

Nicholas Lezard says goodbye to the brat pack

Self And Co

What has Margaret Thatcher done for the British novel - or, more specifically, the talent of the *enfants terribles* who we all thought were going to rescue it? Until we learnt that She was mortal, it looked like she had personally seen it off. Now we know that she only presided over its disappearance. Do you remember that chilling moment when she revealed that she was reading *The Fourth Protocol* for the *second* time? That's what she thought of literature.

The 80s began with some hope that the decade was going to be an exciting one for fiction. Some hope. Looking at the Booker winners gives us a clue. True, Salman Rushdie got it in '81 with *Midnight's Children*, but then the monumentally untalented Thomas Keneally lucked out in '82 with a book that wasn't even fiction. Martin Amis's *Money* never even made the shortlist, but Martin Amis's money was a fabulous consolation. Of course the Booker, apart from weird hiccups like Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* (1985), has

always been crippled by gentility. It was the ungentle authors we had to look to for deliverance. And, for a while, they delivered.

Adam Mars-Jones's *Lantern Lecture* (1981) glittered with promise and intelligence. The *Times Literary Supplement*, approvingly and equally perceptively, labelled him a punk. (In one story, the Queen catches rabies from one of her own corgis.) *Money* itself brought us the gross John Self, farting, eating, snorting, drinking and wanking his way through civilisation. It wasn't a pretty sight; if the word 'awesome', in the Californian sense, gives us a purchase on the phenomenon. If ever there was an unreconstructed Thatcherite, it was J. Self. Sensitive readers found him too much to handle but many had a soft spot for him. This might have been his fall.

A sensibility bruised by the spirit of the age might have made Amis, and the author most often mentioned in the same breath, Ian McEwan, turn from their seedy heroes and appropriate voi-

ces that would telegraph their concerns more obviously. The next time Amis junior turned to full-scale fiction in *London Fields*, he told it all through sappy Samson Young, a dying writer obsessed by the beauty of babies' eyes, but pathetically unaware that his creator was involved in a shabby deceit: while you listened to the dewy-eyed man on the doorstep (the fate of the earth! All those nice babies! Those terrible nuclear bombs!) a stunted sidekick had slipped in the house and was spraying misogynist, snobbish graffiti all over the place. (It was his tv appearance that did it. When Amis announced that the streets of Notting Hill were 'seething with riot' - by which he meant that he felt uncomfortable carrying his tennis racket down the Portobello Road - we saw what had been latent in his fiction all along. Fans turned apostate.)

As for McEwan: *The Comfort Of Strangers*, an empty, threatening book, has been turned into an empty, harmless film. And *The Child In Time* was a seductively-written hippy anti-abortion tract, its author duped into believing the essential fiction of fatherhood (as pointed out mercilessly in Adam

Mars-Jones's *Counterblast*, *Venus Envy*. Oh, Adam: why haven't you written a novel?). The book was still technically brilliant in parts, but not even that could be said for *The Innocent*. A low-key spy yarn of intelligent mediocrity, with some free gruesome bits thrown in. The critical hoopla that welcomed it demonstrated just how easily the reviewers could be persuaded to welcome a name, rather than a talent.

Publishing gossip can help crystallise your response to a book in a way that criticism can't: so remember *London Fields* went to the publishers with strict instructions not to change a syllable, and *The Innocent* secured an advance of £250,000 (all together now: a quarter of a million beer vouchers for *that?*).

And Mrs Thatcher herself? How did the novelists treat her? Apart from a few token sneers in the brief mania publishers had for yob fiction, nothing much. She was too bizarre a character for all but the most undaunted writers to try to tackle. A cameo appearance as Mrs Torture in a book by Salman Rushdie called *The Satanic Verses*. I hear it's awfully good. Try to get hold of a copy when it comes out in paperback.*