s portrayal of the apocalypse as an emotional reality, suggesting Amis was using the theme to promote his own psychological agenda. *London Fields* was greeted with warmer reviews, but critics were still resistant to the nuclear themes. Universally accepted as a murder mystery or sex triangle, most reviewers ignored or downplayed the nuclear references in the novel, dismissing it as an "end of the century" story.² The evidence of nuclear preoccupation is clear, from the fictionalizing of physicist Leo Szilard to the allusions of Britain’s atomic testing to the appearance of Enola Gay and Little Boy as characters. The resistance of reviewers to acknowledge nuclear themes emphasizes Amis’s original point, "I still don’t know what to do about nuclear weapons. And neither does anybody else" (EM 2). At the least, writing about them is the first step toward bringing them out of marginal darkness and into textual light.

Because *Einstein’s Monsters* is prefaced with the anti-nuke essay, "Thinkability," the prevailing nuclear theme does not detract from the stories. Amis knows he is writing in the taboo margins and the preparation is necessary. Because most critics of the collection complained of the overt agenda in the fiction, Amis’s essay is essential to
advocating responsibility. "Thinkability" acknowledges his unintentional thematic concerns. Critics clearly ignored the essay or chose to let it influence their reading of the text.

The first story, "Bujak and the Strong Force" personifies nuclear weapons in the figure of Bujak, a Polish emigre to London who is revered for his quiet, massive strength. "You slept alot sounder knowing Bujak was on your street" (33), safe in the deterrence of a viable weapon at your disposal. The narrator, Samson, comes to know Bujak slowly, unsure if he will fit peacefully into his life. Weapons must be greeted with caution, as their impact is unknowable until they explode. Through Bujak, Amis openly communicates his nuclear ideology. "All particularly modern ills, all fresh distortions and distempers, Bujak attributes to one thing, Einsteinian knowledge, knowledge of the strong force" (46). The strong force is energy locked in matter, in Bujak as in a ballistic missile. All are reserves of energy waiting to be unleashed. Yet in the critical moment when Bujak discovers his family murdered by common thugs, he resists. Amis argues against retaliation theories and the logic of contemporary warmongers when Bujak acknowledges that "I had no wish to add to what I'd found...If I had killed them, I would still be strong. But you must start somewhere, you must make a start" (58). Nuclear weapons cannot be used to discipline or retaliate, because the
violence they unleash would always overwhelm the situation they confront. Deterrence is ineffective, as the killers knew Bujak and struck anyhow. Recognizing the power in restraint, Amis offers a hopeful ending. "Now that Bujak has laid down his arms, I don’t know why but I am remotely stronger" (58). The implication is clear: compromise and disarmament are the only hopes for the future.

Without either progressive step, we end up in London Fields. The novel lacks the blatant political agenda of the short stories but exemplifies the nuclear theme. Western civilization is facing a political Crisis with nuclear warheads pointed at one another, the female protagonist has imaginary friends named Enola Gay and Little Boy, and the narrator is dying of a hereditary radioactive synergism contracted by his father, who worked in High Explosive Research. All vehicles for creation have turned instead to destruction, while the earth shows signs of radiation sickness herself. In London Fields, both of Einstein’s monsters, nuclear weapons and human beings, are unleashed.

The first page of the novel reminds us, "you can’t stop people once they start creating" (LF 1). The problem, then, lies with what we have created: nuclear weapons. While the weapons themselves are most physically destructive, the blame lies with their creators. Because the potential for atomic energy lies within the natural world and is not, essentially, man-made, blaming the force itself is
inaccurate. Instead, twentieth-century man is at fault for harnessing nuclear energy and any destruction the atoms unleash becomes our responsibility. Amis moralizes this point to promote personal responsibility, which many of his characters lack. We have manipulated nature for a destructive purpose and in doing so, have successfully destroyed ourselves. The creators are to blame because the weapons alone can do nothing.

Amis isolates his philosophical cautioning to his narrator, Samson Young. Samson may be totally against nuclear weapons, but nearly everyone else in the book is either already corrupted by their presence or hoping for their impact so the world can begin anew. The novel is not a conscious chronicle of nuclear war; rather, the threat lurks in the background, illuminating every action. Amis confines deliberate nuclear images to allusion and relies instead on the allegory of Nicola Six, a precognitive femme fatale who spends most of the novel orchestrating her death. She is the antimatter, the black hole, the reversal of all creative powers. She is the earth stripped of potential. Through her, we come to understand the limited options we possess in an armed world.

"Right from the start, she had a friend, Enola. Enola Gay. Enola wasn’t real. Enola came from inside the head of Nicola Six" (16), but Enola IS a real destructive force, the plane which dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. Nicola refers to
Enola as a sort of naughty twin sister in childhood. Whenever Nicola did something particularly devious, Enola was by her side. If Nicola needs courage or companionship, Enola is there. Yet in the plot of *London Fields*, Nicola names Enola as a true life friend as part of a scheme to con money from a lover, Guy. Enola and her "son," Little Boy, according to Nicola, are lost in a Cambodian refugee camp and need money to be transported home. Guy, who has no knowledge of the historical Enola Gay, believes Nicola's scam, but Amis is quick to assign blame. "A little knowledge might have helped him here, a little knowledge might even have saved him" (124), but like much of society, Guy remains ignorant of the nuclear impact. An awareness of the power of a Little Boy might have prevented many nuclear catastrophes, but the real and fictive Enola remain ambiguous.

Our problem with weaponry, according to Amis, is complacency. One of the reasons the nuclear threat is widely ignored is that, "like everybody else, Guy had little appetite for the big bad news. Like everybody else, he had supped full of horrors, over breakfast, day after day, until he was numb with it, stupid with it and his daily paper went unread" (141). Apathy and disgust have let nuclear weapons manifest, leaving us victims of our own creations. Because we are adaptable, we create situations which should be intolerable and then learn to adjust. Samson notes, "apart from the fact that on account of the political situation,
they and their loved ones might all disappear at any moment, my protagonists are in good shape and reasonable spirits" (238). Living with the ever present shadow of potential annihilation, Amis’s characters are held hostage by the threat of the bomb. The most attention paid to the Crisis consists of traffic tie-ups, airport hysteria, crowd control. Always, the threat of devastation remains in the background, leaving an imprint on Amis’s world, but scarcely inspiring any instinct toward self-preservation. Continuing with life as though all were normal is the goal. The people of London are akin to those living in a war zone. If the reality of potential destruction is in the forefront of their minds, they cannot function. This drives even Samson, the closest character of conscience we have, to admit, "I am trying to ignore the world situation. I hope it will go away. Not the world. The situation" (64). Yet Samson’s motives for hating the Crisis are much like literary critic’s motives for silencing nuclear weapons. If the world were to be destroyed, "I would lose many potential readers, and all my work would have been in vain. And that would be a real bitch" (64). Thus, the Crisis is collectively perceived as a temporary, Reaganomically winnable war. Our nuclear policies are stagnant and "poor old deterrence is in bad shape, so you give it a little jolt. Two cities. It’s good, isn’t it. We’d all feel so much better after a cathartic war" (418). Yet Amis ultimately rejects the situation,
knowing "nothing can survive a devastation so thorough...apparently it was hopeless right from the start" (469).

Born into a nuclear world, the characters' experiences with weaponry in London Fields mirror Amis's. "On television at the age of four [Nicola] saw the warnings, and the circles of concentric devastation, with London like a bulls-eye in the center of the board. She knew that would happen, too. It was just a matter of time" (16). Amis himself recollects, "when I was eleven or twelve the television started showing target maps of southeast England, the outer bands of the home counties, the bulls-eye of London" (EM 1). The recurrent image has a profound affect on him and Nicola alike. Both convey a fatalistic acceptance of eventual war.

"Thinkability" makes reference to "the admirable London After the Bomb" (19) which describes, in detail, the status of Amis' hometown after a nuclear attack. In graphic charts and tables, the reader is presented with predictions of survivability post-bomb. Amis is writing reality in London Fields, chronicling the effects of what image historian Spencer Weart calls "nuclear fear."

The most obvious nod to anti-nuclear thought is Amis's recurring Dr. Slizard. Present as physician in both Einstein's Monsters and London Fields, Slizard is a minor character who makes diagnoses and dispenses medication to treat nuclear-induced illnesses, notably Samson's. Slizard
prescribes drugs to cope with the symptoms of illness and finally, a pill to end one’s life when the nuclear illness becomes too much to bear. In this dual role of healer and destroyer, the fictional Dr. Slizard is a homage to atomic scientist, Dr. Leo Szilard.

Leo Szilard, a Polish physicist, worked on the developmental stages of the Manhattan project. As a young researcher in London in the 30’s, he touted the existence of neutrons and their potential power as an energy source, but was ignored by the international community until atomic weapons research began. Ironically, though Szilard was instrumental in developing the A-Bomb, he later became a peace-activist and widely protested the escalating Cold War. Szilard’s role in creating Little Boy is minimal—he was not one of the team at Los Alamos, nor was he consulted in the final stages; his responsibility lay in the A-bomb’s inception. Aware of the research into atomic energy in the early stages of World War II, he drafted a letter to then President Roosevelt to inform him of "scientific developments and their possible military consequences" (Bess 47). He then persuaded Albert Einstein to sign the letter for credibility’s sake and sent it to the White House. Szilard, in effect, proposed the atomic bomb. A repentant Einstein eventually recalled his signing of Szilard’s letter the "one great mistake of his life" (47). Amis has chosen the two scientists with the most regret for nuclear weapons
to frame his own objections. The creators are genuinely repentant of their creations, whose aims have become far removed from the original intent. Amis, like Szilard and Einstein, takes full responsibility for mankind’s efforts in destruction.

Near the end of his life, Szilard established the Center for a Livable World, which still exists to promote disarmament, and spoke widely on unilateral deescalation of nuclear arms. Szilard genuinely believed we would have disarmed the majority of our nuclear arsenal by the 1990’s because the cost and maintenance would have become too taxing. Amis acknowledges Szilard’s dual role in the atomic age in the enigmatic long distance healing powers of Dr. Slizard. As a physician, Slizard accomplishes what Szilard the scientist attempted healing the nuclear world. Leo Szilard straddled both sides of atomic weapons, born before their existence, responsible for their proliferation and finally against their intent. In London Fields, Samson explains, "my father taught Slizard at NYU before he switched subjects" (345). His father, who developed weapons, taught Slizard how to make weapons until Slizard, like Szilard, "switched subjects" from killing to healing. The fictional Slizard can no more heal radioactive illness than Szilard could unmake the atomic bomb, but, like Bujak, he made a start.

Amis, too, must make a start. Despite initial criticism
of Einstein's Monsters, Amis refused to abandon "the nuclear question," as he calls it. He freely admits London Fields reflects his interest in nuclear subjects. Indeed, the moral erosion described in "Thinkability" is fully present in the novel. Amis liberates the Enola Gay for his own symbolic purpose and, though London Fields is not about a nuclear war, per se, he depicts the psychological damage present in a world full of weapons. Descriptions of an atomic blast and a nuclear winter are scattered throughout the novel, as well as the effect of a constant nuclear threat on the populus at the end of the millennium. The novel illustrates the primary effect of thinkability: eventual destruction. This leads most of the characters of London Fields to abandon hope and covet 'the End.' When respect for life is lost because we know the end could be around any corner, eschatology becomes man's common malaise.
1. Derrida’s essay "No Apocalypse, Not Now" was included in a special issue of *Diacritics* (Summer 1984) which defined nuclear criticism and examined the importance of considering nuclear issues, especially in the humanities.

2. Amis has spoken contradictorily of *London Fields*’ intent. In interviews with more literary figures, including Will Self, and critical magazines, including *Esquire*, he emphasizes the nuclear quotient. Yet in more personality-minded magazines, such as *People*, Amis claims readers are misinterpreting his literary aim.

3. Recent research suggests that nuclear explosions may have occurred in nature millions of years ago. Uranium, the element which generates a nuclear explosion, is present in nature in many forms. To make a nuclear device, the uranium found in nature is enriched or refined to a combustible point.

4. Weart, a physicist and historian, has written the definitive book on nuclear imagery entitled *Nuclear Fear*. Symbols of the nuclear age, including circles such as Amis mentions, are examined for their lasting psychological and sociological impact.
Chapter Three

Eschatology: Craving the End

Thinkability unfortunately allows for the potential of widespread destruction. Initial denial may be necessary to psychologically persevere, but eventually one acquiesces to the reality of the nuclear threat. Amis is not content to preach against weapons, however, without illustrating all available options in a nuclear world. Despite the strong narrative voice in Amis’s novels which nearly always promotes life, death is widely coveted by most of his protagonists. The emphasis shifts from favoring life to preferring death. This chapter will explore the motivations for eschatology in London Fields. The decline in the quality of present day life contributes to apocalyptic fantasies, widely shared by those in the novel, notably Guy Clinch. I will also consider the role of time as it relates to eschatology. In much of the novel, time is compressed, resulting in a cheapening of life and even further degraded morality. Because nuclear weapons have shifted our focus from life to death and aged our planet beyond repair, an inversion of our typical standard of living occurs and life becomes chaotic and dispensable. This chapter will explain the shift in time and the hazardous results.
London Fields essentially centers on Nicola Six’s death, premeditated by herself. Samson is a quixotic figure, chronicling her death while anticipating his own, yet his last words consist of hopes for the future. Even Guy, the wealthy, mainstream husband gone astray, finds occasions to welcome the world’s end. Widespread Thanatos includes the planet as well. The craving for death is twofold: in one sense, an urgency to be done with the poisoned world, recently rendered uninhabitable; in another, the freedom which accompanies the knowledge of an ending. Because consequences of actions are erased when the end is near, death both emancipates and strengthens Amis’s characters.

Nicola, a "murderee," knows how, when and where her life will end. She simply can’t identify her murderer. This quest motivates much of the novel, as Samson uses Nicola’s diaries to piece together the murder mystery. Yet from the beginning, "the story wasn’t over, but the life was" (22). Samson, too, is dying, with more beneficial effects. "One thing about my illness or condition. I’ve never been braver. It empowers me" (11). It also physically improves the degenerating Samson. "Death seems to have solved my posture problem and improved my muscle tone. What jogging and swimming and careful eating never quite managed, death is pulling off with no trouble at all" (182). Ironically, death, in its last stalking days, is helping Samson and Nicola, perhaps because they are already marked. Repeatedly,
Amis refers to them as the dead, which renders them untouchable to the forces which are winding down all else in the novel. Stated simply: "In death I shine. In death I am, I am beautiful" (182).

Death is not merely welcomed, but solicited as a viable alternative to the unbearable present. Death, in all its shapes (the Crisis, the end of the century, the end of Nicola’s life) is necessary; to Nicola’s plot, to Guy’s infidelity, to Samson’s writing. Nicola freely admits,

'I do need real life. It’s true. For instance, I need the class system. I need nuclear weapons. I need the eclipse.’

'You need the Crisis.’ (259)

Without the Crisis, which motivates her leading men, Nicola’s murder cannot happen. All events intertwine and at the center is the potential worldwide disaster. Guy’s motivation is clear because "in his own way Guy Clinch confronted the central question of his time...if, at any moment, nothing might matter, then who said that nothing didn’t matter already?" (254). Guy needs the Crisis to justify his conscience and escape the moral demands of his current situation. "Love makes you use the blind man," warns Amis, "bring on the holocaust for a piece of ass" (278). Fully aware he is using the world’s situation to his best advantage, he convinces himself he is seeking life, experience, undiluted feeling. Guy wonders hoe he will "ever
know anything in the middle of all this warmth and space, this supershelter?” (38). To achieve this, he perpetuates his own apocalyptic fantasy, which "has the power to focus and intensify motivation, to elicit action that would not be elicited without it. Apocalypse...justifies destructive impulses that judgement would normally veto" (Ostow 68).

Guy’s perception of a nuclear explosion is not without horror, but he covets the results, looking beyond the destruction.

The first event would be light speed...everything that faced the window would turn to fire the checked curtains, this newspaper, Marmaduke’s tailored dungarees. The next event would come rather faster than the speed of sound, faster than noise, the strident thunder, the heavensplitting vociferation of fission. This would be blast overpressure...surrounding the house and causing it to burst outwards. The house itself would become a bomb, and all its plaster and order, its glass and steel, would be shrapnel, buckshot...his house, the thrumming edifice of negative entropy, would be ordinary chaos in an instant...then everything would be allowed. (276)

Guy’s horrible fascination with nuclear war is akin to a dirty "conjugal secret" (276); he contemplates destruction with wicked glee because it would finally permit him to indulge his fantasies. The fact that he might well die in such an exchange is lost on Guy, as it is on most apocalypse-waiters. "Let’s not forget the Second coming, also awaited in quiet confidence" (118). Guy’s also hopes for salvation, but its his current conformist situation from which he seeks immediate escape.

Samson is more honest in his dealings with death,
perhaps because he has been expecting it for some time. Both he and Nicola have planned for their death, unlike Guy who is revelling in the survivalist fantasy of his own life after the destruction of all else. Samson recognizes the universal element of mortality. "Death helps. Death gives us something to do. Because it's a fulltime job looking the other way" (240). Death is our new common experience. "We all know we're not going to live forever. We do know that. We forgot it for awhile. For awhile the live forever option looked to be worth trying. No longer" (281-282).

A major episode in Samson's remaining days is the caretaking of abused infant Kim Talent. Samson wants Kim to live, obviously, but he questions the society she must inhabit: "What kind of planet is it where you feel relief, where you feel surprise, that a nought year old girl is still a virgin?" (388). These painful realizations help to explain the welcomed disaster of London Fields. As a moralist, Amis questions the quality of modern life. As Derrida asserts, when life is the only value, quality of life becomes expendable. Most of the Londoners in London Fields are ready to do away with modern life and start anew. The apocalypse, literally "that which is revealed," has always promised something beyond destruction. In destruction, we find transmutation. According to Weart, "transmutation became a symbol for still more, the greatest of all human themes--the passage into death and beyond"
(14). Though nuclear war promises annihilation, the change may bring redemption. If the planet is expendable, we rely on the hope that beyond the destruction will lie a clean slate. Through death, we greet rebirth. With this in mind, Amis’s eschatalogical asides are less anarchical than hopeful: "Christ, how much longer before we come to the end?" (370); "What was the sun made of? What was the matter with it? Why didn’t it go away? Why didn’t it go out?" (451). The sun does go out in the climax of the novel, November fifth, Bonfire Night, Nicola’s birthday and death day and the date the world powers are scheduled to detonate their weapons. The sun, recognized as "the giver of all life" was even "taking life away" (148) with cancer and dangerous, ultraviolet rays in its new threatening role at the end of the world. "Apocalypse urges strong movement toward the goal of relief" from execrable twentieth-century life (Ostow 68).

In all of London Fields’ "moral horror" (LF 209) God is distinctly absent, replaced with the insidious influence of weaponry. The ultimate creator has abandoned his creations to fend for themselves amongst their own failed creations. Perhaps we, like nuclear weapons, can only assume one outcome: total destruction. In fact, weapons have become new demigods. "Kim has stopped saying Enlah...no longer does she pay homage to the sudden, the savage god of babies: Enlah!" (239). I would argue that the role of God has been assumed
by the weapons. The horror of this is that "like God, nuclear weapons are free creations of the human mind. Unlike God, nuclear weapons are real. And they are here" (EM 27). Just as religion once formed the basis of society, nuclear weapons have ordered the present. No longer held to a universal moral standard, our motivations shift. When promised destruction rather than salvation, "our moral codes are inevitably weakened" (7) and the unthinkable becomes all too plausible:

[Guy] found that the current situation, or the Crisis, had a way of prompting the most shameful fantasies--discrepant, egregious, almost laughably unforgivable. What if you survived into a world where nothing mattered, where everything was permitted?" (LF 254)

The irony is that we do live in such a world, not because the old moral regime has been blasted by the Bomb, but because the presence of the Bomb has already bred a lesser human standard. Morals are no longer derived by supposedly objective innate goodness. "The result of this demotion of the moral to merely one significant factor in ethical deliberation on how to live the good life is to make such deliberation much more like aesthetic judgement and justification" (Shusterman 344). Without the checks and balances of moral adherence, even the best of men are found suffering in Amis's novels.

Death becomes a simple matter of convenience toward the end. As the planet wheezes like an octogenarian, we seek to put it and ourselves out of misery. With this promised
relief comes gleefulness. "Excitingly, it was getting to the point where a teacup, say, could be used and put aside, unwashed (or thrown away or shattered), used for the last time" (LF 395) as we are used, ultimately disposable at the end. Death is universal, it has become the lowest common denominator in postmodern life, not merely because we all expect it at one time or another, but because we all suddenly expect it at once. "The twentieth-century had come along and after several try-outs and test drives it put together an astonishing new offer death for everybody. Death for everybody by hemlock or hardware" (297) which is exactly what London Fields delivers. Amis even acknowledges the painful irony of modern love with Dink the South African tennis professional. In the age of AIDS, the act which brings life can instead bring death. "There’s also the fatal disease consideration. If Dink caught one of them, he’d stop being the world’s ninety-nine. And start being the world five-and-a-half billion" (409).

Though the Crisis is averted and the nuclear disaster postponed, however temporarily, we still finish the novel with a clear sense of universal destruction. Even hopeful Samson admits, "it isn’t worth saving anyway" (463). Yet when his own death comes, "not once have I felt such certainty that the world will keep on going for another sixty minutes" (466). Like Nicola, he has pinpointed his death. And because it is a single act, not a universal
destruction, we rest safe in the knowledge that our own mortality is safe for awhile longer. Like John Self, Samson knows "I’m perfectly capable of dealing with my life. In fact, the future looks really bright now that I’ve decided to kill myself" (Money 342). The control found in suicide (even premeditated Nicola is a suicide of sorts) repudiates the hold nuclear weapons have over our lives and more critically, our deaths. Yet the control is merely an illusion because without the poisoning of the weapons, Samson wouldn’t be suicidal and Nicola wouldn’t have found her murderer. As readers, we are left victim to the weapons. Though Amis delivers a hopeful speech from Samson’s deathbed, sixty more minutes is all we should expect from the world. If catastrophe has been averted, the reader will not know. Samson’s story, our story, is already over. Like Samson, we are "pre-nuked and dead already" (LF 323).

Those sixty minutes pass more quickly in London Fields because time has literally quickened. The ‘End’ is minutes away and all life leading up to it expends itself at a rapid pace. Nowhere else in contemporary fiction is time’s passing as acutely felt as in Amis’s. A looming apocalypse is bleak enough but when hurtling toward it at record speed, the panic reaches hysteria. Time, usually an afterthought or a symbolic frame to conduct a discourse within safe boundaries, becomes a character in and of itself. It stalks everyone in London, altering the landscape and encroaching
upon the Crisis. Amis never lets the reader out of time’s keen sight. At the end of the novel, we feel as cathartic as Amis’s pseudo-nuclear exchange discussed in the previous pages. The reader is keenly aware of time’s burden. Ever conscious of saving time, living outside of time and keeping time, Amis finally lets time have its way. The eschatological effects of this hastened time are obvious as "time goes about its immemorial work of making everyone look and feel like shit" (26). Time in its natural element hastens aging, but "so late in the century, so late in the goddamned day" (1), time is short. The effect of Amis’s amplified time is twofold. While life’s frantic pace is escalated and the aging process of ourselves and the planet hastened, there is a sense of winding time in the opposite direction as well, a slowing to a stop. Regardless of how it happens—whether time finally impacts itself and can produce no more minutes, or whether time just runs out—the eschatology is unmistakable. London Fields isn’t merely the preeminent end of the century novel, but a novel of the other end, time.

Though the earth’s time is slowing down, the pace of life is accelerating. Even people "got old quick, like the planet" (69), which, we are constantly reminded, has reached the end of its twentieth century. It is as though we haven’t aged a lifespan, but two millennia along with Mother Earth. The responsibility for her rapid aging lies on us and to
share the burden, she has quickened our own aging process.
The amazing feature of life in 1999 London "was its incredible rapidity, with people growing up and getting old in the space of a week. Like the planet in the twentieth century with its fantastic coup de viuex" (36). Ironically, technology, which is designed primarily to save time, is responsible for hastening what would be the natural effect of time. Devices once meant for efficiency instead fill our lives with urgency; even "in traffic now, we are using up each other's time, each other's lives" (327). Keith's main cheating scam involves couriering items to fixit shops. Electronical appliances, kitchen gadgets, cleaning devices all meant to make life easier instead consume enormous amounts of life in order to be functional. These enhancements of modern life end up wasting precious time, not saving it.

If time itself is not actually speeded up in London Fields, our actions and responses are. Reading the novel is akin to watching a movie on fast-forward. Amis has the same number of pages to work with (and a looming deadline of November Fifth to accomplish his goal) but the action is frenetic. Samson is aware from the beginning that "real life is coming along so fast I can no longer delay" (3). Nor can Amis. The postmodern life in Amis's realism is characterized by a quickening of time and cheapening of experience because there is no longer time idly to savor life. London Fields
fits the description of Irving Howe's "mass society" in many ways, chief among them time's frantic pace. "Direct and firsthand experience seems to evade human beings, though the quantity of busyness keeps increasing and the number of events multiplies with bewildering speed" (Howe 25). Consumers like Keith Talent make amends for life's quick pace by speeding up their own. Samson acutely questions if "Keith's hormonal tumult [has] something to do with reduced life expectancy? Keith's life is now doubly compressed, condensed and therefore speeded-up" (135). The same actions and experiences usually packed into a life of 80 years are now taking place in a life of 40. Keith "could no longer bear to watch tv at the normal speed" (165), which drives him to record several hours and playback the highlights in fast-forward. Yet he fails to realize that "his life is on fast-fwd or pic-search" (135), because this near the End, there is no time to question one's actions. In this manner, time (an endangered species thanks to the nuclear threat) erodes morals and values as the weapons do. Without proper time to contemplate, like Hamlet, and to deliberate, humans are more apt to respond irrationally to situations which would once have been easily solved. For example, Kath's abuse of Kim Talent comes from her overworked, overwrought existence. Samson, quick to realize this, offers to take Kim for a few hours each day, to give Kath back her precious time to gather strength and perspective. In the end,
however, time wins again and Kath abandons Kim. There is no escape from time, as there is no escape from the bomb, in Amis’s fiction.

The weather, already unnatural, becomes supernatural in this speedy atmosphere:

Weather is certainly playing along...the clouds were moving with preternatural speed; you felt as if larger units of weather were passing overhead like meteorological discs on a chart- months, entire seasons sweeping by in less than 30 seconds. (116)

The weather disturbances attributed to the planet’s fury are compatible with time. Natural disasters occur at the rate of a few each year, but in 1999 London, multiple numbers of them occur daily. The November fifth eclipse lasts only 30 minutes or so, with brief moments of totality, but for Guy, hurtling through the skies in the Concorde, the eclipse is oddly prolonged because the plane is racing through the sky fast enough to keep up with the movement of the sun, the moon and the earth.

In the face of this rushed time, however, lies syzygy. Amis has done his research and proscribed for the planet an extensive cosmological experience where the planets align just enough to actually slow time:

Perihelion (when the earth is at its shortest distance from the sun), perigee (when the moon is at its shortest distance from the earth) and syzygy (when the earth, sun and moon are anyway most closely aligned). The confluence made gravity put on weight, slowing the planet’s spin and also slowing time, so that days and nights were now fractionally but measurably longer. (332)

The slightest change in length can hardly be noticed in the
midst of such activity, but the implication remains; time, like the weather, defies its absolute and precise conventions just enough to illustrate the planet's demise. Samson and Nicola could spend much of the book like Chicken Little, running amok and warning of the planet's end, yet Amis resists this and merely isolates their awareness to one moment as Samson watches Nicola watching tv for "news of the storms, the tides, the moon, the sun (the sky is falling!)" (433). The sky literally falls because the sun is sinking and the earth, precociously balanced in gravity's pull, is slowing and affecting time. Suddenly time is no longer an abstract but a weighty concern and when Samson question if "we feel time as a power, and doesn't it feel like gravity?" (297), we answer affirmatively. Though gravity is impossible to resist, it is possible to defy. Kim Talent, the infant heroine of London Fields, does so as she cautiously learns to walk. In refusing gravity, she also refuses to bow to time's harmful effect: "When she drinks from her bottle, she sounds like someone winding a watch...against her future time" (184). Kim is perhaps the only survivor because she is young and has much time stored up ahead of her, whereas Samson, Keith and Kath are already suffering from time. With an aged wisdom, we realize "time takes from you, with both hands. Things just disappear into it" (239), including years of unspent life.

The urgency aided by time's rapidity encourages the
slightest show of self-preservation in the novel. "It was all about time. Time was everywhere present, was massively operational...he saw how it strafed people, how it blew them away, how it wasted them" (172). The promise of nuclear destruction cannot entirely wipe away hope on the most basic level, hope that there will be time to make amends. Amis’s anti-nuclear rhetoric is apologetic and I would argue the same of his fiction. With a guilt not unlike Lady Macbeth’s, Samson wonders "if there’s time to wash all this blood off my hands" (467), which may be Amis’s purpose in dwelling on the nuclear question. To atone for the sins of the past, he must find the time to preserve the future, if there is a future:

> Everything is winding down, me, this, Mother Earth. More: the universe, apparently roomy enough, is heading for heat death. I hope there are parallel universes. I hope alternatives exist. Who stitched us up with all these design flaws? Entropy, time’s arrow--ravenous disorder. (239)

Yet Amis’s hope should not be confused with his reality. *London Fields* ends not with a nuclear disaster, but a suicide. Our narrator’s time in London Fields, and therefore ours, is over. Amis’s follow-up to *London Fields*, *Time’s Arrow* moves backwards in time. I fear Amis may have no concept of the future, at least not the post-nuclear future, because presumably, none will exist. Yet Amis concludes his novel with letters to that future. After the imagined nuclear exchange, we crave time; "even when we don’t have any, we all want time to do this, time to look for our
children and see how many we can find" (469). For Amis, that time is now.

In a nuclear world, life is cheapened and the quality of experience ceases to matter. Time, like ourselves, is an expendable commodity resulting in the frenetic pace of late twentieth-century life. This eschatology would not be present without weaponry, which has replaced religion as a primary motivator for human behavior. In this world of compromised morality, apocalyptic fantasies are easily bred and the unthinkable becomes plausible. However, central to this eschatology is the Einsteinian monster Amis warns of: the nuclear bomb. Because the result of this creation is so horrible, creation itself is called into question. Without such an invention, our world would be vastly different; but in the face of our nuclear arsenal, the capacity for life dissolves and regenerative urges disappear.
Chapter Four

Creation

A primary paradox of nuclear weapons lies in their destructive abilities. Created to bring peace, they can only make war. Aimed to deter, they can only destroy. By intimidating through threats of force, they force nations into an uneasy restraint of their threat. In this circular argument, it is easy to see why a weapon which shifts our focus to the end would also have us question the beginning. Contemporary man’s primary contribution to this age is nuclear weapons. Yet they have become the creation which supersedes all else. Because of their presence and powerful abilities, all other acts of creation become questionable. In this chapter, the creative powers present (or absent) in London Fields will be explained. Procreation is literally repudiated and artistic creation is compromised. I will also trace Amis’s extended metaphor to artistic creation. Not only are we unable to reproduce life, because all life is already compromised, we are unable to produce art. Postmodern theorists help me to explain the dilemma of the hyperreal, which I will then illustrate at work in London Fields. Finally, creation and truth become dispensable and disappear in a nuclear world. The inability to create art is
a casualty of the nuclear age which Amis incorporates into the narrative frame of London Fields. The search for 'truth' is inextricably connected to our compromised powers of creation. I will explain how this dichotomy affects all powers of creation, both life and art.

Much of the problem surrounding Nicola, God and our own hopes for the future during London Fields lies in creative powers. The cyclical nature of life, death and rebirth is interrupted by impending catastrophe, forcing Amis to hope for "alternatives" and "parallel universes" rather than renewed or continued life. If the Earth were able to regenerate after its "entanglement, its flirtation, after its thing with the strong force" (EM 48), there would be no cause to worry. But Amis is distinctly aware of the lasting effect of nuclear experimentation. "The Immortal" (from Einstein's Monsters) details a nuclear exchange in 2045 with scarcely a survivor and a permanently altered planet. Nicola lectures about the Bikini Atoll in London Fields, "those coral lagoons will be contaminated for hundreds of years" (LF 128). Even Samson admits, "it isn't worth saving" (463). Where does this leave us? In classical tradition, the tragedy is followed by a denouement, a period of recovery and enlightenment. In an apocalypse, there is no such time and no power to recreate anew.

The literal creative power is dead in London Fields, averted, turned inward and destroyed. Amis repeatedly
comments on "the death of love," originally as Nicola’s idea and then as an obsession for Samson. "The Death of Love" was even a potential title for the novel, according to the author’s note. Yet the death of love seems a fancy term for the death of creation. Love usually creates, yet in the love-conscious novel, love and creation are both absent. Nicola, for instance, has had seven abortions and her "appearance makes no mention of babies. All she has to say on that subject is Watertight Contraception" (284). Though she is a supreme sexual manipulator, she scarcely has intercourse in the novel as she prefers sodomy "in the place whence no babies came" (68). We are told that "her stomach wall hurt and weighed heavily, she felt occasional drags and brakings of nausea" (264) but the symptoms of pregnancy don’t mean Nicola is creating a life, they are a result of her defiance of such an action. Conscious avoidance of procreation fits her plan for self destruction. In Nicola and the planet, there is no room for new life.

Reproductivity, with or without the Crisis, is already in jeopardy. Amis doesn’t resort to science-fiction genre style baby farms and fertility clinics (note that most apocalyptic scenarios are inimitably concerned with reproduction) but is aware of the already common hazards of reproduction. Kath Talent has a problem with her "tubes" and in the hysteria of the Crisis and eclipse, she is rushed to the hospital, "the ambulance service having been
discontinued in their area for the foreseeable future" (393). Thus, there is no help or aid to creation, an already disposed of ability. Whether her tube troubles are from Keith’s sexually transmitted diseases or merely a symptom of the twentieth century is left ambiguous. But if Keith’s behavior stems from a lack of moral concern for the future, the nuclear century is still to blame. Hope and Guy Clinch spent years attempting to conceive Marmaduke, with disastrous results. Hope’s sister, Lizzyboo, famous for her "SSC’s" (secondary sexual characteristics) is the only truly childless woman in the book. Finally, the President’s wife, Faith, is scheduled for uterine surgery on November Fifth. The allegory is clear when Faith and Hope are having trouble reproducing, creation may as well be dead.

Oddly, two babies are found in London Fields, Kim and Marmaduke. Yet Kim suffers from failure to thrive and Marmaduke’s mother is so traumatized by his presence that she vows never to conceive again. His parents’ “last attempt at lovemaking had featured the pill, the coil, the cap, and three condoms, plus more or less immediate coitus interruptus” (88). The consistent message is that it is better not to create. Samson’s ex-lover is also pregnant and while he experiences brief joy at possible fatherhood, by the end of the novel, she, too, has an abortion. The fear of creation can be blamed on the nuclear presence. "First you fuck around with the way you look (turn yourself into a bomb
site or a protest poster), then, with that accomplished, you start to fuck around with the way your babies look" (282). The effect of nuclear weapons on our physical appearance is literally evident in altered strains of DNA, deformed babies and infertility. Creation cannot withstand constant tampering and eventually resists and mutates. If the power to create is not lost entirely, it is reformed as the power to destruct. Ideally, Nicola-the-vixen with little respect for life would be barren but Amis is much more effective in rendering her resistant to the natural procreative urge. Nuclear weapons don’t sterilize, but they do question the reasoning behind further creation. They have precedence as the ultimate creation and yet, their power lies in destruction.

Amis is most successful when he extends the theme of troubled creation to the artistic process. Not only is it dangerous to bring forth new life into a nuclear world; it is unwise to attempt artistic creativity as well. Amis has found a theme he calls "the ultimate postmodern joke," the author unable to create. He is exempt from this, of course. In fact, in Money, the only person capable of writing anything worthy is the character of Martin Amis. Yet Amis questions this process in London Fields, a fiction disguised as the truth.

In London Fields, Samson is strictly a journalist attempting to chronicle the reality found in Nicola's
diaries. But though he writes under the auspice of fiction, we are reminded many times that, as far as Samson is concerned, he is writing reality. Amis’s latest effort, The Information, presents Richard Tull, a writer who cannot finish a novel, much less give one a name. The power of creation is consistently stifled and constipated in Amis’s work. Rather than isolating his anti-creation message to the stereotype of women giving birth, Amis applies it to the artistic realm, with revealing commentary on the nature of the creative process.

The first words of London Fields claim "this is a true story." But this is a self conscious fiction, aware it is a fiction, cognizant of its having been made up. Still, Samson insists that "real life is coming along so fast that I can no longer delay" (3). Over a dozen times, we are reminded "this is really happening" (10). Nicola criticizes Samson’s failed creative approach, knowing the powers of creation (love) are dead. "Can’t you make anything up? All this literalism, you know, it’s the death of love" (185).

The complex narrative frame of London Fields surrounds the truth in elaborate frame. Amis writes of Samson who writes from secondhand information he gleans from everyone else. While this is an artistic success, where is the truth in the multiplicity of authors? Samson’s writing isn’t genuine either; he has stolen Nicola’s diaries and proceeds to interview everyone else involved to get as many versions
of the 'truth' as possible for his own fictitious narrative. At one point, he freely admits, "Keith's version (of events) just couldn't be trusted for a second longer" (59). Samson, like Amis, is a writer wholly concerned with the truth. "I must have the truth" (62), he insists. So must Amis, but the truth is difficult to locate. Twice, Samson claims he is a "reliable narrator" (78, 162). Clearly, the reader is meant to trust Samson, in part because we are presented with multiple realities. The same events are chronicled in differing chapters from different points of view and from this deluge of information, the reader assembles a separate version of the 'facts.' In this approach, truth is necessarily subjective because no two characters share the same reality. Ultimately, Samson cannot be trusted because of minor inconsistencies and without a solid chronicle of events to judge against, Samson is the closest narrator to reality, and his reality is transcribed into art.¹

Postmodern critic Jean Baudrillard has renamed all life (or reality) as hyperreal. Life is always already reproduced and "art is everywhere since artifice is at the heart of reality" (188). Thus, artifice becomes reality because there is no objective standard for comparison. If all is art or text, as London Fields, the reality lies in the art:

Art is dead, not only because its critical transcendence is gone, but because reality itself, entirely impregnated by an aesthetic which is inseparable from its own structure, has been confused with its own image. Reality no longer has the time to take on the appearance of reality. (188)
The problem, then, lies not with the death of art, but the death of reality. The two have merged, leaving neither a pure representation of its former self.

In all of London Fields, the synthetic, veiled under artifice, replaces the genuine. Nicola’s scheme to procure money from Guy puts her in the role of an actress. Samson’s chronicle of Nicola’s last days is allegedly fictive. Keith Talent, the cheat Nicola supports with Guy’s money, thrives on pornography and television yet is incapable of dealing with genuine interaction. Artifice is preferred to real life, perhaps because real life has been tainted by the ever present Bomb. Reality has fractured itself and surfaces only to be recreated in artificial forms:

If art no longer reflects life, it is not because it seeks to change the world rather than mimic it, but because there is in truth nothing to be reflected, no reality which is not itself already image, spectacle, simulacrum, gratuitous fiction. (Eagleton 152)

Amis cannot be a realist, in this sense, but a hyperrealist, recreating postmodern reality which is, in itself, a fiction. "But that’s art. Always the simulacrum, never the real thing" (LF 131). Samson’s role and Amis’s are therefore compatible. When Samson writes, "it’s just occurred to me; people are going to imagine that I actually sat down and made this stuff up" (302), we freely associate with Amis, the responsible party. Indeed, Samson’s fiction merged into Amis’s reality after the book was published. Samson claims, "I don’t think my book is really prizewinning material"
(302), and Amis’s *London Fields* was passed over for Britain’s prestigious Booker Prize. Yet while Samson believes "the panel might feel differently if they knew it were true" (302), two women on the Booker panel were reportedly offended by Amis’s version of twentieth-century realism. Sadly, even Amis’s fictional narrators aren’t free from self-aggrandizing concerns. Samson’s fictional horror with the world stems directly from Amis’s reality. "You know what the worst thing about everything is? About you. About the whole story. About the world. About death. This: its really happening" (436). In the dichotomy of *London Fields*, Amis is writing the truth. If "reality is behaving unimprovably" (39), why bother with artistic representations?

All Amis’s characters are prey to artistic subjectivity, through Samson’s narrative or their own actions. Specifically, Nicola deliberately represents herself differently to all three men. To Keith, she is a generous femme fatale; to Samson, a tragic figure; to Guy, a virginal ingenue. She is also an actress either in short pornographic videos she makes for Keith, or in carefully arranging herself for each visit, or for dates with Guy. Nicola, at least, is aware she is merely playing a part, becoming art. She is the most successful artist because "as for artistic talent, as for the imaginative patterning of life, Nicola wins. She outwrites us all" (43). Those who
suffer in *London Fields*, Keith and Guy, are inept creators, unaware of their artistic status.

Keith, though entrenched in the world of subjectivity, doesn’t realize his status because subjectivity is all he knows. "It was the world of TV that told him what the world was" (55). If it doesn’t appear on TV or in the cheap tabloids he reads, it is not a part of Keith’s reality. Keith’s own truths are composed primarily of fictions. Not surprisingly, Keith’s goal in life is to get *himself* on TV. Yet when the opportunity presents itself, he stages a pseudo-life for the cameras, fictionally representing himself as Nicola’s lover instead of letting the TV cameras see his real flat, wife and child. Even TV is reproduced for Keith, the modern consumer. Busy at the pub all day, he videotapes hours of television to run through in fast forward at the end of a day. The hyperreal television is reproduced again in an artificial form, trickling down only a third or fourth of inherent reality. For Keith, this is enough.

Keith’s problem with false mediums occurs, in fact, when he tries to blend the real and the artifice. Though Nicola ponders telling him, "film Keith...all that not real" (190), I doubt Keith would believe her. Her firmly believes Nicola’s videos are "the real thing" (268). Keith frequently masturbates to these videos, yet when Nicola propositions him in the flesh, he becomes impotent. "He was almost
sickened by this collision or swirl of vying realities the 
woman on the couch whose hair he could smell, and the girl  
inside the television, the girl on tape" (175). Keith is  
impotent, a creative failure, because the situation is real. 
Shrewd Nicola explains it as "a little difficulty switching 
from one medium to another" (429), but Keith is also another 
victim of the anti-creation forces at work in London Fields.

Critics have blasted Amis for his own self-importance, 
evident in these verbal trickeries and elaborate narrative 
frames. Without the self-conscious cleverness of turning a phrase, they claim Amis would be a much more effective satirist. The act of writing is held to an elevated standard, something only gods and foolish mortals dare do, but Amis is, above all, in awe of creative ability. Amis wonders "how do writers dare do what they do? It seems to me that writing brings trouble with it, moral trouble, unexamined trouble, even to the best" (117). Amis feels a moral obligation to write about nuclear weapons, an unpopular subject which brings with it moral trouble, yet the risk is overshadowed by the reward. Writing on heavy moral ground involves such risks but Amis (and Samson) never retreat from weighty concerns.

Samson continually berates himself for stealing art from life and never forgets his own lack of creative prowess: "I sat there wondering why I just can't do it, why I just can't write, why I just can't make anything up" (25).
The postmodern joke is that one cannot, by definition, be a writer without having written something. A writer fails to exist without his product, thus, the text becomes his definition. "Nothing means anything unless I write it down" (436) just as the writer means nothing until he has written.

The final pages offer a conclusive philosophy of truth, art and reality, just in case the message was missed in the prior 400+ pages. 'MA' the mysterious London theater figure, Mark Asprey, whose apartment Samson has leased (and who also writes under the pseudonym Marius Appleby) writes in a note, "It doesn't matter what anyone writes anymore. The time for it mattering has passed. The truth doesn't matter anymore and is not wanted" (452). Ironically, Samson, the scrupulous journalist, has just written a fiction of what is supposedly truth. Whereas once authors went to extreme to reveal truth, now artifice is prominent and avoiding, disguising or masking truth is more palatable to MA. The connection with Amis is too obvious, as Amis's author's notes are always signed 'MA' and he frequently appears in his own fictions. Yet MA is as big a cheat as anyone else in London Fields, writing bad fiction under aliases and covertly seeing Nicola. When Samson asks MA, "you didn't set me up did you?" (468), the reader must ask the same of Amis.

At book's end, Samson enters into his own text, instead of writing about what is happening to Nicola, he becomes one of the players. One the eve of 'Horrorday' (November 5th) he
is entrenched in the apartment, writing down reality as fast as it is happening. Yet to get to the end, he must leave the typewriter and see what happens to Nicola for himself, as she won’t be returning to give him her version of events. Unable to mask himself behind artifice, Samson must participate in the narrative. In this sense, art fails because eventually, one must find a reality to reproduce. "Imagination failed" (466) Samson as much as it fails us. His last acts are destruction, not creation. After Samson murders Nicola, he writes only letters. These are still fictive, though less so than a narrative chapter, and finally, he takes his own life. The powers of destruction triumph over creation, perhaps because the value of creation has been lessened. "I feel seamless and insubstantial," Samson says, "like a creation. As if someone made me up, for money. And I don’t care" (470). Nicola’s life has "always felt like a story" (118), precisely because it is a story and Samson’s "seamless and insubstantial" end has cheapened creation beyond redemption. In Amis’s world, it is not merely our morals which are weakened, our own inherent ability to create becomes the vehicle for our destruction. Because we live in the nuclear world, creation carries with it the taint of destruction. All which was once used to bring forth life instead promise death. Rather than attempting her "Plan B" (to live), Nicola creates a scenario for her death just as Samson creates a narrative for his.
The powers of creation are dead and Amis, our creator, merges the once clear line between life and art, truth and fiction, to illustrate the dangers of creation. In this diseased landscape, where art fails to thrive and reality is unimprovable, the original creator, the planet, succumbs to her own death instinct. As Nicola and Samson carefully plan their demise, the world is creating a vehicle for our own mass destruction.
Notes

1. For specific descriptions of Samson’s inconsistencies, see Mick Imlah’s review of London Fields in the Times Literary Supplement. The review discredits both Amis and Samson for artistic ambiguity.
Chapter Five
The Punishing Planet

The destructive power of nuclear weapons would not be complete without sacrificing our own origin: the planet. The nuclear taint extends deep into the earth’s core and as a result, turns our once-fertile homeland, traditionally thought of as our Mother, into a figure mad for revenge. In this chapter, I will describe Amis’s contaminated earth which is poised for destruction. Examination of Nicola Six as an allegory of the planet will help illustrate the devastation Amis describes. Later in the chapter, I will explain how Amis puts the Gaia hypothesis to work when turning our planet from ‘murderee’ to murderer.

Though London Fields is rumored to be set in 1999¹, the millennium is not the only event causing apocalyptic fantasies. The planet, worn out from nuclear testing and weakened from the abuse of mankind, is quitting. Weather patterns are out of sync, suns and moons eclipse and fall, and winds, rain and storms continually pummel Amis’s landscapes. In the dichotomy between creation and destruction lies Mother Nature, ready to self-destruct. Earth, too, is not immune to the nuclear force. Besides the looming promise of eventual self annihilation, humanity must
face the fact that terra firma is no longer beneath their feet and the skies above their head CAN fall. Yet the blame for the planet’s breakdown lies with the same Einsteinian monsters held responsible for nuclear weapons ourselves. Amis is not a conscious environmentalist; most of his characters will not highlight the benefits of recycling and conservation. He is, however, aware of our imprint upon the earth and the lasting damage we inflict daily.

Prior to London Fields, Amis’s planet is weakened, but not homicidal. The planet "gets older. The world has seen and done it all. Boy is it beat. It’s suicidal" (EM 47). It is seeking an end to the late twentieth-century disease it has contracted. "Should the Earth enter turnaround tomorrow, nuke out, commit suicide" (Money 250), we should not be surprised. Yet the idea of global extinction by choice is as damaging as the presence of nuclear weapons. While weapons require man’s involvement to exterminate civilization, the Earth is a force unto itself and could, given the centuries of man’s imposition, implode at any given moment. Environmental hysteria supports Amis’s theme of inimitable disaster and the psychological impact of a suicidal planet is no less threatening than nuclear war. Our morals are still compromised, our lives still cheapened because of the knowledge they could end immediately. Prior to the nuclear age, millennia were greeted with a hysteria known as millennialism: group frenzy happily awaiting the end of
the world through environmental disaster brought about by God’s wrath. At the end of the twentieth-century where nuclear disaster could occur at any time, coupled with millenarianism, group psychosis is heightened and a suicidal planet seems perfectly possible.\(^2\) To cure the twentieth-century disease, "the planet needed a couple of months in bed. But it wouldn’t get them--it wouldn’t ever get them" (LF 106). Instead, the exhausted earth responds with a vengeance. The end of Money warns, "In the best, the freest, the richest of latitudes, its still a tough globe. If you ever go to Earth--watch out" (361), because Mother Earth is no longer just suicidal, she’s plotting revenge.

Amis uses the allegory of Nicola Six to further illustrate the world’s wicked demise. The glee with which Nicola ruins many men’s lives is not unlike the planet’s plans for mass destruction. Nicola is unrepentant in planning her own disaster, as the earth is in planning ours. When Nicola is not being sexually categorized, she is repeatedly compared to two forces: the planet and nuclear weapons. Because of her kinship with Enola Gay, the reader identifies her with weaponry. Though hurtling toward her own death (like the planet) she is destroying those who come into contact with her (like a weapon). She possesses a kiss which is "a weapon of the exponential kind...because it was almost unusably powerful" (LF 187) yet she does use it. Evidence for Nicola-as-Ravaged-Planet is ultimately stronger
than Nicola-as-Nuclear-Bomb. Though Nicola admittedly needs nuclear weapons, she also despises them. "If you got the world's most talented shits and cruelty experts together, they couldn't come up with anything worse than Bikini," she says, referring to the atomic tests on the South Pacific atoll. "And how do we commemorate the crime...certain women go about wearing this trash. Its very twentieth-century, don't you think?" (127). If critics would look at Nicola in context, rather than reducing her to a set of images, they would have to admit that like the earth, she radiates "feminine shockwaves...such intensity, poised and cocked, and ready to go either way" (61). She is wiser than all the men in the novel, yet powerless to avert her own destruction. She, like the planet, has had enough.

As an allegory of the late twentieth-century earth, Nicola displays its ravages completely. "Imagine the atomic cloud as an inverted phallus, and Nicola's loins as ground zero" (195). The Bomb is successful as a sexual image because Nicola is entirely believable as a woman showing the effects of nuclear testing upon the earth. Anti-nuclear activists have adopted sexual rhetoric for their own cause. Nuclear development is commonly referred to as "the rape of the earth" and Nicola has suffered much mining and detonation in her sexual experience. She looks as though "she'd just had fifteen lovers all at once, or fifteen periods" (61). The exhaustive efforts of creation are no
less damaging than a gang rape, as both the earth and Nicola reflect. Primarily, Nicola represents use and contamination. "Her body," like the planet, "had after all been recklessly adored, every inch of it" (61). Adoration is not preservation, however, and through discovery and use, the merits of what was once admirable have disappeared. It would not be extreme to imagine Nicola as a beloved national park which has endured years of overuse and thus, exploitation and abuse. At times, Nicola alternately fancies herself as a black hole, or as that beyond the black hole, the as yet undiscovered parallel universe. Most often, though, she is an earthly mortal intent on her death. On the eve of it, "she had about her then the thing of hers that touched me most; as if she were surrounded, on every side, by tiny multitudes of clever enemies" (436), like the planet, surrounded on every side by the painful intrusion of nuclear weapons. Nicola freely identifies with earth, humankind’s symbolic womb.

Nicola also fantasizes about God, her utopia-touting ex. "God said he would fix it so she lived forever. Nicola told him to get lost" (121-122). If Earth cannot live forever, neither can Nicola. Her desire is to be above God (like the weapons) and a more powerful, tangible force in the cosmos. Though God warned Nicola "that if she didn’t come across at least one more time, He’d wash His hands of the whole planet," she is undeniably more powerful. "She
told Him to fuck off" (133). God is disposable to Nicola, herself more threatening, important and persuasive. "I am beyond God," she declares, "I am the motionless Cause" (133), the enormous power inherent in the earth’s natural force.

The two heroines fates are inextricably connected. If the abused planet is an allegory of humanity, Nicola—with her precognitive flashes and Bikini Islands lectures—reminds us how we are all connected. "You got old quick, like the planet" (69). The planet, like Nicola, is a murder victim. Unlike Nicola, the planet knows who is responsible for her murder: mankind. The planet and she, we are told, sympathize with one another. In Amis’s world, victims are referred to as "murderees" in acknowledgement of their active role in planning their deaths; Mother Earth may well be a murderee.

The natural world the modernists felt was being so encroached upon has nearly disappeared in Amis’s postmodern fiction. The only stretches of green grass and blue skies are located in London Fields, the physical place, yet it is also here where Samson Young developed his synergism, where he "bought the farm." Order, once prevalent in nature, has fled only to be replaced by a destructive chaos. Mother Earth becomes God and, like the flood designed to wipe away one creation and begin anew, the planet seems poised to perform a similar act of repentance for a creation gone bad.
Though the earth and mankind both suffer from the same diseases, mankind has plagued the earth, while heretofore the planet has responded gently. Natural disasters are a thing of the past in the twentieth century, but they abound in London Fields, where Mother Nature finally exacts revenge.

The cause of Mother Earth’s poor condition is strictly man’s impact on her. Though Amis is concerned with time’s passage, the twentieth-century has been uniquely difficult for the planet, mainly due to man’s technological ‘advances’ in this century, preeminent among them, nuclear weapons:

Imagine the terrestrial timespan as an outstretched arm a single swipe of an emery board, across the nail of the third finger, erases human history. We haven’t been around for very long. And we’ve turned the Earth’s hair white. She seemed to have eternal youth but now she’s aging awful fast, like an addict, like a waxless candle. Jesus, have you seen her recently? We used to live and die without any sense of the planet getting older, living and dying. We used to live outside history. But now we’re coterminous. (196-197)

With a nostalgia for the prehistoric past, Amis blames modern man for not only self destruction, but the ravaging of the earth. The problem lies with our persistent attempts to imitate creation, thus interfering with natural order. "We can’t stop. She can’t stop" (408), "you can’t stop people once they start creating" (1). Our creations are solely to blame. The regret comes too late for the planet, yet Amis damn us without pardon:

Imagine the planet as a human face—a man’s face, because men did it...the face beneath is saying I know I shouldn’t have tried that stuff. I know I shouldn’t
have messed with all that stuff. I really want to change and straighten out but I think I went and left it a little too late. I get an awful feeling this is stuff you can't recover from. Look what it's done to me. (369-370)

The effects are visible on the planet and mankind. Whereas man is dependent on the planet, the planet seems to have realized she may function much better without a nuclear populus.

Lest Amis be dismissed as a tree-hugging proselytizer, he specifies man's destruction of the planet which, in turn, is also responsible for the poor quality of our own lives. When we destroy the earth, we devalue our existence upon it—through air, water and noise pollution, cancer-causing agents and radioactivity. Amis may be assuming the burden of late twentieth-century man, but it is only to preserve and explain the actions of his fathers to his children:

We suspected that sacrifices might have to be made, later, for all the wonderful times we had with our spray cans and junk food packaging. We knew there'd be a price. Admittedly, to you, the destruction of the ozone layer looks a bit steep. But don't forget how good it was for us our tangy armpits, our piping hamburgers. Though maybe we could have got by with roll-ons and styrofoam.... (156)

The threat of global devastation does not loom in the distance in London Fields, it already exists. Rather than waiting for the effects of our environmentally destructive actions, Amis introduces them into the present. Cancer abounds because the sun is sinking, ever so close to the earth and at a rapid degree. Guy and Hope are forced to worry about the effects of breathing outdoors for any length
of time. Marmaduke "needs some fresh air...we all do, but there isn’t any" (156). That which has been previously taken for granted is no longer assured. Air must be purified of nitrates, water filtered, earth untouched. The planet is poisoned and, in turn, is poisoning us.

The Gaia hypothesis explains how Earth is a living organism, where all life is connected in one sympathetic ecosystem. If one specific organism were to disrupt the natural forces, the other organisms would respond in kind. Since man’s chemically dependent contemporary lifestyle has left a scar on the earth, the earth must respond. Nuclear weapons, testing and toxic waste will permeate the earth with radioactivity for hundreds of thousands of years. The earth has already been impacted beyond redemption, but in Amis’s world, she has enough strength left to take mankind with her. For the Earth, "can-do was nothing compared to already done" (69). The sheer force of the earth, the original model of creative energy, is inverted in London Fields, using the energy of natural forces for destruction: "We have all known days of sun and storm that make us feel what it is to live on a planet. But the recent convulsions have taken this further. They make us feel what it is to live in a solar system, a galaxy...a universe" (43). Earth’s power can no longer be described in familiar earthbound terms because the planet’s actions have become unearthly. For metaphor, Amis calls upon the universe. The disasters in
London Fields come from a solar system as tainted as the earth and respond with equal violence. Worse yet is that catastrophic weather is foreign to our consciousness. Weather is usually relegated to background, scenery and invoked for thematic concerns. But Amis’s weather is both deliberately bizarre and deadly. "The weather has a new number, or better say, a new angle... its not a good one. It will just make everything worse. The weather shouldn’t really be doing this" (241) but it persists. On November fifth, the novel’s climax, a lunar eclipse blocks out the sun, imitating a nuclear winter, however briefly:

The cold, the eclipsed wind, the silenced pigeons. Four hundred miles across, the point of a dark cone of shadow was heading towards him at two thousand miles per hour. Next came the presentiment of change, like the arrival of weatherfront or thunderhead, with the light glimmering—but getting fierier. Then a shade being drawn across the sky. Totality. (444)

As eclipses terrified our primal ancestors, they bring the same terror today through their ability to illustrate the devastation of nuclear winter. After a nuclear explosion, the dust and debris would travel to the atmosphere and hover like a giant cloud, blocking the sun’s light and heat for years. The sun itself is sinking because the planets are out of alignment; the sun’s effect is now much like the warmth and destruction of a bomb. The horror is that we know "the sun shouldn’t be doing this... coming in low at us like this, filling windows and windscreens with rosy wreaths of dust" (365). The sun is aimed precisely at the planet. If the
weapons themselves don’t wipe out civilization, the universe will.

Earth, the original storage house for nuclear energy (recall that atomic bombs are merely natural forces escalated and harnessed), resorts to the weaponry of natural disaster to mete out its revenge. Great civilizations have fallen prey to the earth, buried under volcanoes (Pompeii), earthquakes, tidal waves (Crete), floods and shifting continental plates. The contemporary society of London Fields is not immune but this natural disaster is a conspiracy of meteorological proportions. So altered is the landscape of London Fields that "it was hard to believe that the weather had until quite recently been a synonym for small talk. Because nowadays the weather was big talk. The weather made headlines all over the world. Every day" (331). The raging planet carries as much menace as any warhead and should be treated as such an enemy. Newscasts "did good to put the weather reports on late at night, after the children have supposedly gone to bed. X-rated weather reports" (369) which are unnatural and therefore, heinous. The weather, previously harmless and at worst, inconvenient, has become the weapon of choice for Mother Earth. The winds "tear through the city, they tear through the island, as if softening it up for an exponentially greater violence. In the last week, the winds have killed 19 people and 33 million trees" (43). Casualties of war are easily counted,
but how do we calculate those dead at the hands of the universe? "Meteorologists were the new war correspondents" (332), tabulating cyclones, hurricanes and "superatmospheric...supermeteorological" (14) weather. "The cyclones and ball lightning in Yugoslavia and Northern Italy had even made it onto the pages of Keith’s tabloid" (103). Natural disasters, usually isolated to a region or hemisphere, plague the entire earth at the end of the millennium. Like the Great Flood of literary tradition, in London Fields "it was raining all over the world. The biosphere was raining" (193). Though the primary enemy of life is the nuclear presence, "in these days of gigawatt thunderstorms, multi-megaton hurricanes and billion acre bush fires, it was easy to forget there were man-made devices" (276) promising "death for everybody, by hemlock or hardware" (297). The weather’s strange behavior can be blamed indirectly on the nuclear presence. In the 1950’s, when atomic testing first caught public attention, various weather disturbances were initially attributed to the nuclear blasts.³ Ironically, the earth which has been responsible for providing and sustaining life has become a killer. The father figures held responsible for nuclear development can no longer be trusted, and now the mother figure of the earth has become an enemy. In this dysfunctional universe, where the children are left poisoned and primed for destruction by their universal parents, Amis
must finally admit, "the planet was insane" (305).

Whether the planet is successful or not, its poison has rendered it uninhabitable. The quality of life has been permanently downscaled, in part due to the nuclear presence, in part because the earth has run out of enrichment: "The human race has declassed itself" (EM 48). Conscious of all life on the planet, Amis illustrates the waste of the earth not only with man, whose destruction lies in his own hands, but with the defenseless, animals and children.

The birds of New York have more or less given up the ghost, and who can blame them? They have been processed by Manhattan and the twentieth-century...declassed, they have slipped several links in the chain of being. (Money 188)

Ordinary pigeons, once lovebirds, typically representative of trash and waste in modern times, "have definitely seen better days. Not so long ago they were drawing Venus’ chariot" (LF 101). "Christ, even the dog looked declassed. Even the dog was meant for better things" (265). Man’s best friend sinks with him because even "dogs aren’t living as long as they used to" (97). Amis’s universal taint includes all life forms on the planet, even the smallest, since he is certain all life has been affected by the nuclear presence: "There was the squirrel, leaning on a tree stump and retching apologetically" (156). Marmaduke, witness to the squirrel, voices Amis’s concern with our declassed states, "he showed no interest in animals except as new things to injure or get injured by" (156). In an armed world, all life
becomes something to injure (or declass) or be injured by. The metaphor of first strikes and deterrence is complete. Man and his weapons have stricken the earth and she and her life forms, especially the weak, have begun to retaliate.

Mother Earth’s revenge is not an isolated incident. The nuclear presence of the past five decades has corrupted our home, inside and out. Amis is adept at environmentalism; without overt politicizing, he manages to lay the blame for earth’s rapid demise at the feet of mankind, inventor of nuclear weapons. By giving the earth the role of the punisher, he is subverting stereotypical gender roles. Mother Earth has been driven insane by our nuclear fathers. In this critique of the earth, Amis participates in traditional feminist rhetoric and aligns himself with a philosophy traditionally viewed in opposition to him: feminism.
Notes

1. In interviews, Amis has said London Fields is set in 1999. However, there is no specific reference to the year in the text. This ambiguity works to Amis's advantage as the end of the century panic can apply to the entire decade prior to the next millennium.

1. Michael Barkun's Disaster and the Millennium examines millenarianism in a depth impossible to replicate here. Cults, such as Jim Jones' Jonestown and David Koresh's Davidians, are prime examples of the apocalypse being used to manipulate the masses. Turn of the century disasters are present at the end of nearly every century and are heightened, of course, during a millennium.

3. Weart's Nuclear Fear describes the connection between weather and weaponry in detail. Crop failures, global warming and unusual storm activity has been blamed on the results of atomic testing by a paranoid populus, though admittedly these accusations occur less frequently than in the 50's when nuclear tests were an unfamiliar new phenomenon.
Chapter Six
Fathers and Feminism

Amis’s nuclear theme, though groundbreaking, is not without connections to critical frameworks. Its urgency is contemporary but as such, it is an outgrowth of other schools of thought, notably feminism. In this chapter I will refute Adam Mars-Jones’ unnecessarily harsh criticism of Amis as an feminist-hostile opportunist. I will explain how his pacifism is linked to feminism and examine his framing of the nuclear question in paternal imagery. Nicola Six must also be considered to refute criticism of Amis as a misogynist as Nicola is the key to London Fields as a feminist text. Finally, I hope to establish that though Amis may not be writing as a feminist, he is also not opposed to feminism, as traditional criticism of his works would have us believe.

When questioned directly, Amis scoffs at accusations of his own misogyny. He may write accurate portrayals of misogynists, but this makes him a skilled writer, not a woman hater. Because the narrative voice is so strong in his work, and the misogynist characters so minor, Amis links himself with the former, not the latter. Though Amis is not a feminist, his work is compatible with feminist thought. In
his 1990 pamphlet, *Venus Envy*, Adam Mars-Jones attempts to discredit Amis's nuclear sympathies as "conspicuously male" (8). For Mars-Jones, anti-nuclearism is an excuse, a way to avoid more encompassing critical stances. "By striking first," with a pacifist stance, "[Amis] can cut the supply lines between the nuclear issue and other issues he doesn't want to engage with feminism and environmentalism, half of humanity and the whole of its home" (17). Yet Amis's anti-nuclear philosophy is firmly rooted in these issues. His blame for nuclear world prominence lies with father figures and redemption is to be found in mothers. This is an essentialist feminist stance, but while Mars-Jones argues that Amis privileges fatherhood, I would note that Amis identifies the absurdity of patriarchal behavior.

Patriarchal world regimes have brought about the Cold War and its leftover party favors, a nuclear arsenal "with four tons of TNT equivalent for every human being on the planet," according to Amis. It is this way of thinking, created and established by our fathers, which has ruined the twentieth-century. Amis's anti-nuclear stance is not anti-feminism, nor is it a strategy to avoid dealing with feminism; it is instead a violent repudiation of the father and embracing of the mother (woman and earth) in order to repair failed patriarchal ways.

Mars-Jones's attack primarily concerns itself with *Einstein's Monsters*. Because his evidence is gleaned from
the nonfiction essay, "Thinkability," my refutation must come from nonfiction as well. In his 1987 essay "Nuke City," Martin Amis travels to Washington D.C. to investigate the military industrial complex responsible for perpetuating nuclear defense systems. His first observation intersects anti-nuclear thought with feminism. In the nuclear defense industry, "there are no women" (99). The implication is that women would not participate in the nuclear debate, would not consider destruction on such a wide scale. Thus the blame lies firmly with men. Mars-Jones claims Amis's "anti-nuclearism is actually a substitute for feminism, performing the same rhetorical function of disengaging him from human destructiveness" (18). If this is the case, why does Amis begin and end his nuclear debates with images of fathers, mothers and children? The prevailing allegory is that the fathers have ruined the world for their children, and the mothers have suffered irredeemably. "In this debate, we are all arguing with our fathers" (EM 13), "but it is about our children" (Esquire 111).

If London Fields had been written by a woman, its anti-nuclearism and environmental sympathies would have been classified (and perhaps dismissed) as undoubtedly feminist. But because London Fields is authored by Amis, who both personally and professionally seems doomed to be forever typecast as the bad boy of letters, the message is convoluted. The key to understanding London Fields as a
potentially feminist text is the ambiguous Nicola Six, who lies at the heart of the feminist debate. Because the novel is a quest for her murderer, the reader knows her death will be the climax. No one seeks death more actively than Nicola yet she cannot be dismissed as a tragic, suicidal figure. In attempts to define her and account for her role in the novel, Nicola has inspired the wrath of female reviewers and the confusion of literary critics. Even Samson, in his chronicles, has trouble accurately portraying her as a femme fatale, a Vixen, a host of sexist epithets. Critics universally laud her position as a symbolic figure, with differing results. "She is meant to be the opposite to the Eternal feminine, the Earth Goddess" (Szamuely 47). "Nicola is an almost Satanic figure" (Kroll 62). Nicola is "an entirely sexual and heartless creature" (Packer 565). In his review of the novel, Luc Sante comes closest to Nicola's truth. "She is the embodiment of every male fear about women" (46) yet Sante then unfairly accuses Amis of using Nicola to "bait feminists." Widely rumored as a contender for Britain's 1989 Booker Prize, London Fields was allegedly rejected due to the objections of two female judges, who no doubt had difficulty with Amis's portrayal of women, including Nicola. Amis has repeatedly disavowed any misogynistic leanings in the novel and is reportedly "horrified" by such criticism. In the resulting controversy, Nicola has been completely misunderstood.
The attention granted Nicola, both positive and negative, may explain her important stature in the novel. She possesses strength, power, self containment and compassion in necessary moments. "Far from being a misogynist, [Amis] is a romantic idealist who adores women; he sees them as having a decisive power that is the emotional equivalent of nuclear energy" (Kroll 62). Though sexual, Nicola resists existing primarily as a sex object because she is always the aggressor. Frequent criticism identifies Nicola as purely male fantasy but this view conspicuously overlooks the fact that Nicola knows history, delivers anti-atomic lectures and is more literate than any other character. Her self-destructiveness is not a result of her gender, as the trait is shared by many men in the novel. She is neither silenced nor controlled by men and her absence of stereotypically feminine traits should strengthen her cause among women rather than bringing condemnation. Critics who dismiss Nicola as a sex object are themselves objectifying her and blaming Amis.

It is important to note that Nicola delivers the majority of anti-nuclear sentiments. Much like the absent women of Washington D.C.'s military industrial complex, Nicola could not participate in such 'MAD'ness. She denounces the twentieth-century, even if at first glance she may seem to be the ultimate product of such. In the novel, she reads D.H. Lawrence, quotes Keats, and speaks
nostalgically of the years prior to World War II. Because she is well acquainted with nuclear history, she, like Amis, feels free to dangle nuclear references in front of those who know no better. The reader may not expect such a well-developed mind in one who is generally described in sexual terms, but the impact is merely weightier when she does speak out. Like the planet, Nicola can be both beautiful and powerful, seductive and destructive. Her plans to ruin Keith and Guy are excusable when we consider that she is subverting traditional authority. Nicola refuses to be objectified, precisely defying their attempts to contain her. To Keith, Nicola is purely sexual and exists only to satisfy his exhaustive needs. To Guy, she is an idealized virgin for whom he must be her savior. Neither is the truth. Only to Samson is she remotely equal because at least he understands her antagonism with nuclear weaponry and her fatal situation in a nuclear world. Nicola thus poignantly illustrates Mother Earth gone mad. She knows her death is inevitable and blames man for her demise. Yet like the planet, she is seeking vengeance for years of misuse by patriarchy. Both Nicola’s parents die when she is young and she is left to assume motherhood for herself and take ill comfort from the available fathers, the nuclear patriarchs.

The other fathers of London Fields are no more helpful than Amis’s fathers who are responsible for the nuclear threat. Samson’s father most directly represents them; he
worked for a High Explosives Research Project which contributed to Samson's fatal synergism. Keith has no hand in raising his daughter except to occasionally beat his wife, which drives her to abuse the child. Keith, like the weapons, creates an atmosphere where mutually assured destruction is effectively at work. Even upper-middle-class Guy is useless with his own son. Marmaduke, though a terror to all, is most violent and unresponsive to his own father. Guy finds himself contributing 15,000 pounds to a Save the Children fund at one point, but is unable to directly help his own offspring. The dismissal of paternal responsibility abounds in London Fields so that the only thing our fathers end up responsible for is the nuclear threat. "WE are the little boys in this debate" (EM 6) but little boys, like Little Boy the atom bomb, have a "love of war! Watch! Oh boys, why do you have to do this? But boys have to do this" (LF 323). Because of the nuclear threat, Amis necessarily categorizes men and women into destructive versus creative roles but the blame lies firmly with the destroyers. Fatherhood of all kinds is rejected in striking contrast to canonical literature which has repudiated motherhood. Perhaps because Amis doesn't recoil from bodily functions and human wastes, that which previously declassed motherhood, the taint of the womb, is absent. Instead, women become complex and awe-inspiring figures to Amis. Men have trouble creating life; it was "Guy's difficulties" (88)
which delayed Marmaduke’s conception, yet women resonate with the potential for life. The most tainted womb in *London Fields* is the planet, which has been sodomized by the nuclear presence. For the earth and ourselves, it is "hard to love, when you’re bracing yourself for impact. And maybe love can’t bear it either and flees all planets when they reach this condition, when they get to the end of their twentieth centuries" (197). Creation is disrupted because of what men have done to the ultimate Mother, Earth. The result is "an inverse of filial confession," where "we will have to take deep breaths, wipe our eyes and stare into theirs, and tell them what we’ve done" (*Esquire* 111). It may be too late to atone for nuclear sins, however, as fatherhood has already been denigrated. When Guy returns to his home after leaving his wife for Nicola, the damage is done. The words of his own child powerfully symbolize the larger conflict:

‘Mummy? Don’t love Daddy.’
‘I won’t. I certainly won’t.’
‘Good.’ (*LF* 451)

Amis’s assumption that our fathers will have to die off and perhaps Amis’s own generation must pass away before the problem of nuclear weapons, is solved is not far from truth. But in the meantime, repudiating the role of fathers who have failed to preserve and prepare the world for their children is a start. Like Bujak, "you must make a start" (*EM* 58).
Mars-Jones criticizes Amis for re-inventing fatherhood and assuming the care, concern and typically female responsibilities of motherhood, thus missing Amis’s point. If Mother Earth should last another twenty centuries, patriarchal order must cease and men must reinvent their familial roles. At the end of *London Fields*, Samson rescues Kim from her abusive parents, delegating "kindness, or paternalism, or money" (*LF* 467) for her upbringing. Though Samson is dying, he has made his contribution to the future, like Amis. "I cling to certain hopes: hopes of you. I hope that you are with your mother and that you two are provided for. I hope your father is around somewhere--controllably" (469). All fathers must be present and controlled if the nuclear issue is to be diffused. The familial metaphor must extend to the world if it is to be resolved. Such delegated responsibilities and familial restructurings are not an attempt to usurp the female role, but to address previous imbalance and amend destructive fatherly ways.

When Amis criticizes nuclear weapons, he is also attacking the society responsible for their development and proliferation. This patriarchy is at fault and Amis is willing to negotiate a solution as yet unimagined to his nuclear fathers. Amis is not usurping the female role, as Mars-Jones claims, but embracing a different order of gender roles, where both sexes take responsibility for their children. It is striking that Amis discusses the nuclear
debate in familial terms. In doing so, he elevates political banter into a universal moral standard. Rather than declaring defeat and giving weapons psychological prominence, he rallies against their permanent influence. In all his work, the threat of weapons is discussed only so that we may see the error of our failed patriarchal thinking. His primary concern is always to make amends, to "blunder through," as he says, and he knows it will take a universal psychological change to transform our current eschatology into hopes for survival.
Chapter Seven

Conclusion

Martin Amis’s nuclear themes have stirred various accusations that he politicks, proselytizes and postures. The motivations of people, it has been said, are universal and not subject to nuclear intervention. What Amis blames on the nuclear threat already exists in human nature. While this is certainly true, the point of Amis’s nuclear querying is to illustrate the effects of the nuclear presence, not to imagine a world where we are reinvented by them. He is a consummate realist, dwelling on a society already tainted by nuclear weapons, and has chronicled our responses to them in kind. If immorality, greed and artifice exist in human nature, they are revealed in the human nature which must acknowledge nuclear weapons. If society is in decline and the cheats prey on the weak in a "normal" world, they do so to extremity in a nuclear world. Nuclear weapons have not created a new race of humanity, they have rapidly disintegrated our own. Life, once preserved in a universal hippocratic oath, is now expendable.

The psychological effects of living under the threat of Mutually Assured Destruction must be noted in literature and society. According to Amis, "that was absolutely right at
the top of the agenda in the second half of the twentieth-century--what to do with these things." And if it was not at the top of everyone's agenda, he would say it should have been. Writing about nuclear issues is one way of addressing them. Admitting to their existence and embracing thinkability, however, must come first. Amis still speaks liberally about nuclear weapons, though the hysteria brought on by the 1980's has subsided. He cautiously admits, "we're now in a new (phase) which we can confidently but not safely call proliferation." While a considerable improvement over promised destruction, proliferation still lends itself to a wide range of psychological dilemmas. If life was cheapened because that which could destroy all life was poised for detonation, what becomes of us when the weapons are distributed freely among many? Proliferation is a progressive step in that 'MAD'ness is over and the winnable war is a myth of the Reagan past, yet Amis must realize the threat of nuclear weapons is still prominent. Instead of being centrally focused, it is diffuse and widespread. Better still would be a phase called 'Disarmament' but no one, least of all Amis, expects that any time soon.

The same political systems which escalated the Cold War also ended it, says Amis. What removed "this suicide mechanism" was democracy. "When Gorbachev said, 'this isn't serious' he didn't mean that it was comic, he meant that it was fundamentally un-serious. He sensed this wasn't a
serious way of conducting business and it was diplomacy which broke the deadlock." Part of the new diplomacy which may control the way nuclear weapons and issues are handled is rhetoric. Diplomacy is a fine tool for negotiation, but rhetoric, specifically literature, must enter into this diplomacy. Amis has taken an important first step in confronting nuclear issues directly. Though he claims he has been "considerably inconvenienced by Gorbachev," I suspect the nuclear theme will continue in his work. The Information restricts its action to the present without a looming Crisis, but Richard Tull's London is as battered as the city of London Fields. Mother Earth is still in rapid decline, still suffering from the nuclear presence. The Information also denigrates Utopian pundits and urges literature which looks beneath glossy, organized and ultimately shallow bliss. Amis's fictions are anti-utopian precisely because the margins (nuclear and otherwise) he writes in are discarded in utopian ideals:

Postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death and horror. (Jameson 57)

Amis, whose works exemplify this definition of postmodern culture, is continuously fascinated by the margins. Subjects which remain unobserved by most are scrutinized in Amis's fiction, chief among them, nuclear weaponry. As long as Amis continues to write in the margins, he may suffer from a lack
of widespread mainstream and critical acceptance (and will perhaps never become a Gwyn Barry-like phenomenon), but his work will always be a part of the diplomacy which shapes the end of our millennium. This, I imagine, is more important.
Works Consulted


