Martin Amis isn’t new to the business of turning the horrors of history into fiction, but he has never done so more thoughtfully than in this disquieting novel. Amis first wrote about the Holocaust in *Time’s Arrow* (1991), in which readers were distracted from their revulsion by a teasing reverse chronology. In *The Zone of Interest*, the confrontation with “that which happened” (Paul Celan’s phrase) is direct. The mechanisms of atrocity are described with a level of restraint that has not always been evident in Amis’s work, and unanswerable questions about the origins of the “final solution” are framed with humility and grace. And yet a different kind of question, posed by the novel’s very existence, refuses to disappear: the question of using Auschwitz as the material for a novel in the first place.

The narrative unfolds in the “Kat Zet” (Amis’s term for Auschwitz in *Time’s Arrow* reappears here) between August 1942 and April 1943, as the tide turns against the Nazis, and the prospect of defeat begins to haunt those running the industrial machinery of the death camp. The grotesque figure of Paul Doll (loosely modelled on Rudolf Höss, who was the commandant at Auschwitz from May 1940 to November 1943) is the most repulsive of the book’s three narrators, with a quasi-comic capacity for vanity, hypocrisy and self-indulgence that slides into psychotic brutality. Szmul is a tormented Jew who leads the Sonderkommando, “the saddest men who ever lived”, a group of prisoners who preserve their lives by helping to manage the extermination process. Golo Thomsen, with Aryan hair of “frosty white” and “arctic eyes” of cobalt blue, is the fictional nephew of Martin Bormann. He is coordinating the construction of Auschwitz’s Buna-Werke, an industrial complex intended to produce synthetic rubber and fuel. Thomsen’s passion for Hannah, Doll’s statuesque wife, is at first little more than an erotic obsession. He compares himself with a bull elephant on heat (“I must, I must, I just must”), but his rampaging desire ripens into a tender affection. Thomsen’s deepening attachment provides qualified glimpses of hope in a story that can offer nothing to celebrate.

“Imagine how disgusting it would be if anything good came out of that place”, Hannah remarks. Here is Amis’s dilemma. The better his novel, the more disgusting its achievement. The idea of drawing on the Holocaust to create coruscating fiction is at best uncomfortable, and at worst exploitative and offensive; yet to declare the death camps out of bounds for novelists might risk a collective amnesia that would be even worse. And to write badly about Auschwitz would be intolerable. The novel repeatedly returns to the question of disgust. Szmul exhumes the buried testimony of one of his dead Sonderkommando colleagues, and finds it embroidered with lies about the eloquent nobility with which prisoners met their deaths. He thinks of the record he intends to leave behind him. “I understand that I am disgusting. But will I *write* disgustingly?”

The weight of Amis’s responsibility imposes an uncharacteristic constraint on his flamboyance. His language is often as exuberant, or as flippant, as ever, but its unremitting purpose is to direct the reader’s response. Author and reader must stand in the same soiled place. Doll’s self-revelations are defined by this necessity, for it would be a disaster if the reader began to feel a sneaking sympathy for his helplessly egotistical ineptitude. “I like numbers”, he tells us. “They speak of logic, exactitude, and thrift... I like numbers. Numbers, numerals, integers. Digits!” The message is simple – Doll distances himself from the reality of his work by translating it into the abstractions of arithmetic. The point is constantly reinforced as a verbal tic punctuating his musings, until it becomes a mechanical expression of alienation: – “1 thing was clear”; “the Jews’d give us the same treatment if they had ½ a chance, as everybody knows”; “After a moment or 2 I said... “. Only once does Amis endow the language of this terrifying clown with power and poetry, allowing him an aberrant and immediately repudiated moment of perception:

[If what we are doing is good, why does it smell so lancingly bad? On the ramp at night, why do we feel the ungainsayable need to get so brutishly drunk?....

I must shut down a certain zone in my mind.

I must accept that we have mobilized the weapons, the wonder weapons, of darkness.

And I must take to my heart the potencies of death.]

The zone of interest (*Interessengebiet*) was what the Nazis called the forcibly depopulated area (around 40 square kilometres) that surrounded the camp. In this novel, it is what “tells you who you are”, knowledge of a kind that Doll has to close down. Szmul translates his experience of this zone into the traditional language of fable, describing the camp as “the magic mirror” that “showed you who you really were”. Most of its inhabitants cannot find a way to deal with what the mirror shows them.

This is a novel that takes on themes of immense gravity, but chooses to diminish itself in doing so (“we were all reduced”, as Thomsen notes). Just as shrinking with disgust, rather than swelling with evil, is its distinguishing gesture, so the limits of insight, rather than the growth of understanding, drives its plot. No-one can understand what is happening, or why. In the personal afterword Amis describes the slow genesis of his novel in a marsh of incomprehension. Years of reading historical accounts of the Holocaust had led him to a “chronic stasis”, unable to penetrate beyond facts that remained “in some sense unbelievable, or beyond belief”. The creative breakthrough came when he encountered Primo Levi’s comments in *The Truce*:

Perhaps one cannot, what is more one must not, understand what happened, because to understand is almost to justify. Let me explain: “understanding” a proposal or human behavior means to “contain” it, contain its author, put oneself in his place, identify with him. Now, no normal human being will ever be able to identify with Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels, Eichmann, and endless others.

Though the commandant defiantly declares that “Paul Doll is completely normal”, he and his colleagues have abandoned the capacity for identification with other human beings that is the safeguard of normality. They are removed from shared experience, and can exist only as enigmas of vice.

“Historians will consider this more an evasion than an argument”, as Amis concedes. Amis is no historian, and he makes no claim to add to our knowledge of Auschwitz. His novel is burdened with scrupulous information, but it describes nothing that has not been documented hundreds of times in the mountain of publications spawned by the camp. His point lies in identifying failure; the failure of his characters, and our own continuing failure to comprehend. There’s a subdued flirtation with magical explanations – “something quite eerie and alien”, as Thomsen’s associate Konrad Peters (a professor of history who has served the Nazi Party Intelligence) puts it. “I wouldn’t call it supernatural, but only because I don’t believe in the supernatural. It feels supernatural.” Amis takes his epigraph from *Macbeth* (“Liver of blaspheming Jew,/Gall of goat, and slips of yew/Silvered in the moon’s eclipse”), and the climax of the novel takes place on April 30 -Walpurgisnacht, when witches were supposed to have gathered on the Brocken mountains to revel with their dark gods. It was “meant to be the time when you can cross the boundary between the seen and the unseen worlds. Between the world of light and the world of darkness”. Adolf Hitler died on April 30.

This suggestion of a “whiff of hellfire” is a diversion. What the crisis on Walpurgisnacht reveals to Hannah is not the glamour of otherworldly wickedness, but the vulgar triviality of the buffoon she married – “a nightmarish little boy. Caught doing something plainly disgusting. And still trying to smile”. Rather than aggrandizing him into the image of a billowing Brocken spectre, exposure cuts him down to size. Doll is no more than a disgustingly destructive child.

Peters’s second hypothesis is more persuasive. Perhaps the aggression was “quite human and plain and simple”, a product of a calculated political endorsement of cruelty, coupled with “something incredibly ancient. Going back to when we were all mandrills and baboons”. In this interpretation, humanity is inescapably less than human, and far from intelligent. “I’ve never seen one good reason for all this fuss about the Jews”, an irritated manager – a businessman – claims; though his own motives are hardly kinder: “here we have a people that it is opportune to exploit”. The self-defeating irrationality of Auschwitz is as baffling as its malice, seeming to arise from a predatory instinct that obliterates the capacity for thought. Thomsen, annoyed by a plague of mice in his lodgings, brings in a ruthlessly efficient cat, Maksik. Perhaps recalling Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *Maus*, Amis draws a natural analogy as Thomsen watches Maksik kill a mouse:

What was the mouse saying? It was saying, All I can offer, in mitigation, in appeasement, is the totality, the perfection, of my defencelessness.

What was the cat saying? It wasn’t saying anything, naturally. Glassy, starry, imperial, of another order, of another world.

This too won’t quite serve as an explanation. If the Germans were “naturally” cats, they also “went like sheep to the slaughterhouse. And then they donned the rubber aprons and set to work”.

Courage, rather than understanding, goes some way to humanize Amis’s lost protagonists. “Not everyone’s brave, my dear”, as Thomsen reminds his lifelong friend Boris, whose martial recklessness finally benefits no one. “It was hard to be brave in the Third Germany. You had to be ready to die – and to die after preludial torture which, moreover, you had to withstand, naming no names”. Thomsen’s sober reflections are prompted by his quest to discover the fate of Hannah’s first lover, Dieter Kruger. Hannah’s devotion to the heartless but indomitable Kruger stirs Thomsen into thought, and then, resentfully, into action. Kruger “was capable of courage. Hannah had loved him. And he was brave”. Courage does not earn redemption, but those who discover it might declare themselves to be something other than animals. Amis is careful not to exclude women from this observation. Doll, who sees women as possessions, is a sexually incapable voyeur, furtively spying on his wife and pubescent daughters as they bathe and dress. Thomsen seems equally proprietorial as we first encounter him: “as I watched Hannah curve her body forward, with her tensed rump and one mighty leg thrown up and out behind her for balance, I said to myself: This would be a big fuck. A big fuck: that was what I said to myself”. Reluctant to renounce his swaggering promiscuity, he is compelled to do so by Hannah’s resolute courage. Thomsen’s early prediction – “It’s hard to imagine it ending well” – resonates throughout his story; but without Hannah it would have had a still bleaker ending.

We are not left with the grandeur of tragedy, but the smaller sadness of a private defeat. The loss is all the sadder for the implication that it doesn’t much matter, located as it is in a desolate narrative in which nothing can be concluded. “Where did it come from, the need for such a methodical, such a pedantic, and such a literal exploration of the bestial? I of course didn’t know...” Amis shows courage of his own in conceiving a novel that insists on its inadequacy. Unease remains, for Auschwitz will always be troubling territory for fiction, but he has confronted its challenges with honour and delicacy, and without a trace of prurience. Hannah’s twelve-year-old daughter, ignorant of the corruption that surrounds her, asks one of the novel’s many opaque questions: “‘*What would you rather?*’ yelled Sybil from the distant sandpit. ‘*Know everything or know nothing*?’” The only answer is to walk away.