Anna Devereux

The Clinch

It was Jane Austen who clinched it. When Martin Amis died last year, an essay he had written for *The New Yorker* in 1995 titled 'Jane's World' resurfaced on Twitter.[1] In this essay, Amis recounts how he and Salman Rushdie found themselves trapped in the cinema confronted with Richard Curtis's *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, a film they both loathed; Amis wrote it off as 'Jane Austen, in a vile new outfit'. I have always hated this film: how Andie MacDowell's career survived this bafflingly empty performance long enough for her to gain my favour with her charming turn in *Magic Mike XXL* I will never understand. To discover that Amis felt the same way (about *Four Weddings*—he never voiced publicly his views on the *Magic Mike* franchise) warmed me to him. I read on to find that we felt the same way about many things, the most crucial being Jane Austen. Here was Amis, unashamedly calling himself a 'pious and vigilant Janeite', his tirade against the film quickly morphing into a celebration of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.[2] Amis praises that, 200 years after Austen's death, her most celebrated novel '*goes on* suckering you'; it is obvious that Elizabeth and Darcy must end up together by the nature of the genre, Amis admits, but even so, Austen inspires a 'panic of unsatisfied expectation' in readers who know the plot back to front. Amis's *London Fields* (1989) suckers its readers too: It is a story that from the outset tells you where it will end and yet torments you with panicked imaginations of what might take place.[3]

Labelled as a 'Who'll do it' rather than a 'whodunnit', the novel follows American writer Samson Young (Sam), on a stay in London to cure his writer's block. Sam, through an unlikely friendship with professional cheat and darts extraordinaire Keith Talent and wretchedly good Guy Clinch, uncovers a plot by the irresistible Nicola Six to bring about her own murder. Nicola, an erotic cartoon of a femme fatale who employs sexual prowess to tempt fate, has garnered much attention in the critical discourse surrounding Amis, many citing her as prime evidence for their arguments that his writing about women is misogynistic. In a 2001 episode of BBC Radio 4's *Bookclub*,[4] the discussion heads straight for Nicola. One reader raises Amis's claim that reading Gloria Steinem made him a feminist, asking the author if he would have written Nicola

differently had he read Steinem first. 'I did,' corrects Amis, meaning that Nicola was informed by his engagement with feminism. Amis insists that Nicola 'wonderfully satirises male illusions'. For Amis, Nicola holds all the power, within both the text and his own writing practice: 'I felt very much that Nicola Six was writing this novel with me and I would sometimes, as the narrator does, appeal to her,' just as Sam laments in the novel's final pages, 'She outwrote me. Her story worked. And mine didn't.' (p. 466) Although *London Fields* is narrated by Sam, the real narrational power is held by Nicola, who possesses the singular talent of always knowing what is going to happen to her. Readings of Nicola as two-dimensional miss the multiple dimensions of the intricate plot that she, not Amis or Sam, has devised.

Keith is introduced to us as the Murderer and presents all the traits we would hope to find in a murderer-to-be (violence, criminality, untrustworthiness), but it is in fact the ostensible hero Sam who does the deed. On reflection I wonder, was this fated from the beginning? Or could it be that Nicola tries each man on for size? Perhaps Nicola is following in the footsteps of Lise in Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat* (1970), who carefully analyses each man she meets to see if they would be her 'type'—meaning the type to murder her. Are the men a perfect network of potential murderers, Nicola laying out tests to see which one can go through with it? Such tests include teasing Keith with pornographic promises and pushing him in his darts career—a career Nicola will ultimately destroy on live television. For Guy, Nicola performs a pantomime chastity, presenting herself as the impossible virgin and securing his sympathy by inventing refugee friends who depend on his aid, Enola Gay and Little Boy (the names of the atom bomb and the plane that dropped it on Hiroshima—Guy is so unsuspicious that he misses this blatant prank). If we take the novel at its word, however, we find that Nicola 'always knew what was going to happen next' (p. 15) and could not therefore be surprised by Sam's being the murderer. She confirms this in the novel's final scenes when, discovering Sam waiting with the murder weapon, she greets him without surprise: 'Always you …' (p. 465).

This revelation in turn reveals another taunting performance of Nicola's—Mark Asprey, the ultra-successful novelist who has lent Sam his flat, and who Nicola says is the only man she could never get over. If Nicola always knew the identity of her murderer, then the image she paints of Asprey might well be an invention designed to bring out the murderer in Sam. Asprey is to Sam what Enola Gay and Little Boy are to Guy, a tool of manipulation. Asprey taunts Sam from afar, as his opulent flat, friendly notes and romantic conquest of Nicola

display his vast success in contrast to Sam. Looking at the novel backwards, with the knowledge of that final revelation, Nicola's plot always had Sam at its centre.

If Nicola 'always' knew, then Guy and Keith can be seen in another light too, not as potential murderers but as temptations to lure Sam to his fate. Keith Talent *is* the talent—the attraction, the 'authentically' lewd Londoner to please the American author's fantasy of boozers, fights, cheats, birds and darts—the perfect subject for Sam's gritty page turner. The cries of 'Darts!' in Keith's scenes are so prevalent that, in the real world, whenever I come across a fellow Amisite I do the same: 'Darts! Keith! Darts!' But if Keith is the talent, then Guy Clinch *is* the clinch. He is the true temptation that Sam cannot deny. The reader may laugh at Keith's mistreatment by Nicola, as what she submits him to is nothing compared to the violence he inflicts on women, but her groan-inducing emotional torture of clueless Guy is painful to witness.

Guy does not have a memorable line, no 'darts!', or 'innits', or glasses of 'porno' to make us snigger behind the pages. He is overshadowed by Keith and by his monstrous son Marmaduke. In the *London Review of Books*,[5] Julian Symons compared Keith to Dickens's grotesque villain Quilp from *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), who chews cutlery to pieces and torments his martyrish wife, but Marmaduke's superhuman aptitude, timing and imagination for inflicting pain seems to me a better match. While Quilp eats cutlery, Marmaduke eats his own nappies: 'Loaded or unloaded?' (p. 83), Guy musters up the courage to ask. Marmaduke's violence is strategic, calculated to inflict the most amount of pain and humiliation and to prevent his father experiencing happiness: 'Inches from his head, on the innumerable pillows, crouched Marmaduke, his hands joined and raised. As Guy entered the warmth-field of his wife's body, Marmaduke's twinned fists thumped down into his open face.' (p. 82). Outshone by the gruesome villainy of Keith and Marmaduke, Guy goes under the radar, but he is the key to Nicola's plan.

Accepting Keith as the Murderer just because Sam introduces him as such is typical of us, the gullible reader in Amis's eyes. Perhaps Sam's insistence on Keith as the murderer is proof that he foresees more than he lets on. Sam does not love Keith, and he does not pity him; in fact, Sam probably wants Keith dead. Sam *does* love Keith's family, wife Kath and baby Kim, who suffer obscenely at the hands of Keith. Sam inserts himself into their home, babysitting Kim and becoming protective of Kath. In contrast, Sam's tone when narrating Guy is one of pained pity. While Keith's violence is presented upfront and without apology,

Sam gives his reader what is almost a trigger warning before introducing Guy: 'When I take on Chapter 3, when I take on Guy Clinch, I'll have to do, well, not happiness, but goodness, anyway. It's going to be rough.' (p. 23) Guy has a wife, Hope, who detests him, and a child who tortures him during every waking moment; at home, his goodness invites supreme dehumanisation: 'When Hope called his name – "Guy?" – and he replied *Yes*? there was never any answer, because his name meant *Come here*.' (p. 29) For Guy to endure further nastiness seems an unforgivable cruelty in Sam's eyes.

If Sam loves Guy, Kath and most of all Kim, it stands to reason that he wants Keith either six feet under or behind bars to protect them. So, for Sam, Keith is the longed-for murderer: if Keith murders Nicola, and Sam has the proof, then Keith is off the streets for good. But in the end, to Sam's horror, Guy is driven by Nicola to a maddened strength. His apparent goodness is destroyed, as he squares up to Keith and beats him, and then sits in wait for Nicola. Nicola's transformation of Guy is complete, he is ready to murder her, but Sam insists on doing it for him. Sam cannot allow Nicola to live after what he has witnessed her do to Guy, and if Guy is the one who murders her, then Keith gets off scot-free, and everything continues as it was. The same people continue to be hurt and punished, the same people hurt and punish and get away with it.

For Nicola, far more complex than Sam will have you believe, Sam has been in her sights for much longer than she has been in his. She knows he will not falter to take Guy's place. Guy clinches it. He takes Sam all the way from narrator to murderer and provides a noble excuse for the crime. All as Nicola knew he would. Amis said of Nicola that her murderee-longing comes from her recognition that she 'has no feminine future that she can imagine'. She is 'bowing out'. Read in this way, Nicola's meticulous plotting of her own murder is in the grand tradition of transgressive women in fiction and film who, seeing no viable future, choose a radical death. Just like Spark's Lise, or Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), whose heroine, finding no sustaining life on earth, walks into the sea. Or even *Thelma and Louise* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1991) who, running from patriarchal violence with the police in pursuit, take each other by the hand, step on the pedal and drive towards certain death into the abyss of the Grand Canyon. In a heteronormative, patriarchal, rapidly disintegrating socie, a feminist text might take death as the only radical choice where turning back means agreeing to the terms of society. Through her masterful manipulation of these three men, who unsuspectingly submit to this murder relay race, Nicola brings about a radical end.

In some ways, Guy is like Mr Darcy's easy mannered cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, 'not handsome, but in person and address most truly the gentleman' (p. 145), with whom Elizabeth Bennet 'conversed with so much spirit and flow' (p. 147). The uncomplicated liking that this pair feel for each other cannot match the 'captivating softness' (p. 154) of Elizabeth's original choice, the duplicitous George Wickam, nor the tense passion which grows between her and Darcy, but there is a clear affinity between them. Austen shows us a happy alternative for Elizabeth here, a man with whom she could have built a genial and contented marriage, wherein our heroine could find happiness without a grand romance. In a twisted way, this is what Guy is to Nicola: the murderer who would have done just fine. Not the perfect, anticipated, fated Murderer, but a man with whom it might have worked out. Not Sam, but in person and address most truly the murderer.

Notes

1 Martin Amis, 'Jane's World', *The New Yorker* (1995).
2 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2007).
3 _____, *London Fields* (London: Cape, 1989).
4 'Martin Amis', *Bookclub*, BBC Radio 4, 9 August 2001, 16.00pm.
5 Julian Symons, 'Darts for Art's Sake', *London Review of Books*, 11 (1989).

Author Biography

Anna Devereux is a CHASE-funded postgraduate researcher at the University of East Anglia. Her research focuses on communism, decolonialism and literary practice in Doris Lessing's archive.