

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

# Racism and geopolitics IN SOUTH AFRICA

‘The Girl Who Saved the King of Sweden’ by Jonas Jonasson (HarperCollins, 2013)



**Nombeko’s first-hand encounter with violent apartheid, backed by nuclear deterrence, draws parallels with Israel’s own system of systematic apartheid and presumed nuclear deterrence.**

KAZI MAHDI AMIN

Swedish journalist and writer Jonas Jonasson, known for his comical approach to history, demonstrates his ability to entertain and educate in his book, *The Girl Who Saved the King of Sweden*. While his previous work, *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared* (2009), revolved around the whimsical adventures of a centenarian, this book delves into the life of a young South African protagonist from Soweto, shedding light on the injustices of apartheid and the shadowy world of global power dynamics.

The story takes us across two continents,

introducing us to Nombeko, a young girl born in a South African slum. Despite facing challenges such as fending off rapists and coping with an alcoholic mother seeking solace in unrefined spirits, Nombeko manages to overcome her circumstances. She even becomes involved in South Africa’s nuclear weapons programme, driven by her unwavering determination to change her fate. Surprisingly, her journey culminates in saving the King of Sweden from her deranged Republican brother-in-law.

The characters in the novel are far from ordinary; they exist on the fringes of society. Themes such as institutional racism in colonies, migration, flawed anti-

monarchy sentiments stemming from personal vendettas, and the need for rebellion permeate the lives of these characters. They grapple with their lack of control over their situations. Nonetheless, the extraordinary events they experience captivate readers, offering a fascinating exploration of apartheid South Africa’s nuclear programme, Israel’s involvement, the assassination of the King of Sweden, the US labelling Nelson Mandela as a terrorist, and even the mention of Chinese Han dynasty ducks.

The novel’s message is clear: never give up. However, inquisitive readers will also recognize the geopolitical undertones within its pages. Nombeko’s first-hand encounter with violent apartheid, backed by nuclear deterrence, draws parallels with Israel’s own system of systematic apartheid and presumed nuclear deterrence. For those seeking a combination of historical insight and a light-hearted, absurd narrative, *The Girl Who Saved the King of Sweden* proves to be time well spent.

Although the book maintains an effortless fluidity of language, the pacing could have been improved. The build-up to the climactic moments feels lengthy, but it serves as an ideal book to enjoy for a peaceful night’s sleep before diving into another weekday.

Jonasson, as a writer, embodies cosmopolitanism. His stories, including the two I have read so far, take readers on immersive journeys through humanity’s triumphs and missteps. *The Girl Who Saved the King of Sweden* is a book you’ll happily recommend to friends who appreciate absurd comedy.

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ESSAY

## Like father, unlike son: Martin Amis’s place in literature

SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

News of Martin Amis’s recent death on May 19, 2023 from cancer reminded me of the time I read a good portion of *Experience* (2000), his memoir, at the British Council library while waiting for a friend. Having been more of an admirer of his father’s writing than his, I considered Amis to be the least profound of his generation, a cohort which comprised some of Britain’s most celebrated writers of the 1980s. His contemporaries included Kazuo Ishiguro, who went on to win the Nobel Prize in 2017, Salman Rushdie, whose *Midnight’s Children* clearly is among the best novels to be written post-World War II, and Ian McEwan, who has had a late-career surge with novels such as *Nutshell* (2016). The younger Amis’s reputation, in contrast, seems to be still shaky.

Reading through *Experience* that day, I was left surprised at the casual rudeness:

My mouth talks too much. Only a week earlier my mouth had soured a New Yorker dinner at the Caprice in London by indulging in this ‘exchange’ with Salman Rushdie:

— So you like Beckett’s prose, do you? You like Beckett’s prose.

Having established earlier that he did like Beckett’s prose, Salman neglected to answer.

— Okay. Quote me some. Oh I see. You can’t.

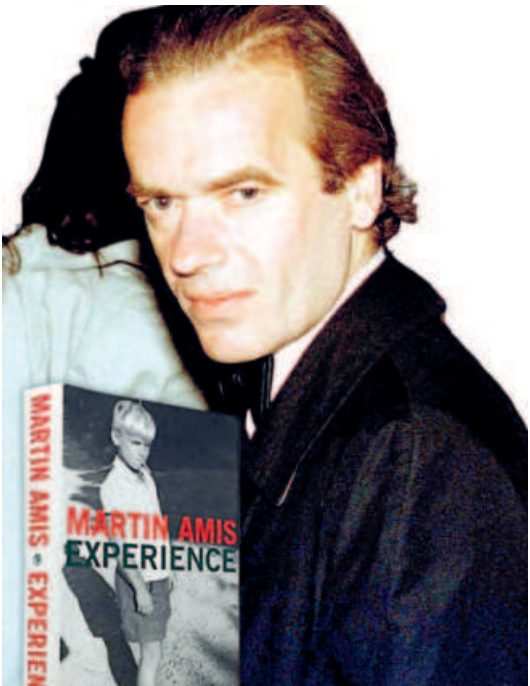


PHOTO: REUTERS

Martin’s final book, *Inside Story* (2020), billed as a novel though really it’s a loosely drafted memoir, carries on, unfortunately, with the same smarmy tone that tries hiding the vapidness of his interactions and memories. His incessant need to address the “reader” drags on the patience of any actual reader. One almost sympathises with his father, who according to an anecdote, had once flung his son’s book across the room when he discovered that Martin had used his own name for a character. For Kingsley Amis, this was akin to breaking a contract with the reader. There should be “no fooling around with reality.” But fooling around with reality is somewhat of a specialty for Martin. His notable works succeed because he is so unbearable with it. It wouldn’t be a good Martin Amis book without his narrators breaking the fourth-wall or playing around with some postmodern gimmick.

*London Fields* (1989), arguably his best work, is a glossy murder-mystery embossed with such a tone of meta-narrative fashionable of the ‘80s. Here, it is evident that Amis’s charms (and inevitable obnoxiousness) is a result of his tiresome devotion to style (being as he was a major fanboy of Nabokov), aided by themes of glamour, celebrity, and debauchery, which the book is chock full of. In *London Fields* and its preceding novel *Money* (1984), Amis does imbue an anger, but it is a different sort of feeling, not the “Angry Young Men” humour of *Lucky Jim* or *The Old Devils*, novels which made his father’s literary name rather there is a sense of boredom in Martin Amis’s work. After a while, one gets the idea that Amis is hellbent on being a “disinterested aesthete”. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his nonfiction work *Koba the Dread*, a “study” of Stalin’s brutality, which reads hollow and impersonal, almost clinical.

Perhaps Martin Amis’s works do not grab me for the most part because they veer too far away from the humanism of, say, Saul Bellow—a writer Martin greatly admires and has written about extensively. Where Kingsley Amis was often a much needed dose of angry wit, his son’s anger came off as decadent, rebellious without much cause, and unnecessary to an extent. Martin’s great literary achievement is that with a set of forgettable novels he was able to carve out his own place, away from his father’s shadow. There is no doubt that he could write. He was by the age of 27 a literary editor of a major outlet and had been a part of the British scene ever since his childhood. But to what extent the intoxicating personality and the good looks will translate to a readership beyond his life is at best unanswerable. The odd Islamophobia and right-wing remarks do not, of course, help. What is certain however is that as a celebrity and intellectual, Martin Amis definitely has a place as 20th century literature’s most remarkable and original nepo baby.

Shahriar Shaams has written & translated for SUSPECT, Third Lane, Six Seasons Review, Arts & Letters, and Jamini. Find him on twitter @shahriarshaams.

BOOK EXCERPT: NONFICTION

## Snapshots of history—Golam Mustafa meets Manzoor Alam Beg

TRANSLATED FROM THE BANGLA BY HRISHIK ROY AND SARAH ANJUM BARI

A history of Bangladeshi photography would be incomplete without the stories of Golam Mustafa—the first Director of Photography of Bangladesh Television, the first person to produce a commercial film using the U-matic format in post-Liberation Bangladesh.

Born on November 30, 1941, the Ekushey Padak-winning photographer was among the first batch of students at the Begart Institute of Photography and a founding member of the Camera Recreation Club, Bangladesh’s first photography organisation.

*Modhurimay Alap* (Swapno ‘71, 2023), released at the Ekushey Boi Mela this year, transcribes two days of conversations between Golam Mustafa and Shahadat Parvez, a photographer, teacher, and researcher who is currently Photography Editor at the daily *Desh Rupantor*. Their discussions take the reader through Mustafa’s youth during the 1947 Partition, the documentation of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s homecoming, Bangladesh’s place in the world of photography, the revolutionary phases of East Bengal photography, and more.

In this excerpt from the book, Golam Mustafa shares how he first became acquainted with Manzoor Alam Beg, considered to be the Father of Photography movements in Bangladesh.

**Shahadat Parvez (SP): How did you get to know Manzoor Alam Beg?**  
**Golam Mustafa (GM):** I was trying to catch a bus one day when I noticed a studio—Roxy Photo Service. A few large photographs hung on the walls inside. I went in to look around and found a man standing at the counter, fervently pulling a cigarette. He was thin, bearded, dark complexioned; he had a very interesting face.

“I have a few negatives that I want to print. Can I do that here?” I asked him.

“You can”, he said.

“Will you do it for me?”

“These are a bit oversized. It’s alright, I will manage with some

paper”, he said after looking at the negatives.

I went back to the studio the next day. “I’ve printed your photos”, he said upon seeing me. “But let me keep it for another day. This needs softer paper for better quality print.”

Of all the studios that had printed out photos for me, no one had ever asked to keep them with such interest and compassion. I left the images with him and returned the next day. There was a world of difference between the two sets of photos. He explained to me



PHOTO: FARZANA YASMIN

why the quality differed.

The man wanted to know what I did, and then he looked at my camera. “This is an ordinary camera”, he told me, “but you can produce good work with it if you read the manual closely.”

I spent all of that night with my camera on my bed, reading its manual page by page. I went back the next day and told the man that there were three points I hadn’t understood.

Beg Shaheb realised that a lot of customers came to him, but I was no customer. There was a certain madness to me.

One winter, I clicked a picture of the old high court building. Do you

remember it? It is still there—the one in front of the Eidgah field. There was a vast lake there. A beautiful lake with clear water. The peak of the high court building would reflect on the water body. I couldn’t perfectly capture that reflection in the picture I had taken. I showed it to Beg Shaheb.

“This picture can’t be taken like this”, he told me. “You have to climb at least 20 feet. Try putting up a ladder against the tree in front of the building.”

Trust me, I wouldn’t dare to do it

you are a photographer.

They don’t understand what this means. They say, “Sir, how can we see with our eyes closed?”

I tell them that if you have your eyes open, you only see what is in front of you. If you close your eyes, your horizons expand.

I see it now. I climb up as those four people hold the ladder for me. The higher I climb, the more the ladder rattles. My camera hangs by my neck. There are 12 exposures, and I capture all 12. I switch right and left, change exposures and capture images. Beg Shaheb had asked me to change the stop and capture pictures. I fix my shutter speed to 125 and click pictures on F 22, 16, 11, 8 and 5.6.

The next morning, I reach Beg Shaheb’s studio very early out of excitement. He arrives on his Suzuki motorcycle and asks me, “Oh, Mustafa. You are here already? Didn’t you go to university today?”

“I will go after I develop my roll and observe the negative”, I tell him. “You had asked me to try to take a picture of the high court from atop a ladder.”

Beg Shaheb opens the dark room in the back. The madness of my excitement had gotten to him by then. He didn’t even submerge it in water after fixing it.

“It has happened. You pulled it off”, he tells me. “You can go to class now. I will print out the best shot from your negative by this evening.”

I sat in class for what felt like forever. I looked at my watch constantly. Finally, finishing my class, I rushed to the studio. “Your picture is done. It’s being dried in the studio”, Beg Shaheb told me.

He had printed a panoramic view on a 12 by 16 inch paper. He said, “I will put this up in the studio. You took the picture the way I recommended, so this will be here in your honour. I will print out a smaller one for you.”

I became his student on that day.

I took pictures alongside him, went to different places, had both good and bad experiences. I was with him beyond life and death. And that picture of mine was in that studio until the very last day.