

# **Book Reviews**



**Petr Chalupský.**

***The Postmodern City of Dreadful Night. The image of the city in the works of Martin Amis and Ian McEwan.***

**Berlin: VDM Verlag Dr. Muller, 2009.**

Petr Chalupský in his *The Postmodern City of Dreadful Night* presents selected novels by the contemporary British writers Martin Amis and Ian McEwan. The city, principally London, is the main theme. It is not only the setting of the novels, but also a symbolic connecting line which influences the behaviour of the protagonists. Chalupský attempts to show the importance of the city in novels written during 1980s and 1990s. He describes several roles played by the city in the novels and discusses its social, political, and psychological aspects. Chalupský's book is divided into four main chapters, which serve as an organised survey of the works of various writers who have used the city as a fundamental motif.

The first chapter could be seen as an introduction to the theme from a historical point of view. It traces the portrayal of cities in novels from the late Victorian era up to the present day, and outlines how the city has changed since then. This chapter also briefly discusses tendencies in the modernist depiction of the urban milieu in the works of T.S. Eliot and James Joyce. It is a very useful summary of the theme in general, while the other parts of the chapter are mostly devoted to London and postmodern society.

The book outlines connecting threads between Amis's and McEwan's novels, although each writer is analysed in separate chapters. The second chapter provides the reader with a detailed analysis of Martin Amis's novels. Martin Amis is an urban writer and London is the setting of most of his novels. Chalupský has chosen four of them: *Other People: A Mystery Story* (1981), *Money* (1984), *London Fields* (1989), and *The Information* (1995). Although London is not always the central theme of the novels, it reflects the socio-cultural conditions of the protagonists. Chalupský suggests that some of the novels can be also read as socio-political works, as they incorporate particular historical events. Nevertheless, this kind of reading is highly speculative. A vivid emphasis is placed on the state of modern civilisation, which is seen as being in a process of moral decay. It is not necessary to stress the political issues that were current at the time of writing, although it is undoubtedly important to see certain historical connections. All novels are described as satirical pictures of modern Western society in the 1980s and 1990s, typified by consumerism, which prioritised money. The city, which used to be a flourishing centre of art, culture and trade, is now depicted as corrupted and declining. Chalupský analyses not only the plots of the novels, which are usually very simple and not essential, but also their form. He supports his analysis by literary theories and shows how Amis and McEwan employ postmodern devices in their writing. Besides presenting the plot and the form of the individual novels, Chalupský also analyses the psychology of the characters. In Amis's novels, the characters usually have their alter-egos, which make them ridiculous caricatures of society. In

McEwan's novels, the protagonists are not depicted as stereotypical caricatures, but they still bear features that are typical of city dwellers. Chalupský suggests that these features include alienation and isolation, which can be caused by the anonymity of life in the city. In his view, the novels can serve as a warning against contemporary negative social tendencies, such as violence, hostility or consumerism.

The third chapter is devoted to Ian McEwan's novels *The Cement Garden* (1997), *The Comfort of Strangers* (1997), *The Child in Time* (1992), and *Amsterdam* (1999). Chalupský explores the consequences of living in the city through violence, cruelty and fear, which are the main motifs of the novels analysed in the chapter. In comparison to Martin Amis, McEwan is considered less experimental, though he still to a certain extent implements a number of postmodern devices. Among the devices which are distinctive for both writers is the mixing of various genres. In order to present an emotional, social and political understanding of the novels, the chapter includes a characterization of narrative techniques and various strategies that are skilfully combined by McEwan. Chalupský is well acquainted with the works of both writers as well as with relevant theoretical concepts, so he is able to summarize the essential elements appearing in the novels and to compare them on the theoretical level. Unlike McEwan, Amis is a master of postmodern features such as flashbacks, his own appearance in the book as one of its characters, and various disruptions of the narration. However, Chalupský has found many postmodern features even in McEwan's writing.

In the fourth and last chapter Chalupský demonstrates correlations between modernism and postmodernism and presents the literary prospects of the city. He summarizes the effects of postmodern culture and points out how the phenomenon of the city is popular in contemporary literature. In spite of the fact that he examines mainly the works of Martin Amis and Ian McEwan, his research manifests a broad knowledge of related literary topics.

The core of the analysis is included in the second and third chapters, which describe the function of the city in the selected novels. Nevertheless, the selection of the novels should not have been restricted by their date of publication, because there are other novels, such as McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) or Amis's *Yellow Dog* (2003), in which the city plays a significant role, making them worthy of attention. In summary, Chalupský's research represents a valuable contribution to the field of contemporary British literary studies. The monograph includes supporting theoretical and historical contexts which help in understanding the text.

Jarmila Kojdecká  
Pavol Jozef Šafárik University, Košice

**Stanislav Kolář, Zuzana Buráková, and Katarína Šandorová.**  
*Reflections of Trauma in Selected Works of Postwar American and British Literature.*  
 Košice: Pavol Jozef Šafárik University, 2010.

The field of trauma studies has attracted increased scholarly attention over the past two decades. The diverse literature associated with the analysis and representation of trauma, violence, and their aftermath has led to a number of important advances in how we understand the scope and consequences of traumatic exposure. In the engaging and methodologically sophisticated new monograph *Reflections of Trauma in Selected Works of Postwar American and British Literature* the authors make a valuable contribution to this growing field of research. Drawing upon selected works of American and British post-war literature, the study presents an important model for conceptualizing the field as an area of academic inquiry, and thus represents a new tool for the interpretation of literary works.

The introductory section addresses terminological and conceptual issues, illuminating the complexity and ambiguousness of the concept of trauma. Building upon seminal works in the field (Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dominick LaCapra), Stanislav Kolář gives the reader the terms, background, and tools to understand further readings or discourse on the various topics covered. He discusses the usefulness for literary studies of the category of post-traumatic stress disorder – an individual’s reaction to both physical and psychological trauma, which “involves a wide range of traumatogenic stressors, including not only combat and natural catastrophes, but also torture, rape, child abuse, incest, serious accidents and other life-threatening events” (6). Kolář also discusses LaCapra’s concept of remembering traumatic events (acting out and working through), differentiates between individual and collective trauma, explicates theories of transgenerational transfer of trauma, and discusses the benefits and limits of the artistic representation of traumatic events.

In the first chapter Kolář applies the outlined concepts to selected works of American Holocaust literature. His analysis of E. L. Wallant’s *The Pawnbroker*, S. Bellow’s *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, W. Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice*, C. Ozick’s *The Shawl* and A. Spiegelman’s *Maus* locates typical symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and focuses both on the psychological effects of the wartime trauma and the traumatizing consequences of American exile on the survivors. Kolář argues that life in America fails to heal the survivors’ suffering: “While their prewar life in Europe is associated with wealth and social success, in their American exile they are depicted as despondent alienated strangers leading miserable, isolated lives” (55). The essay is successful in pointing out that the individual historical traumas portrayed in the examined novels are in fact closely linked to collective identity formation.

The second section introduces another form of trauma representation. *Hiroshima*, a nonfiction reportage assembled by the Pulitzer prize-winning author John Hersey, portrays the stories of six people who survived the atomic bomb in Hiroshima. Kolář discusses the relevance of testimonies in studying traumas of contemporary history, arguing that initial failure to understand fully the traumatic events does not exclude the survivors’ ability to testify to what has happened. He considers the reverberations of the “Nuclear Holocaust” in the lives of the victims and demonstrates that “people in Hiroshima were traumatized even prior to the explosion, having lived in anxiety over the potential conventional bombing of

the city” (61), and that the long-term traumatic effects brought on by the cataclysm were even more serious after the victims’ realization of the extent of the losses.

In Zuzana Buráková’s contribution “Finding Identity through Trauma” the transmission of intergenerational and transgenerational trauma serves as a prism through which to view the strengthening of modern Jewish identity. The author examines three works of contemporary Jewish American writers: J. S. Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated*, L. Vapnyar’s collection of short stories *There are Jews in My House*, and G. Shteyngart’s novel *Absurdistan*, and shows how various points of traumatic experience (the settings of which range from interwar Ukrainian shtetls to post-Soviet Russia) shape and disrupt identities. Furthermore, the approach seeks to explain the recent “return of tradition” in Jewish American writing (69). Despite numerous references to “tradition” and its “resurrection” in Jewish American literature, the article does not quite manage to explain and define what is meant by the term, which can be understood in religious, cultural, national and other terms with resulting constraints on the topic of identities. This is, however, a matter of the clarity of the exposition at this particular point rather than an issue of substance.

Transhistorical structural trauma is employed by Katarína Šandorová in her essay on traumatic experience of lesbian characters, analyzing three works of contemporary British novelists—S. Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet*, J. Trollope’s *A Village Affair*, and J. Winterson’s *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. Šandorová broadens definitions of traumatogenic stressors to encompass “other traumatizing phenomena, such as education and the knowledge which is acquired at school and in the family,” as she argues that: “It is not only direct experience which can act as a traumatizer, but also contact with individuals who can transmit their own traumatizing beliefs or fears onto other people” (97). The analysis aptly underlines how the female protagonists are exposed to traumatizing social norms and conventions which are passed onto them by the community in the midst of which they live.

The volume provides a collection of valuable case studies using trauma as an explanatory model in literary studies. The authors make a strong case that we should continue to explore our categories regarding the concept of trauma and its application in cross-disciplinary research. The range of topics overcomes the Eurocentric focus that has dogged trauma studies as a discipline and suggests how various forms of trauma representations move beyond the individual and translate themselves across and between cultures. The book also offers a fine addition to the scholarly debate about investigations of identity and helps the reader understand the rich potential that trauma studies has held for sociological research.

Marie Crhová  
Silesian University in Opava

**Michaela Náhliková.**

***Jewishness as Humanism in Bernard Malamud's Fiction.***

**Olomouc: Palacký University, 2010.**

The cover of Michaela Náhliková's book has a simple drawing—a bird standing on a barrel. The picture poignantly alludes to two short stories, "The Jewbird" and "The Magic Barrel" by Bernard Malamud, to whom her monograph is devoted. A quarter of century after Malamud's death, it is even more evident that this outstanding writer transcends the realm of Jewish American fiction. His work defies the strict categorization of ethnic literatures, providing us with a universal message. It is precisely this universal appeal of Malamud's novels and short stories that Náhliková underscores in her highly informative and well-structured study of the writer's work.

As indicated by a considerable number of monographs and essays, Bernard Malamud can be approached from various viewpoints, depending on what literary critics choose to highlight. He can be read as a realistic observer of Jewish immigrants in a big American city, a symbolist, or a storyteller mixing reality with fantasy in a Chagallesque manner; some critics even see him as an existentialist writer. As Sheldon J. Hershinow in his book *Bernard Malamud* (1980) remarked, the author's prose is a "distinctive mix of realism, myth, fantasy, romance, comedy, and fairy tale" (136). Michaela Náhliková presents Malamud, in accord with some other studies, as a humanist. She points out the humanistic tone of the author's stories and their deep moral message, which emerges from the conflict between man's personal freedom and his limitations. Malamud's monoanthropic concept of the Jews as suffering Everyman figures is seen through the prism of their responsibility, resulting in activity, whether embodied in Yakov Bok from the author's much-praised novel *The Fixer* or in many protagonists of his short stories.

Náhliková rightly claims that Jewishness in Malamud's fiction symbolizes more general, universal values and "serves as a platform for common human experience" (108). This is not to say that she ignores the unique cultural features of Malamud's characters, but again she interprets their Jewishness in connection with morality and humanism. Even so, in her interpretation, Malamud's marginalized hapless outsiders retain their Jewish identity despite the author's universalizing tendencies. In fact, Malamud is perceived as one of the most Jewish writers in American literature, and Náhliková's book confirms this judgment. She cogently shows that the Jewishness of his characters does not consist in their religion, but rather in their morality and humanity. Morris Bober from Malamud's early novel *The Assistant*, the old Jewish tailor Manishevitz from the famous short story "Angel Levine", Mendel from the title story of the author's second collection of short stories *Idiots First*, and many other characters are Jews attached to their own system of values, in which they find the truth. Despite numerous biblical allusions, Malamud's characters are conceived as mundane beings with their earthly joys and pains, more often with their Jobian suffering and lamentations. The nature of these characters compelled Náhliková to draw a distinction between Judaism and Jewishness, though in her claim that the division between them "was fully completed" (17), she seems to set up a rather artificial schism or even an insurmountable chasm between Jewish religious faith and cultural status—since there is always a space, even in Malamud's stories, for a possible symbiosis of the two. However, she is

right when she describes the writer's approach to faith as universal, not only religious in its content.

On the other hand, a lack of faith, as well as the denial of the Jewish past and subsequently of ethnic identity, can have devastating effects, as we can see from the interpretations of such stories as "The Silver Crown", "The Lady of the Lake", "The Last Mohican", or the novella "Man in the Drawer". The past, linked with suffering, is meaningful, and becomes a very important if not crucial component of Jewish identity. Ignorance or denial of personal and collective history brings about the loss of this identity, which may be restored in an encounter with an observant Jew, as some stories indicate, or paradoxically in a prison during the worst suffering (*The Fixer*). As Náhliková suggests, faith is often accompanied by doubts, and the struggle between both forces is what characterizes Malamud's fiction. She is, however, aware that faith itself is not sufficient in Malamud's stories; it must be imbued with love that leads to humanity, as is seen from her approach to such stories as "Take Pity" and "Idiots First".

Malamud's emphasis on humanity is not in contradiction with the theme of anti-humanism—which, in Náhliková's interpretation, functions as a warning. She thoroughly analyzes the various manifestations of this theme in Malamud's prose—anti-Semitism (e.g. *The Fixer*, "The Jewbird"), racial prejudices ("Angel Levine", "Black Is My Favorite Color", *The Tenants*), and the total dehumanization of mankind, reflected in Malamud's last finished novel *God's Grace*. She charts Malamud's pessimism, growing in intensity from *The Tenants* and *Dubin's Lives* and culminating in *God's Grace*. In her analysis of this novel, she uncovers various questions posed by Malamud, pointing out the biblical background of his story. The need for humanity is visible even in the stories with non-human characters (which are nonetheless endowed with human traits) whose human-ness is confronted with the inhuman behavior of human beings ("The Jewbird" but also "Talking Horse", a story which is not analyzed in the book). Throughout her book, Náhliková rightly pays attention to a very significant feature of Malamud's prose, namely his use of grotesque and fantastic (magic) elements. She convincingly argues that in these stories, Malamud does not place emphasis on the supernatural, but rather on the human qualities of his protagonists. In combination with the realistic core of his stories, the supernatural ceases to be perceived as unbelievable, and instead becomes a very natural and integral part of their structure. Let us add that this strategy draws on Yiddish folklore, rooted in Eastern and Central Europe of previous centuries.

In the chapter "Jewishness and Schlemielhood: Man Versus Stereotype", Náhliková clearly explains the terms *schlemiel* and *schlimazel* and applies them to Malamud's work. If we stick rigidly to the traditional definition of *schlemiel*, we can agree with the assertion, promoted by such authorities on Yiddish and Jewish culture as Ruth Wisse (in her book *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*), that the figure of the *schlemiel* is gradually disappearing from American fiction. Yet I strongly believe that even in a society that glorifies heroes and superheroes, the figure of the *schlemiel* has not vanished. It has been transplanted and modified, deprived of some quintessential features such as simplicity and passivity. To put it simply, Malamud's characters are far away from S. Aleichem's Tevye, I. L. Peretz's Bontsha the Silent and I. B. Singer's Gimpel the Fool. On the other hand, I fully understand Náhliková's concern about the rather reductionist approach of some literary critics to Malamud's characters, which results in a stereotyping of Jews as passive victims of

circumstances. She rejects the too straightforward concept of a Jew as a metaphor, because she is convinced that “categorizing the characters greatly reduces their fates and complexity” (107). Here she seems to respond to such scholarly studies as R. Alter’s “Bernard Malamud: Jewishness as Metaphor” (published in *After the Tradition: Essays on Modern Jewish Writing*) and S. Pinsker’s *The Schlemiel as Metaphor: Studies in Yiddish and American Jewish Fiction*.

One of the strengths of this book is the way in which it places Malamud’s work into its broader contexts—philosophical (for example Náhliková’s inspiring application of M. Buber’s philosophy to the analysis of the novel *The Assistant*), religious, social, and last but not least, literary. Also on the positive side, Náhliková’s interpretation includes many examples of intelligent judgments which reveal her sensitivity to Malamud’s texts. On the other hand, at times her monograph tends to be rather descriptive, especially in the passages in which the author inclines to retell the plot. Náhliková’s acquaintance with the secondary sources dealing with B. Malamud and Jewish American literature is impressive; however this virtue turns against her as her text is excessively overloaded with many quotations due to which her own voice tends to be diluted. Náhliková’s analysis does not cover Malamud’s complete works, as she refrained from interpreting his *Pictures of Fidelman: An Exhibition* and the novels *The Natural* and *A New Life*. Although Malamud’s first novel *The Natural* is the least “Jewish” novel in the context of his work, it forms an important part of his writings and therefore should not be omitted. On the other hand, Náhliková devoted space to the unfinished book *The People*. In her analysis of *The Fixer*, she mentions Israel Zangwill’s interest in the Mendel Beiliss, which inspired Malamud to write this novel. It would be beneficial to compare the novel with Maurice Samuel’s non-fiction book *Blood Accusation* and to trace the function of Malamud’s departures from real facts. A few inaccuracies have crept into the text (e.g. Bernard Malamud did not die in 1984 but in 1986; the final violent scene of *The Tenants* is more fantastic than real).

All in all, Náhliková’s monograph represents a very valuable contribution to studies of Jewish American literature in the Czech Republic. It addresses a highly challenging subject and manages to present one of the most interesting American writers of the 20th century as a conscious humanist for whom “being Jewish was an ethical stance” (115) and who wrote his books without sentimentalizing Jewishness.

Stanislav Kolář  
University of Ostrava

**Šárka Bubíková.**

***Úvod do studia dětství v americké literatuře.***

**Pardubice: Univerzita Pardubice, 2009.**

Šárka Bubíková, in her *Úvod do studia dětství v americké literatuře* (Introduction to the Study of Childhood in American Literature), reflects current trends in the humanities. Childhood as a theme has received the attention of Czech scholars (see e.g. the 2006 publication by Milena Lenderová and Karel Rýdl, *Radostné dětství?*) and this book extends the available range of general information on such texts. The publication will suit not only those who are involved in the study of English literature, but also those readers who simply enjoy reading and want to go beyond the simple “consumption” of a book. In the introduction, Bubíková clearly defines the target group of her publication and places it on the boundary between a textbook and a popular book for readers with an interest in American literature but without the necessary linguistic skills to read the texts in the original. The purpose of the book is reflected in its chronological concept, where the author stresses time periods that brought some significant changes in understanding childhood.

The choice of the topic, and particularly the American literary milieu, is one of the many strong points of the book. It allows for the perception of childhood from a completely different perspective. Growing up in the Czech environment has its specific features, which have been well dealt with in other scholarly texts; however, the author of this book examines the particularities of growing up in the United States, the development of understanding of the phenomenon of childhood, and the changes in this understanding through different historical periods as reflected in the literature of the time. Such a concept offers ideal ground for cultural comparison, enabling one to identify the differences between growing up in Central Europe and the United States in different periods. The colonial period, for example, brought a very specific environment for a child – both physically and spiritually. According to Bubíková, the stress on moral upbringing and religious education is clearly reflected in texts published at the time. The threshold of modernity, with the advent of economic prosperity, brought about the decline of Puritan thought, and thus led to changes in the understanding of childhood: the increased respect for natural development, the turn away from seeing a child as a “little adult”, and so on. The modern era then brought a further emphasis on childhood as a time of development and learning, which is not to be quickly overcome, but on the contrary, used and enjoyed. Interestingly, the author’s portrayal of postmodern childhood seems to complete the circular development of the understanding of childhood by again bringing the notion of the child closer to that of the adult (similarly to pre-industrial times). Besides presenting the philosophical, religious, social, psychological and educational milieu of childhoods in different periods, Bubíková also makes very useful comparisons and references, thus producing a coherent picture of her chosen topic. The citations are well selected to precisely illustrate her points. Apart from the chronological approach, the author also strives to paint a complete social picture, and so she includes chapters on the ways in which childhood is influenced by racial or gender issues. The final chapter is devoted to the genre of the Bildungsroman, perhaps in order not to omit adolescence – the bridge between childhood and adulthood.

In summary, the reviewed publication presents not merely an introduction, but an insight into the phenomenon of childhood in American literature. The author’s expertise

and experience is clear from the organisation of the text, its informativeness and the variety of well-chosen citations from primary sources. The book *Úvod do studia dětství v americké literatuře* is a valuable teaching resource, and at the same time a good popular source for non-student readers.

Olga Roebuck  
University of Pardubice