

[ HARDCOVER: UK ]

## Now you see him, now you don't

Amos Oz cleverly contorts reality in his new novel, but postmodernism remains a dead end for fiction

BY ADAM MARS-JONES  
THE OBSERVER, LONDON

In M.C. Escher's 1956 lithograph *The Print Gallery*, represented space is made to curve so that what seems to be an exhibit hanging on the wall turns out, as the eye travels over the picture, to contain the entire gallery. In visual art, an effect of this sort is easily categorized as an optical illusion — but then the representation of three dimensions in two is an illusion by definition — or impossible object. It gives pleasure or irritation, but it doesn't call the whole artistic enterprise into question.

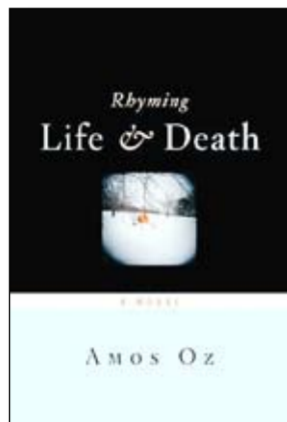
Things are different when similar effects are carried over into fiction, as they are in Amos Oz's *Rhyming Life and Death*. An Israeli writer known only as the Author attends a cultural evening at which his work is analyzed, read aloud and discussed. He imagines lives for some of the people in the audience, and those who share the podium with him, giving them names and histories. Scenes between the Author and these figments are played out with variations, are reworked or erased, rather as happened with the Gielgud character in Alain Resnais' 1977 movie *Provvidence*.

The destabilization is more drastic than Escher's and suddenly there is need for a technical term: postmodernism. The reason for the difference must be the element of time and the fact that readers don't just contemplate that illusory third dimension but inhabit it continuously. The book is on the beguiling end of the scale for such experiments (whose single most enjoyable example must be David Hughes' *The Little Book*), but readers are likely to experience something more like an evocation than a piece of playfulness.

*Rhyming Life and Death* is partly a sketch of a particular psychology, though that is something that could have been managed in any number of other ways. The Author is almost oppressed by his inventions, but can't help appropriating details from everyone he meets, a sort of metaphysical kleptomaniac. He has developed a dread of physical contact with strangers and imagination is his only remaining access to intimacy: "He continues to watch them and write about them so as to touch them without touching, and so that they touch him without really touching him." Does creativity supersede the world or merely drain it?

Any book with an unnamed writer at its center must expect to be seen as autobiographical. At first, this seems not to be the case with *Rhyming Life and Death*, since the Author is a few decades younger than the author, except that the book has a period (1980s) setting. The Author's career is distinctly unspecified, except for one odd detail. He has a day job, as an accountant (though there's no detail given about that life either). Perhaps playing the game

### Publication Notes



RHYMING LIFE AND DEATH

BY AMOS OZ

155 PAGES

CHATTO

of postmodernism is a relief from the role of compulsory conscience, which attaches to any writer in a controversial state, just as the period setting, though recent, seems a time of innocence.

When Escher produced his 1948 image of two hands drawing each other, he didn't risk testing the viewer's patience, but the equivalent is-it-me-or-isn't-it? strain in postmodernism rendered even so vital a writer as Philip Roth a bit of a bore in novels of the 1980s and 1990s. Amos Oz has a light touch, but there's no disguising the way postmodernism rewrites the contract of fiction to the apparent benefit of the writer.

Postmodernism is in some ways a theory-driven trend; in others, it represents a costly triumph over the critic. Every possible response is pre-empted, every shot fired in advance. The critic within the book analyzes "the devices the Author has used, such as the strategy of the double negative, the snares and delusions he has concealed in the lower levels of his plot," then goes on to "the problem of credibility and reliability, which raises the fundamental question of narrative authority and, in turn, the dimension of social irony and the elusive boundary between this and self-irony..." And so on.

Intellectual engagement seems pointless when the book has already had the last word. Emotional engagement is ruled out by the shifting status of the "characters" — why step over the threshold and enter the interior spaces of the fiction, when the carpet is only there to be pulled out from under you?

Postmodernism in fiction seems to lead largely to dead ends, though Isak Dinesen with her Chinese-box structures of story within story and Borges with his labyrinths and mirrors go on testifying to the possibility of a metaphysical fiction less thoroughly armored against its audience, still attuned to the rewards of surrender.

enthusiasm," while Iyer agrees, pointing out that he combines "cosmopolitanism and innocence... authority and vulnerability." Youthfulness is what strikes me most about these columns. Someone who's traveled as much as Jacob must qualify to be called cosmopolitan, while his relative youth must make him something of an innocent, even if he has to write with an air of knowledgeability about some of the world's greatest restaurants.

And it's true that Jacob offers the persona of an innocent abroad. He admits quietly that he hasn't heard of some of the celebrities whose doings make up the table talk of London's "chattering classes" (one of his favorite phrases), and he has a chapter on the overlooked virtues of flying economy class. When he visits Dubai and is asked by a jaded colleague which seven-star hotel he'll be staying at, he's met with incomprehension when he replies that he'll be staying with friends.

In Rome, too, he's advised by his knowledgeable hosts on where to go to avoid the tourists. His undoubted innocence is confirmed when he passes these secrets on to his readers.

But there's also something else that characterizes the young about him. He's clearly fallen on his feet in very many ways, but you feel he still doesn't really know where his destiny lies. He's specialized in business and in management studies, and here he's writing about travel, eating and drinking. Yet he doesn't seem a natural *bon viveur*. He dislikes champagne, he says, and loathes caviar. Nor, it seems, does he pull his *FT* rank when ordering tables, accepting one grudgingly offered only at 5:30pm at one noted eatery.

He admires San Francisco, agreeing with many others that it's the US' most humane city. Yet he feels obliged to observe its credentials as a gay Mecca are getting a little antiquated, with one

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— Mathangi Arulpragasam, musician



## Louder than a bomb

Many in Sri Lanka are turned off by Oscar-nominated rapper M.I.A.'s views about the country's civil war

BY MEL GUNASEKERA  
AFP, COLOMBO

She's the songbird of the hit movie *Slumdog Millionaire* but in her native Sri Lanka suspicions about Oscar-nominated hip-hop star M.I.A.'s political sympathies have cost her success and fans.

Born in the UK to Sri Lankan parents — both ethnic Tamil — the 32-year-old rapper, whose real name is Mathangi Arulpragasam, grew up in the island's conflict-ridden north.

It's an experience she has said informs her music and she is unapologetic about her outspoken condemnation of the atrocities that have taken place during more than three decades of civil war.

After Arulpragasam's family fled to India and then back to London, she studied music and went on to achieve the sort of fame that saw her performing live, heavily pregnant, at this month's Grammy awards ceremony in Los Angeles.

Her song *Paper Planes*, on the *Slumdog Millionaire* sound track, was nominated for a Grammy as record of the year.

*O Saya*, her collaboration with Indian composer A.R. Rahman for the film, is up for a best-song Oscar.

While the accolades flood in, however, she said in a recent interview with [www.dailybeast.com](http://www.dailybeast.com) that her current focus is not on awards but



Sri Lankan singer Mathangi Arulpragasam (M.I.A.) is the songbird of the hit movie *Slumdog Millionaire*, but in her native Sri Lanka, suspicions over the hip-hop star's political sympathies have cost her success and fans.

PHOTOS: AFP

on the Tamil struggle for a separate homeland in Sri Lanka.

Her father is said to have been a Tamil militant linked to a group known for its bombing campaign in the capital Colombo in the mid 1980s.

The Tigers' 37 years of armed struggle is said by the government to be nearing an end with security forces on the verge of crushing the rebels, who are now corralled in a narrow jungle strip in the island's northeast.

Arulpragasam, in her interview with the US-based Web site, described the current situation as one of "systematic genocide and ethnic cleansing."

"I actually come from there and the fact is that this is happening now," she is quoted as saying.

"I lived in Sri Lanka when the

campaign for ethnic cleansing started and if I could stop it and see the end of it in my lifetime that would be amazing. I can't justify my success otherwise."

Such comments have not endeared her to parts of Sri Lanka's majority Sinhalese community, with some people accusing her of sympathizing with the Tigers — branded a terrorist organization by the EU and the US.

The music video of her song *Bird Flu* shows children dancing in front of what looks like the Tamil Tiger insignia of a roaring tiger.

"M.I.A.'s lyrics and style of music don't appeal to people here," said local rapper Krishan Maheson, who released an unofficial re-mixed version of *Paper Planes* in her native Tamil.

Maheson, also a Tamil, said he received hate mail for promoting the song. "The feedback was 'why are you working with her? She's a terrorist,'" Having said that, she deserves credit for her artistry and fame," Maheson said.

Her music is not played on Sri Lankan radio or television — which, like music retailers, dropped her for fear of offending the government as the war dragged on — or in nightclubs.

Her fans must make do with Internet sites such as YouTube or MySpace.

"I think there is a lot of political pressure not to play her music because of the hype surrounding her work," said local musician Eshantha Peiris.

Local song writer and jazz musician Dilip Seneviratne, who is Sinhalese, said: "She generates a lot of hype about her roots, about the war, but her stage presence and what she sang [at the Grammys] turned me off."

Critics such as US-based Sri Lankan rapper DeLon have accused her of glorifying terrorism and called her a

"terrorist chick."

Sri Lankan music fans have a broad spectrum of genres to choose from, with everything from pop, jazz, heavy metal and rock dominating the airwaves, and Western classical concerts playing to packed houses.

Local rap and pop performers who record in English are also popular, so there is little indication in the vigorous blogosphere debate on M.I.A. that the Sri Lankan music scene is poorer for her absence.

"M.I.A. doesn't have a clue about Sri Lanka," says blogger Surekha Ratnatunga. "She is the voice the world will listen to, but makes the same mistake as the government, by acknowledging the plight of only a portion of Sri Lankan population."

M.I.A.'s songs contain their fair share of violent imagery and the chorus of *Paper Planes* is peppered with percussive gunshot sounds as a backdrop to the implicitly violent lyrics: "All I want to do is — Bang! Bang! Bang! — And take your money."

But the artist insists her creativity is born of her own experience.

"If you think lyrics about guns are bad, I shouldn't have been shot at when I was 7 years old," she told the *Wall Street Journal*.

She said *Paper Planes* refers to the stereotypes that Third World immigrants to the West often suffer.

"It's about people driving cabs all day and living in a [expensive] apartment and appearing really threatening to society. But not being so," she told the *Houston Chronicle* newspaper.

"I've seen people get massacred in front of me. When you come from that kind of background, you do become matter of fact and tell it like it is," she said.

[ SOFTCOVER: INDIA ]

## Going to lots of places and none at all

Rahul Jacob is still finding his feet as a travel writer. But he does know how those in the know avoid the tourists in Rome

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Rahul Jacob has been the travel, food and drink editor of London's *Financial Times* since 2003, and this is a collection of pieces he first wrote for that newspaper. He grew up in Calcutta and left India at the age of 21 to study journalism in the US. Before joining the *FT* he covered business from Hong Kong for *Time* magazine and worked for *Fortune* in New York, writing about management.

The first thing to strike you about this book is its publisher. Shouldn't the travel editor of the *FT* be able to get a London or New York publisher for his book? Did it being published in India mean that it had been turned down by more prestigious houses elsewhere?

On the other hand, there are endorsements by travel-writing giants Jan Morris and Pico Iyer on the cover. Morris says Jacob is a natural cosmopolitan and possesses "a fresh and wonderfully infectious

enthusiasm," while Iyer agrees, pointing out that he combines "cosmopolitanism and innocence... authority and vulnerability."

Youthfulness is what strikes me most about these columns. Someone who's traveled as much as Jacob must qualify to be called cosmopolitan, while his relative youth must make him something of an innocent, even if he has to write with an air of knowledgeability about some of the world's greatest restaurants.

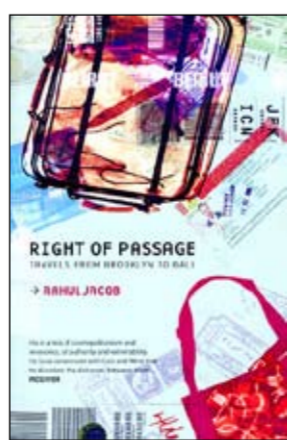
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RIGHT OF PASSAGE: TRAVELS FROM BROOKLYN TO BALI

BY RAHUL JACOB

266 PAGES

PICADOR INDIA

gay marriage held up while one of the couple made his way forward on a walker.

So — not naturally at home with business, nor management, nor high-dining, nor first-class travel, and maybe in the last resort not with travel at all. What then is Jacob really concerned with? Perhaps it's religion. Perhaps what he really wants to become is a priest.

This idea first struck me when I read his report on a Hong Kong lunch with Yann Martel, author of *The Life of Pi*. Martel is celebrated for his proposition that the scientific account of the world is just a story, and that what religions offer are simply different stories. But religion, he argues, has "the better story," and indeed "May you believe the better story" is what he inscribes in Jacob's copy of his novel as they part. "I realize that I still do not," writes Jacob.

I have to admit finding Jacob's travel impressions at best

inconclusive. That he is in essence something other than a business correspondent or frequent flyer is suggested when he relates how he applied for the position of *FT* Rome correspondent the moment it came vacant. He didn't get the job, but the fact that he yearned for it suggests that what he wanted was a sense of stability, of belonging to somewhere enduring and beautiful, that he's failed to find in cosmopolitan London, or on the globe-ranging tourist trail.

It's the same with his literary quotations. These constitute flourishing oases after his characteristic self-effacement, but he doesn't feel able to linger over them as one suspects he'd like to. So it's off to another trattoria, though he doesn't really enjoy fine food, or to another conference, though those who attend such things aren't really the kind of company he enjoys best.

So where's the rest? Where's the peace? In the arms of Mother Church, perhaps, or in some

ashram back in India? Each is hard to imagine, but others of a similar background have trodden this alternative path.

India-born intellectual Andrew Harvey, for example, author of *Hidden Journey* (1991), tells how one evening in India he saw a young female guru radiating an inexplicable light, and from that moment abandoned Western scientific materialism for ever.

This book claims to be in part about questions such as "Why do we travel?" There's no serious attempt at an answer, but one might be that we're searching for something. If it's not that, isn't travel just an endless series of distractions?

This is an attempt at a book, possibly a premature one, that nonetheless contains some intriguing material. But what Jacob appears not to know is that others have already traveled with the same perplexity and self-questioning he exhibits long before him.