

A Chronicle of Conflict

A vibrant account of London replete with rabid rivalries

THE INFORMATION

BY MARTIN AMIS

Flamingo

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WHEN Martin Amis talks about the "romping zeroes" in novelist Gwyn Barry's advance for a book in his new novel, *The Information*, the irony is inescapable: HarperCollins has just managed to grab Amis for a jaw-dropping £500,000. And when Barry boasts about the "huge deal" on his next book because "it's a war out there," the irony becomes even more startling. Amis has been under attack ever since he decided to replace his old agent of many years for *The Information*.

The barrage of publicity seems to have helped. *The Information* was number one on *The Sunday Times* bestseller list soon after it was released. As Amis said in a recent interview: "Publicity is a voracious idiot — it gobbles up everything and just gets fatter. You have to learn to manipulate it, or it will manipulate you."

Like most of Amis' earlier works — *Success*, *Money* and *London Fields* — this is also a story about jealousy, competition, rivalry and animosity. At the centre of this almost satirical comedy are two novelists — Richard Tull, the failed writer, and Gwyn Barry, the immensely successful novelist who is feted by interviewers, translated into dozens of languages and invited to almost every celebrity evening in town — who are both the best of friends as well as the most ferocious of enemies at the same time.

It is this all consuming rivalry that drives Tull to think up some particularly devious plans to destroy Barry. Since a

savage review or a scurrilous profile don't seem damaging enough, he even goes to the extent of hiring someone to settle scores. And around all this, Amis manages to weave a vibrant account of *la dolce vita* in London.

Amis' characters are so terribly exaggerated, that they are almost satirical. Take Barry, for instance: he's driven to distraction by thoughts of his own biography (not autobiography); he compares writing to carpentry only because he thinks that the metaphor is evocative enough, and then specially sets up a carpenter's unit in his office complete with a hand-made bench only for the benefit of any interviewer who may come in. Tull, on the other hand, is a pathetically pitiable loser: he barely makes a living doing literary reviews, most of his books pass by unnoticed and unacclaimed, yet he carries on working on his next novel, ironically titled *Untitled*.

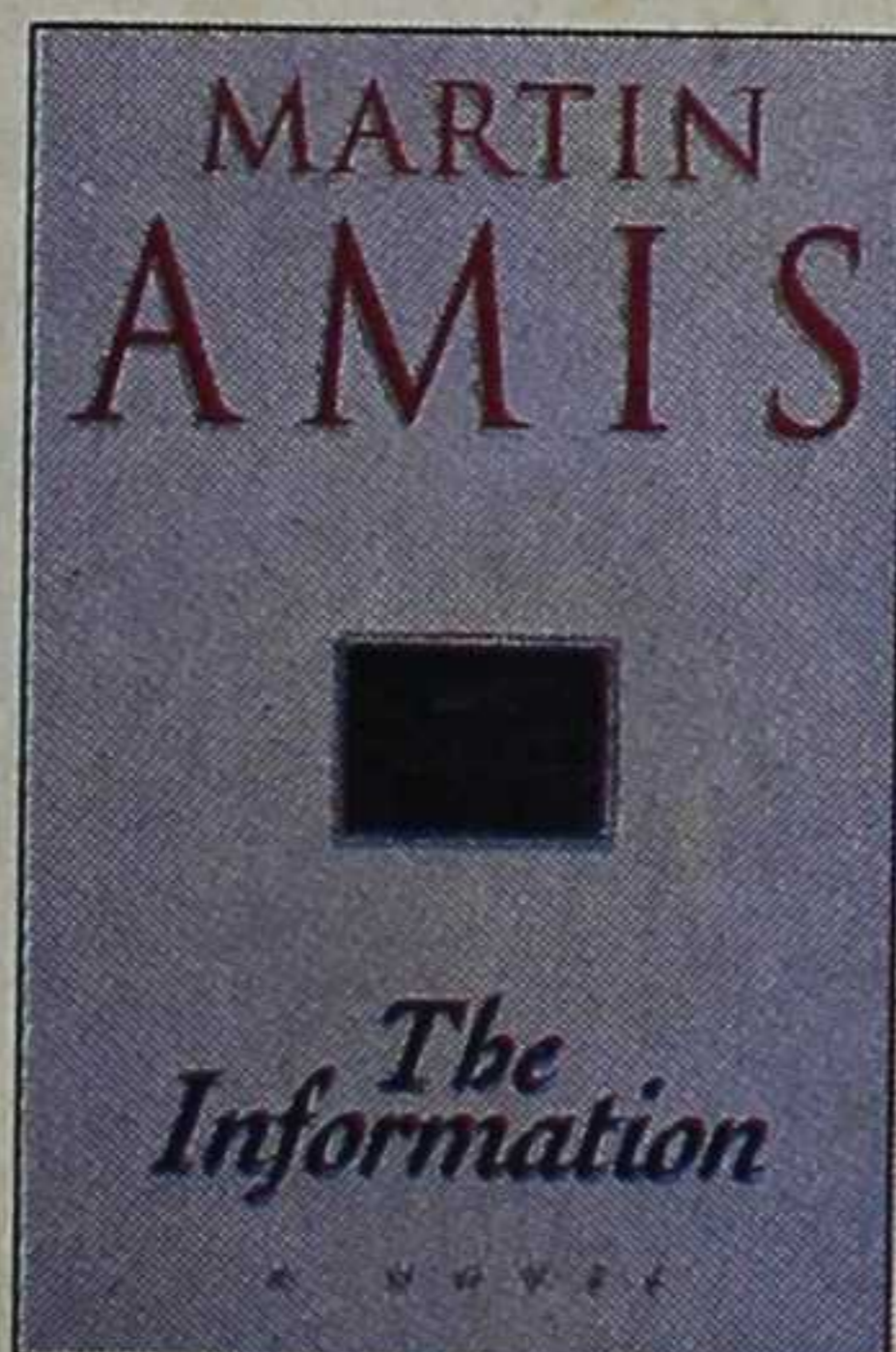
If the characters in Amis' book are charged, the writing is also achingly heady. The 45-year-old son of Kingsley Amis is a skilled word-smith whose prose throbs with a rare vivacity and raw passion. He manages to capture the idiom of literary London as well as the more bohemian side of the city with tremendous ease, skill and dexterity.

In fact, his portrayal of literary London with its rabid rivalries is so true to life that there were rumours that it was based on Amis' relationship with writer Julian Barnes. The literary grapevine had it that Barnes was the model for Gwyn Barry, and that the friendship between the two had gone for a toss after the book. Amis has

been consistently stonewalling on the subject, although he is honest enough to concede that "life does imitate art in the weirdest way."

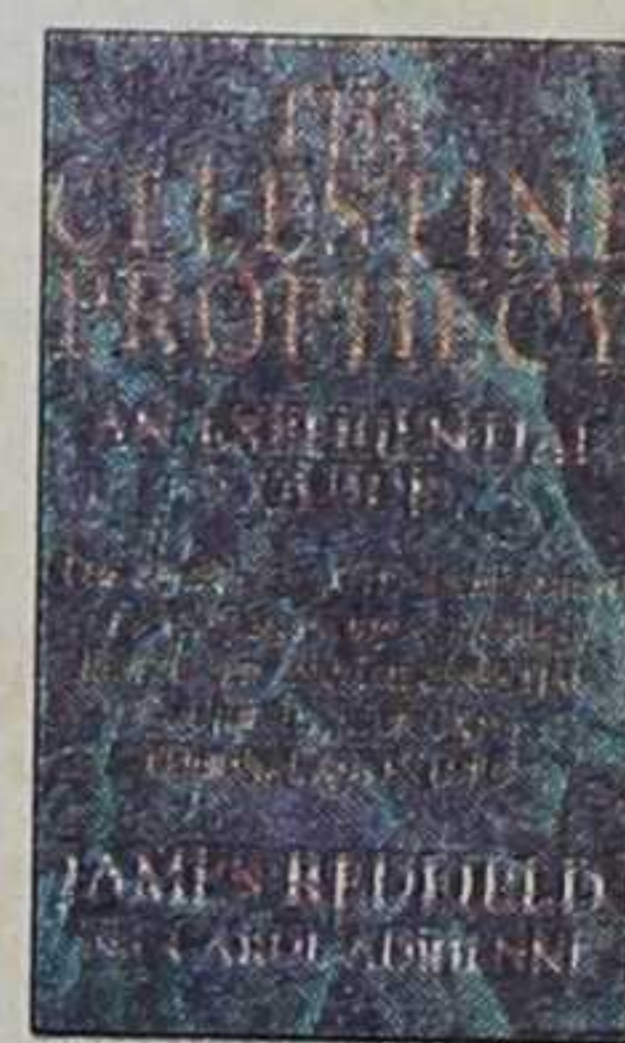
But then such unbridled animosity and competition isn't something peculiar to the literary world. Amis strikes a chord with just about anybody trapped in the throes of rivalry and enmity. On either side of the Atlantic.

SUGITA KATYAL



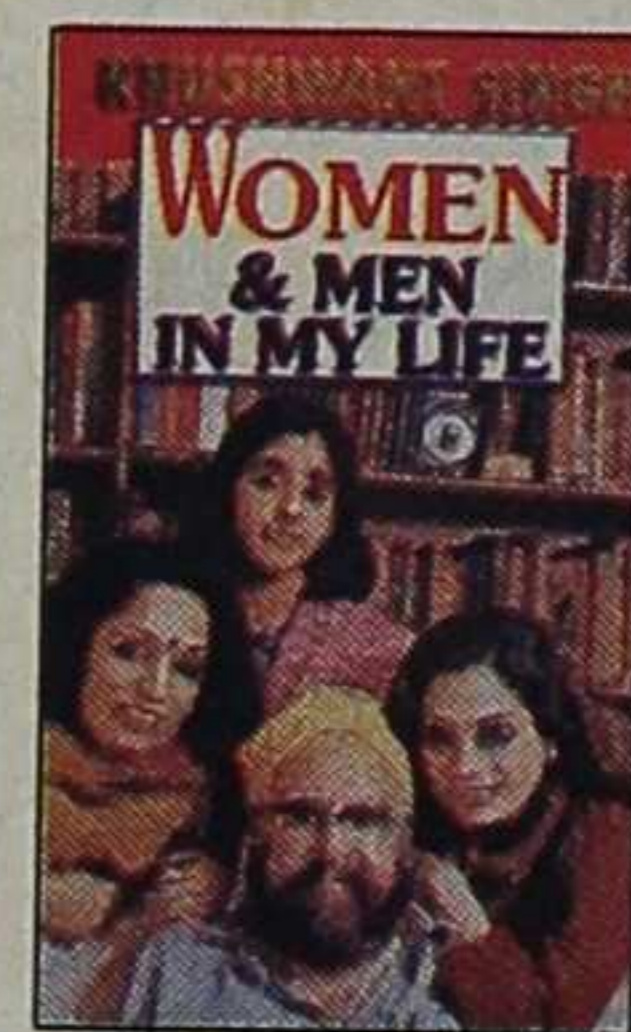
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BROWSER'S CORNER



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IT could just as easily have been called 'Everything you never wanted to know about the people Khushwant Singh met — and made sure you never asked.' Singh's latest book, **WOMEN & MEN IN**

MY LIFE, is a compendium of his recollections of people he met, befriended and fell out with. Written in his customary racy, provocative style, it is full of Singh's recollections; and the list of men and women reads like a veritable who's who — Devyani Chhabal, Sadia Dehlavi, Charanjit Singh and Bharat Ram. No one is spared: every profile includes some snippet about the person which you never knew. The question is: did you really want to know? (UBS Publishers; Pages: 209; Price: Rs 95).



IN FAREWELL TO A GHOST, Manoj Das has captured the essence of the true India — the 23 short stories abound with scenes of village life, complete with superstition and legend. Reading about the boy who

kissed a ghost — and didn't live to talk about it — or Bhanu Singh, who worried about the etiquette to be followed in greeting nudists, gives you a glimpse of the trails and tribulations of life in India. (Penguin; Pages: 185; Price: Rs 100).