

<http://dx.doi.org/10.16926/trs.2018.03.07>

Paulina KASIŃSKA

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2393-5090>

Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa (Częstochowa)

The reception of *The Zone of Interest* by Martin Amis in the English, American, German and Polish literary and critical circulation

Summary: The author, analysing the critical-literary discussions in online daily press, shows that Martin Amis's *The Zone of Interest* received extremely mixed reviews. The novel was well received by English and American critics, but the reviews in Germany were rather negative. In Poland, *The Zone of Interest* received mixed reviews and the novel was hardly noticeable in the reading reception. According to the author, the reason for the polarized opinions of critics is the increased sensitivity of nations directly affected by the policy of the Third Reich to an unconventional approach to Holocaust literature, which aims to rework the trauma through breaking the Holocaust taboo.

Keywords: Martin Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, literary criticism, Holocaust, novel, trauma.

Although 72 years have passed since the end of the Second World War, Holocaust representation is still a matter of heated dispute. The events which took place between 1939 and 1945 were disastrous for humankind in so many respects that the question whether they should be represented in literature resurfaces continually. Thane Rosenbaum, an American writer whose both parents were prisoners of Nazi concentration camps, argues that only Holocaust survivors have the right to speak about those events as they experienced the war atrocities firsthand – their memories may be turned into testimonies or accurate literary representations. The author insists that writers born in post-Holocaust world should not tamper with history and should focus on easily observable consequences of the Shoah

on modern times instead¹. Moreover, Rosenbaum famously states that „if the Holocaust truly is unimaginable, then there is no place for the artist” because there is no artistic imagination equal to the task of describing the atrocities of the Nazis².

Although artists born after the war could not experience the Holocaust, those tragic events left imprints on their minds as well – the Holocaust was so universally profound event that its influence goes far beyond one generation. Disturbing stories, photographs and films were a mere substitute for war atrocities, yet, they still have a traumatising effect on the following generations³. Many writers were torn between the temptation to write about the Holocaust and their moral restrictions. Even though Rosenbaum compares the controversies surrounding the subject of the Shoah to a “modern-day Medusa head”⁴, a number of Holocaust novels is growing on the market. Originally, Holocaust-themed novels were written by the generation of the survivors such as André Schwarz-Bart, Imre Kertész or Aharon Appelfeld, to name but a few⁵. However, as Joyce Carol Oates remarks, “the generations of firsthand witnesses [had to] give way to younger generations”⁶. Nowadays, two tendencies are visible – some of the authors, like Ayelet Waldman or Susanna Moore, choose to write not about the Holocaust itself but about the aftermath. However, Martin Amis, the author of two highly controversial Holocaust novels, takes a completely different stance on the issue of Holocaust writing⁷.

Amis’s playful experiments with form seem to be completely at odds with Adorno’s statement that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”⁸ which became a moral imperative of Holocaust literature. Amis’s first Holocaust novel, *Time’s Arrow: or The Nature of the Offence*, debuted in 1991. The book features the life of Nazi doctor but the story is told in a very particular way – it is narrated in reverse chronology by the protagonist’s soul.

¹ T. Rosenbaum, *The Audacity of Aesthetics: The Post-Holocaust Novel and the Respect for the Dead*, “Poetics Today” 2006, no. 2, vol. 11, p. 490, source: <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2005-016> [accessed: 1.01.2018].

² *Ibidem*, p. 491.

³ M. Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, “Poetics Today” 1996, no. 17, p. 106.

⁴ T. Rosenbaum, *The Audacity of Aesthetics: The Post-Holocaust Novel and the Respect for the Dead*, “Poetics Today” 2006, no. 2, vol. 11, p. 493.

⁵ J.C. Oates (rev.), *The Death Factory*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, “The New Yorker”, 29.09.2014, source: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/29/death-factory> [accessed: 12.12.2017].

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ T. Adorno, *Cultural Criticism and Society*, [in:] *idem, Prisms*, transl. S. and S. Weber, MIT Press, Cambridge 1981, p. 17–34.

The novel attracted dispute because of the experimental form and difficult subject matter⁹. After a quarter of century Amis decided to approach a subject once again with *The Zone of Interest* (2014), his fourteenth novel. The writer once again broke, as Wulf Kansteiner and Todd Presner called it, “the taboo of a romantic-comic emplotment of the Holocaust”¹⁰.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the reception and circulation of *The Zone of Interest*, the latest novel of British author Martin Amis, in the area of the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Germany and Poland. Is Holocaust-themed literature still considered a taboo? How did Holocaust theme affect the reception of Amis’s novel? Hopefully, the conducted research will help to answer these questions.

Martin Amis is one of the most controversial authors in the United Kingdom. Sam Leith claims that “[t]here is no living British writer who garners as much attention as Amis; so much of it hostile; and so much of that hostility, circularly, arising from the attention itself”¹¹. However, it is easy to observe that in spite of wide media coverage, Amis rarely wins any literary awards. Stephen Adams notes that Amis’s biggest honour was his nomination to The Man Booker Prize for *Time’s Arrow* in 1991¹². In comparison, his father, Kingsley Amis, was awarded with the Man Booker Prize and the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, a British order of chivalry rewarding those who contributed to the development of the arts and sciences¹³. Amis commented on this situation during the Hay Festival in Wales: “There was a great fashion in the last century, and it’s still with us, of the unenjoyable novel, and these are the novels which win prizes, because the committee thinks, »Well it’s not at all enjoyable, and it isn’t funny, therefore it must be very serious«”¹⁴.

⁹ S. Jordison (rev.), *Guardian book club: Time’s Arrow by Martin Amis*, M. Amis, *Time’s Arrow*, “The Guardian”, 20.01.2010, source: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2010/jan/20/times-arrow-martin-amis> [accessed: 1.12.2017].

¹⁰ W. Kansteiner, T. Presner, *Introduction: The Field of Holocaust Studies and the Emergence of Global Holocaust Culture*, [in:] *Probing the Ethics of Holocaust Culture*, eds. C. Fogu, W. Kansteiner, T. Presner, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2016, p. 27.

¹¹ S. Leith, *Why we love to hate Martin Amis*, “The Guardian”, 15.08.2014, source: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/15/love-to-hate-martin-amis> [accessed: 30.12.2017].

¹² S. Adams, *Martin Amis: Only unenjoyable books win literary prizes*, “The Telegraph”, 7.06.2010, source: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/7807513/Martin-Amis-Only-unenjoyable-books-win-literary-prizes.html> [accessed: 1.01.2018].

¹³ *Amis, Kingsley 1922–1995*, Concise Major 21st Century Writers, Encyclopedia.com, 13.05.2018, source: <http://www.encyclopedia.com>, [accessed: 1.03.2018].

¹⁴ S. Adams, *Martin Amis: Only unenjoyable books win literary prizes*, “The Telegraph”, 7.06.2010, source: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/7807513/Martin-Amis-Only-unenjoyable-books-win-literary-prizes.html> [accessed: 1.01.2018].

Amis's novel, *The Zone of Interest*, tells the story of an unusual love triangle. A high-ranking Nazi officer, Angelus „Golo” Thomsen, falls in love with the wife of Paul Doll, a camp commandant. The story is shown from three narrative standpoints – apart from the perspective of two above-mentioned Nazis, the reader can see the events through the lens of Szmul Zachariasz, the leader of Sonderkommando, a special unit in charge of disposal of gas chamber victims. The book is classified as an example of historical fiction – Amis declares that although he made up the personal lives of the protagonists, the story is set against events that actually took place at Auschwitz in 1942¹⁵.

The book was published on 28 August 2014 by Jonathan Cape, known as one of the most renowned publishing houses in the United Kingdom¹⁶. Despite the difficult subject matter, Amis's book met with critical acclaim in this area. *The Zone of Interest* was shortlisted for The Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction, one of the largest literary awards in the UK¹⁷. Martin Amis was also nominated by The International Dublin Literary Award¹⁸.

The feature that distinguishes *The Zone of Interest* from other Amis's works is the language. Amis is known as one of the most controversial living writers in the United Kingdom¹⁹ so a relative moderation presented in his novel was greatly appreciated by English critics. Jack Kerridge points out that highly sophisticated language is a typical quality of Amis's prose, yet, in *The Zone of Interest* the author seemed to adjust the language to the seriousness of the theme of the novel and as a result “the customary verbal pyrotechnics and show-off vocabulary are largely absent”²⁰. Another typi-

¹⁵ M. Amis, *Martin Amis: “The Zone of Interest”*, interviewed by Donna Seaman, 30.10.2014, source: <https://chicagohumanities.org/events/2014/journeys/martin-amis-zone-of-interest> [accessed: 15.01.2018].

¹⁶ J. Cape, *Martin Amis, The Zone of Interest, published August 28th*, 10.06.2014, published on Twitter, source: <https://twitter.com/jonathancape/status/476379141848453121> [accessed: 14.01.2018].

¹⁷ The Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction, *2015 Shortlist announced*, 24.03.2015, source: <http://www.walterscottprize.co.uk/2015-shortlist-announced/> [accessed: 13.02.2018].

¹⁸ The International Dublin Literary Award, *The Nominees 2016 Longlist*, <http://www.dublinliteraryaward.ie/nominees/the-zone-of-interest/> [accessed: 9.02.2018].

¹⁹ S. Leith, *Why we love to hate Martin Amis*, “The Guardian”, 15.08.2014, source: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/15/love-to-hate-martin-amis> [accessed: 30.12.2017].

²⁰ J. Kerridge (rev.), *The Zone Of Interest review: The best Martin Amis novel in two decades*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, “Express”, 24.08.2014, source: <https://www.express.co.uk/entertainment/books/502760/The-Zone-Of-Interest-by-Martin-Amis-review> [accessed: 4.02.2018].

cal quality of Amis's works is his quirky sense of humour which, according to Alex Preston, seems to be largely restrained in the novel in question. What is more, Amis's jokes are "always directed towards the novel's ethical ends"²¹ and seek to show the absurdity of the Nazi regime. Preston praises the author for regaining the right balance between seriousness and humour and concludes that "facing the Medusa's head of Auschwitz has had a salutary effect on Amis's writing"²².

Although the plot of Amis's fourteenth novel, branded by the English publisher as "fearless and original"²³, attracts much attention, it is definitely not an easy read. Wynn Wheldon claims that the book is definitely a challenging one as it displays "grubbiness [that] threatens to turn to disgust. Disgust with author and disgust with oneself for giving in to the rhetorical power of his writing"²⁴. Wheldon compares the finishing of reading of *The Zone of Interest* to the feeling of a physical relief but she is quick to add that the novel is "best for 25 years"²⁵. The reviewer particularly praises Amis's mode of narration and how he assigned additional meaning through his characters' names²⁶. Katy Guest calls the novel "horrifically brilliant" but indicates that the plot is anticlimactic. However, these charges are greatly reduced as the reviewer concludes that "the ridiculous pointlessness" of the book is intentional – in this way, Amis wanted to show the paradox of "the futility of writing about the Holocaust, and the impossibility of ever writing about anything else"²⁷.

In the United States of America, *The Zone of Interest* was published by the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group on 30 September 2014²⁸. The re-

²¹ A. Preston (rev.), *The Zone of Interest review – Martin Amis's impressive holocaust novel*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, "The Guardian", 7.09.2014, source: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/07/the-zone-of-interest-review-martin-amis-impressive-holocaust> [accessed: 20.01.2018].

²² Ibidem.

²³ Penguin UK, *The Zone of Interest*, source: <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/1098898/the-zone-of-interest/> [accessed: 19.01.2018].

²⁴ W. Wheldon (rev.), *The Zone of Interest is grubby, creepy – and Martin Amis's best for 25 years*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, "The Spectator", 16.08.2014, source: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2014/08/the-zone-of-interest-by-martin-amis-review/> [accessed: 1.02.2018].

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ K. Guest (rev.), *The Zone of Interest by Martin Amis, book review: Amis' best book in years*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, "The Independent", 21.08.2014, source: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-zone-of-interest-by-martin-amis-review-9682965.html> [accessed: 7.01.2018].

²⁸ Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, *Martin Amis events*, source: <http://knopfdoubleday.com/tag/martin-amis-events/> [accessed: 28.01.2018].

views were also largely positive. Anthony Marra regards the book as “a benchmark for what serious literature can achieve”²⁹. Additionally, Marra states that it is difficult to deny that *The Zone of Interest* possesses moral values and praises the multidimensionality of Amis’s novel comparing its plot to “a thin skin encasing more muscular moral and philosophical concerns”³⁰. The reviewer makes an interesting remark about the title of Amis’s novel by stating that the zone of the interest is not only the ground surrounding the concentration camp but also, even more importantly, the setting of the human soul³¹. Joyce Carol Oates states that “Martin Amis is at his most compelling as a satiric vivisectionist with a cool eye and an unwavering scalpel”³² but he criticises the language used in the novel. Oates notes that Amis tends to insert German vocabulary into the statements of his characters to put emphasis on certain statements and does it in such an unskilful way that the apparent mannerism is distracting for a reader³³. Unlike Oates, Ruth Franklin appreciates Amis’s experiments with German language adding that they show well how the camp reality influenced the language of the main characters in the novel³⁴. Interestingly, Sophie Gilbert ponders over Amis’s courage to tackle the theme of the Holocaust once again, writing that such attempt could only be made by “a brave, possibly deranged soul”³⁵. Gilbert points out an interesting detail which may be the answer for the question of the purpose of such novel as *The Zone of Interest*. In the afterword, Amis concludes that his efforts to understand why the Holocaust happened were futile. However, the writer comes up with a seemingly obvious conclusion which is a kind of negative eureka – people commit appalling atrocities without a single reason³⁶.

Despite the critical success of Amis’s book in the UK and the USA, the author of *The Zone of Interest* had many difficulties with finding publishers

²⁹ A. Marra (rev.), “*The Zone of Interest*” by Martin Amis: review, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, “SFGate”, 24.09.2014, source: <http://www.sfgate.com/books/article/The-Zone-of-Interest-by-Martin-Amis-review-5778757.php> [accessed: 30.01.2018].

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² J.C. Oates (rev.), *The Death Factory*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, “The New Yorker”, 29.09.2014, source: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/29/death-factory> [accessed: 12.12.2017].

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ R. Franklin (rev.), *Viper’s Nest*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, “The New York Times”, 3.10.2014, source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/05/books/review/martin-amis-zone-of-interest.html> [accessed: 19.01.2018].

³⁵ S. Gilbert (rev.), *Returning to Auschwitz*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, “The Atlantic”, 3.09.2014, source: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/09/the-zone-of-interest-the-novel-by-martin-amis-reviewed/380945/> [accessed: 1.03.2018].

³⁶ Ibidem.

for his books in Europe. In an interview for “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung”, Amis admits that the novel was rejected by his long-time German publisher, Hanser-Verlag, because it was “not convincing enough”. Amis mentions that the letter from Hanser-Verlag shows some objections regarding one of the protagonist, Angelus Thomsen. The author explains that the figure of Thomsen is a dynamic character – despite the fact that he is an enemy of the Nazi regime from the very beginning of the novel, only later does he engage in the active resistance against the Third Reich. The changes in Thomsen are gradual and fuelled by his affection towards Hannah Doll, the wife of the camp commandant, but the publisher argued that the character is inconsistent. The interviewer, Thomas David, mentions that according to German publishing circles, the real reason behind Hanser-Verlag decision is that the subject matter of the book is just „too frivolous”. However, Amis is convinced that German society came to terms with their past and was regards the bias of Hanser-Verlag against his book as unnecessary³⁷.

Amis’s stance regarding the attitude of German society towards the Holocaust seems to be exaggerated. As Gavriel D. Rosenfeld notices, “since its emergence from the rubble of 1945, Germany has been haunted by memory”³⁸. Reworking the past is indeed an important concept within German culture and literature. The reflection of this tendency may be seen in the fact that German language developed a word to denote the struggle with their history. The collective efforts to deal with the past were called *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, usually translated as “coming to terms with the past”³⁹. However, a certain split regarding this issue can be seen within German society. One side of the conflict argues that Germany succeeded in dealing with the legacy of Third Reich thanks to war reparations paid to the Allied governments, bringing a part of Nazi criminals to justice and repressing of neo-Nazi tendencies as much as possible while the other side points out that German society is still not able to confront the history. Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich famously drew attention to German society’s inability to accept their guilt for perpetrating the Holocaust – the authors of

³⁷ T. David, *Das Buch, das mein deutscher Verlag abgelehnt hat*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung”, 27.08.2014, source: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/martin-amis-ueber-sein-buch-the-zone-of-interest-13120569-p2.html> [accessed: 3.01.2018].

³⁸ G.D. Rosenfeld, *Munich and Memory: Architecture, Monuments, and the Legacy of the Third Reich*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2000, p. 1.

³⁹ J.D. Fackenthal, *The Problem of Coming to Terms with the Past: A Post-Holocaust Theology of Remembrance*, CGU Theses & Dissertations, 2012, Paper 33, p. 1, source: http://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgu_etd/33/ [accessed: 1.03.2018].

The Inability to Mourn argued that Germany must confront the history if German society wants to move on after the Holocaust⁴⁰.

The existence of the above-mentioned conflict may have contributed to the reception of *The Zone of Interest* in Germany, where the reviews of *The Zone of Interest* (*Interessengebiet*) were rather negative. According to Stefan Mahlke, Amis's attempts to write a satire ended up with a bitter failure. The reviewer shares the aforementioned view of Hanser-Verlag and severely criticises characters presented in the novel. According to Mahlke, the transformation of Thomsen robs him of his multidimensionality. As a result, the figure of Thomsen and his romance with Hannah fit more into the Hollywood industry than a Holocaust-themed satire. However, Mahlke praises the figure of Paul Doll who becomes more and more caricatural over the course of the novel and lets Amis fully develop his satirical abilities⁴¹. Hubert Spiegel has some serious objections regarding Amis's novel as well. In his opinion, it is not possible to overcome the barrier of prejudice about novels such as *The Zone of Interest*. The reviewer states that Amis's caustic humour is inappropriate for the Holocaust-themed work. Moreover, Spiegel points out that Amis did a considerable research to write *The Zone of Interest* but still he did not avoid clichés and his story did not present anything new in terms of our knowledge regarding the Holocaust⁴².

Nevertheless, there was positive feedback from German reviewers as well. Maik Brüggemeyer points out that the author has always been associated with provocativeness and his works usually feature taboo topics. *The Zone of Interest* may seem disrespectful at first but, according to the reviewer, Martin Amis holds the topic of the Holocaust in high regard. What is more, Brüggemeyer praises the author for showing the perspective of perpetrators, victims and resisters and calls the novel brilliant⁴³. The review published by German magazine "Focus" indicates that Amis's novel is

⁴⁰ G.D. Rosenfeld, *Munich and Memory: Architecture, Monuments, and the Legacy of the Third Reich*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2000, p. 23 .

⁴¹ S. Mahlke, *Stecker gezogen*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, "Die Tageszeitung", 30.10.2015, source: <https://www.taz.de/Archiv-Suche/?!5245228&s=STEFAN+MAHLKE/> [accessed: 3.01.2018].

⁴² H. Spiegel, *Die Liebe in Zeiten des Massenmords*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung", 20.09.2015, source: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/rezensionen/belletristik/martin-amis-holocaust-roman-interessengebiet-13807068-p2.html> [accessed: 4.03.2018].

⁴³ M. Brüggemeyer, *Kein deutscher Verlag traute sich den neuen Roman von Martin Amis zu veröffentlichen. Warum eigentlich?*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, "Rolling Stone", 27.08.2015, source: <https://www.rollingstone.de/reviews/martin-amis-interessengebiet/> [accessed: 2.03.2018].

a great satire which provokes the reader into thinking about the presented issue in a new way. To achieve this effect, Amis deliberately employed exaggeration and distortion. Although *The Zone of Interest* is often compared to Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* (2006), the peculiarity makes it incomparable to anything that had been written before⁴⁴. A very controversial point of view is presented by Alan Posener who calls Amis's novel a masterpiece and goes as far as accusing the publisher of withdrawing the novel of one of the most renowned British novelists from German readers⁴⁵.

Six months after the rejection, *The Zone of Interest* found a new publisher. Kein und Aber, an Zurich-based publishing house, believed in the success of Amis's novel on the German market and decided to publish *The Zone of Interest* in a translation by Werner Schmitz. Peter Haag, the founder of Kein und Aber, said that the company is "delighted to have Martin Amis on board [because] he is one of the top authors in contemporary English literature and he also has a very unusual and satirical view of the world"⁴⁶, adding that he is puzzled by Hanser's decision about rejection of the novel. Kein und Aber decided also to re-release *The Rachel Papers* (1973) and *Money* (1984) which were out of print in Germany for over ten years⁴⁷. Interestingly, the rejection of Amis's book in Germany was not his only difficulty in Europe – *The Zone of Interest* was also rejected by his French publisher, Gallimard, but the book was eventually published by Calmann-Lévy, a Paris-based publishing house⁴⁸.

In Poland, *The Zone of Interest* (*Strefa interesów*) was published by Rebis which is one of the most important translating publishers with headquarters in Poznań. Rebis had previously published Amis's *Dead Babies* (1975), *Success* (1978) and *Lionel Asbo: State of England* (2012)⁴⁹. *The Zone*

⁴⁴ *The Zone of Interest*, Martin Amis' Roman "Interessengebiet" auf Deutsch, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, „Focus“, 8.09.2015, source: https://www.focus.de/kultur/buecher/literatur-martin-amis-roman-interessengebiet-auf-deutsch_id_4932765.html [accessed: 19.03.2018].

⁴⁵ A. Posener, *Auschwitz, wie es liebt und lacht*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, „Welt“, 9.09.2014, source: <https://www.welt.de/kultur/literarischewelt/article132043269/Auschwitz-wie-es-liebt-und-lacht.html> [accessed: 19.12.2017].

⁴⁶ K. Connolly, *Martin Amis's Holocaust novel The Zone of Interest finds German publisher*, „The Guardian“, 4.03.2015, source: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/04/martin-amis-holocaust-novel-zone-of-interest-german-publisher> [accessed: 1.01.2018].

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ P. Oltermann, A. Penketh, *Martin Amis's Holocaust 'comedy' fails to find German publisher*, „The New York Times“, 28.09.2014, source: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/28/martin-amis-zone-of-interest-no-german-publisher.html> [accessed: 13.02.2018].

⁴⁹ Rebis, *Strefa interesów*, source: https://www.rebis.com.pl/pl/book-strefa-interesow-martin-amis,HCHB05205.html#book_details [accessed: 17.03.2018].

of Interest was translated by Katarzyna Karłowska and published on 22 September 2015. The book is a part of Salamandra – a book series devoted to promoting foreign fiction in Poland⁵⁰. Interestingly, despite positive reviews from English and American critics, the book was not published by Czytelnik, Amis's long-time publisher based in Warsaw. The decision was a surprising one as Czytelnik had published such successful novels as *Money* (1995), *Information* (2000) or *London Fields* (1995). The novel was generally well-received by critics and it was nominated for Książka Roku Lubimyczytać.pl, the biggest opinion-forming portal devoted to promoting of reading in Poland, in the category of historical fiction⁵¹. The book was promoted by Martin Amis in a series of interviews but it didn't attract much public attention. The reason for this may be the fact that Poland became the epicentre of the Holocaust and thus, as Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska states, Polish writers were burdened with the responsibility of depicting the Holocaust and this obligation resulted in the plethora of Holocaust literature in Poland⁵².

Grzegorz Jankowicz discussed *The Zone of Interest* with Martin Amis on the occasion of 7th Conrad Festival in Cracow, the largest literary festival in central Europe⁵³. Later, Jankowicz interviewed Amis for "Gazeta Powszechna" and asked the author about his stance about the charges of the aestheticisation of the Holocaust. The author replied that they are puzzling to him because the Holocaust is a part of our reality and thus, writing about it is unavoidable. Moreover, Amis is strongly convinced that it is a writer's obligation to raise difficult topics⁵⁴. Similar interview was carried out by Polish Press Agency⁵⁵. Additionally, the author promoted his book in Literature Department of Teleexpress, a Polish news programme. Amis en-

⁵⁰ Wirtualny Wydawca, *200 księzek z Salamandrą – o serii wydawnictwa Rebis*, 20.05.2004, source: <https://wirtualnywydawca.pl/2004/05/12710/> [accessed: 1.03.2018].

⁵¹ Lubimy Czytać, *Książka Roku 2015 Lubimyczytać.pl*, source: <http://lubimyczytac.pl/nagroda/26/ksiazka-roku-lubimyczytac-pl/120> [accessed: 30.03.2018].

⁵² M. Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Polish literature on the Holocaust*, [in:] *Literature of the Holocaust*, ed. A. Rosen, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2013, p. 159.

⁵³ Miasto Literatury, *Martin Amis – literatura wobec ciemnych stron historii*, 28.09.2015, source: <http://miastoliteratury.pl/martin-amis-literatura-wobec-ciemnych-stron-historii/> [accessed: 28.02.2018].

⁵⁴ M. Amis, *Wszyscy przegladamy się w lustrze zagłady*, interviewed by G. Grzegorz Jankowicz, "Tygodnik Powszechny", 12.10.2015, source: <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/wszyscy-przegladamy-sie-w-lustrze-zagladzie-30622> [accessed: 1.02.2018].

⁵⁵ M. Amis, *Amis: mam prawo pisać o Zagładzie, skoro ten temat jest dla mnie ważny*, 1.10.2015, Polska Agencja Prasowa, source: <http://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/wybory-parlamentarne/news,411287,amis-mam-prawo-pisac-o-zagladzie-skoro-ten-temat-jest-dla-mnie-wazny.html> [accessed: 14.02.2018].

couraged readers by concluding that his book focuses on the turning point in history of the Second World War and shows the failure of Nazi ideology⁵⁶.

Despite the fact that *The Zone of Interest* was promoted actively in Poland and the reviews were mainly positive, the novel was not much-discussed in the press. Piotr Kofta writes that Amis tried to draw the reader's attention by the combination of provocativeness and seriousness, yet, this time his brilliant writing skills were not enough to make the novel a masterpiece. Once again, *The Zone of Interest* was compared to Littell's *Kindly Ones* and Amis was criticised for not contributing anything new to the topic of the Holocaust and Nazism⁵⁷. Wojciech Engelking disagrees with Kofka and regards *The Zone of Interest* as a work which sheds completely new light on the topic of the Holocaust in literature. As it was mentioned before, two out of three narrators are Nazis and this fact gives Amis an opportunity to show the perspective of perpetrators and their families. Initially, the reader feels repulsed by the idea of a love story set in Auschwitz. However, what is truly disturbing about Amis's story is any possibility of normal life inside the hell of Nazi concentration camp. Engelking writes that „in the zone of interest there is no place not only for love (or even for something love-like) but also for any other situation that is preserve of the life outside the camp”⁵⁸. Engelking makes an interesting remark by saying that Amis did not make up the outrageousness of Auschwitz – the camp, apart from the crematories, had the swimming pool, theatre and even the brothel⁵⁹. Moreover, *The Zone of Interest* was also reviewed by Michał Nogaś in Trójkowy Znak Jakości, a radio broadcast, presented by Polskie Radio. In his review Nogaś mainly summarises the plot of Amis's novel but he calls Amis's novel a piece of masterful prose and praises the author for exploring one of the biggest tragedies in modern history of the world⁶⁰.

From the presented reviews, we can conclude that English literary critics anticipated Amis's return to form after many mediocre works. The fact

⁵⁶ Teleexpress Przedział Literacki, *Strefa interesów*, 21.10.2015, source: <http://www.tvp.info/22285172/strefa-interesow> [accessed: 4.01.2018].

⁵⁷ P. Kofta (rev.), *Złamane serca katów*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, „Polityka”, 29.09.2015, source: <http://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/ksiazki/1634541,1,recenzja-ksiazki-martin-amis-strefa-interesow.read> [accessed: 5.03.2018].

⁵⁸ W. Engelking, *Odbyt świata. O „Strefie interesów” Martina Amisa*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, „Kultura Liberalna”, 22.09.2015, no. 350, source: https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2015/09/22/recenzja-martin-amis-strefa-interesow-engelking/?fb_comment_id=1060044690687004_1283708258320645#f3bbffba0600bc8 [accessed: 1.03.2018].

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁰ M. Nogaś, „*Strefa interesów*”. *Historia miłosna z Zagładą w tle*, Portal Polskie Radio, 26.09.2015, source: <https://www.polskieradio.pl/9/399/Artykul/1512827,Strefa-interesow-Historia-milosna-z-Zaglada-w-tle> [accessed: 3.03.2018].

that Martin Amis gained a reputation of a controversial writer certainly increased media attention as well and thus the novel was widely discussed in the press. The book is generally believed to be Amis's best work since *London Fields* (1989). Moreover, *The Zone of Interest* was nominated for two prestigious literary awards in English-speaking world. The critics praised Amis's talent for a satire and his unusual caution with which he writes about the Holocaust. These views were shared by American critics who, in addition, praised Amis for his courage to tackle such a controversial topic once again.

When it comes to *The Zone of Interest* in Germany, the novel was also reviewed numerous times. Such lively interest of German literary circles may be attributed to the centrality of the Holocaust in the German history. However, the German reviewers were definitely more critical of *The Zone of Interest* than American and English ones – the reviews were extremely mixed. The backlash against the work caused Amis to lose his German publisher and the author was accused of using the Holocaust for entertainment purposes. What is more, Amis's language and humour were marked as inappropriate and the story was criticised for relying heavily on clichés. On the other hand, some reviewers praised Amis's novel for the uniqueness of his novel, adding that he manages to show an unusual perspective for the events from the Second World War in a respectful way. The reason for such conflicting opinions may be connected with the fact that German society still did not deal with the troubling past and they are, at least partly, not ready for reworking their national trauma through novels which take an unlikely approach to the Holocaust.

Polish literary circles were more appreciative of Amis's work than German ones. The author was praised for shedding new light on the topic of the Holocaust in literature and excellent writing skills, yet, the use of clichés was criticised. Interestingly, Amis promoted *The Zone of Interest* in Poland actively but, just as in Germany and France, the publication of his novel entailed changing the publishing house. In spite of Amis's efforts, the novel did not gain much popularity and this fact is probably a result of the abundance of Holocaust-themed novels on the Polish literary market.

Writing *The Zone of Interest*, Martin Amis broke a few deep-seated taboos surrounding Holocaust literature. First of all, he wrote about the Holocaust itself not being a survivor. Secondly, the author decided to show the events from the perspective of perpetrators rather than victims. Thirdly, the story itself is taboo-breaking as falling in love of main characters stands in a sharp contrast to appalling atrocities in the camp. Taking these features into account, it is clear that *The Zone of Interest* is a highly controversial novel. The stark contrast between the unfavourable reviews from German

critics and flattering opinions of American and English critics is clearly visible. The research suggests that there is a clear link between the relative openness which characterises the reception of Amis's novel both in the UK and the USA and fact that these countries were not affected by the policy of the Third Reich directly.

Despite the fact that unconventional approach to the Holocaust in literature still continues to polarise the public, such novels are worth reading as they show a reader a fresh perspective on the topic which would be exhausted otherwise – the number of survivors wishing to give their accounts of the horrors of the Holocaust decreases every day and new generations must find their own way to deal with the past.

Bibliography

- Adamczyk-Garbowska M., *Polish literature on the Holocaust*, [in:] *Literature of the Holocaust*, ed. A. Rosen, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2013, p. 159.
- Adams S., *Martin Amis: Only unenjoyable books win literary prizes*, "The Telegraph", 7.06.2010, source: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/7807513/Martin-Amis-Only-unenjoyable-books-win-literary-prizes.html> [accessed: 1.01.2018].
- Adorno T., *Prisms*, transl. S. and S. Weber, MIT Press, Cambridge 1981.
- Amis M., *Amis: mam prawo pisać o Zagładzie, skoro ten temat jest dla mnie ważny*, 1.10.2015, Polska Agencja Prasowa, source: <http://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/wybory-parlamentarne/news,411287,amis-mam-prawo-pisac-o-zagladzie-skoro-ten-temat-jest-dla-mnie-wazny.html> [accessed: 14.02.2018].
- Amis M., *Martin Amis: "The Zone of Interest"*, interviewed by Donna Seaman, 30.10.2014, <https://chicagohumanities.org/events/2014/journeys/martin-amis-zone-of-interest> source: [accessed: 15.01.2018].
- Amis M., *Wszyscy przeglądamy się w lustrze zagłady*, interviewed by Grzegorz Jankowicz, "Tygodnik Powszechny", 12.10.2015, source: <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/wszyscy-przegladamy-sie-w-lustrze-zaglady-30622> [accessed: 1.02.2018].
- Amis, Kingsley 1922–1995*, Concise Major 21st Century Writers, Encyclopedia.com, 13.05.2018, source: <http://www.encyclopedia.com>, [accessed: 1.03.2018].
- Brüggemeyer M., *Kein deutscher Verlag traute sich den neuen Roman von Martin Amis zu veröffentlichen. Warum eigentlich?*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, "Rolling Stone", 27.08.2015, source: <https://www.rollingstone.de/reviews/martin-amis-interessengebiet/> [accessed: 2.03.2018].

- Cape J., *Martin Amis, The Zone of Interest, published August 28th*, 10.06.2014, zamieszczono na Twitter, source: <https://twitter.com/jonathancape/status/476379141848453121> [accessed: 14.01.2018].
- Connolly K., *Martin Amis's Holocaust novel The Zone of Interest finds German publisher*, "The Guardian", 4.03.2015, source: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/04/martin-amis-holocaust-novel-zone-of-interest-german-publisher> [accessed: 1.01.2018].
- David T., *Das Buch, das mein deutscher Verlag abgelehnt hat*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung", 27.08.2014, source: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/martin-amis-ueber-sein-buch-the-zone-of-interest-13120569-p2.html> [accessed: 3.01.2018].
- Engelking W., *Odbyt świata. O "Strefie interesów" Martina Amisa*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, "Kultura Liberalna", 22.09.2015, no. 350, source: https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2015/09/22/recenzja-martin-amis-strefa-interesow-engelking/?fb_comment_id=1060044690687004_1283708258320645#f3bbffba0600bc8 [accessed: 1.03.2018].
- Fackenthal J.D., *The Problem of Coming to Terms with the Past: A Post-Holocaust Theology of Remembrance*, CGU Theses & Dissertations, 2012, Paper 33, p. 1, source: http://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgu_etd/33/ [accessed: 1.03.2018].
- Franklin R. ([]), *Viper's Nest*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, "The New York Times", 3.10.2014, source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/05/books/review/martin-amis-zone-of-interest.html> [accessed: 19.01.2018].
- Gilbert S. (rev.), *Returning to Auschwitz*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, "The Atlantic", 3.09.2014, source: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/09/the-zone-of-interest-the-novel-by-martin-amis-reviewed/380945/> [accessed: 1.03.2018].
- Guest K. (rev.), *The Zone of Interest by Martin Amis, book review: Amis' best book in years*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, "The Independent", 21.08.2014, source: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-zone-of-interest-by-martin-amis-review-9682965.html> [accessed: 7.01.2018].
- Hirsch M., *The Generation of Postmemory*, "Poetics Today" 1996, no. 17, p. 106.
- Jordison S. (rev.), *Guardian book club: Time's Arrow by Martin Amis*, M. Amis, *Time's Arrow*, "The Guardian", 20.01.2010, source: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2010/jan/20/times-arrow-martin-amis> [accessed: 1.12.2017].
- Kansteiner W., Presner T., *Introduction: The Field of Holocaust Studies and the Emergence of Global Holocaust Culture*, [in:] *Probing the Ethics of Holocaust Culture*, eds. C. Fogu, W. Kansteiner, T. Presner, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2016, p. 27.

- Kerridge J. (rev.), *The Zone Of Interest review: The best Martin Amis novel in two decades*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, "Express", 24.08.2014, source: <https://www.express.co.uk/entertainment/books/502760/The-Zone-Of-Interest-by-Martin-Amis-review> [accessed: 4.02.2018].
- Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, *Martin Amis events*, source: <http://knopfdoubleday.com/tag/martin-amis-events/> [accessed: 28.01.2018].
- Kofta P. (rev.), *Złamane serca katów*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, "Polityka", 29.09.2015, source: <http://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/ksiazki/1634541,1,recenzja-ksiazki-martin-amis-strefa-interesow.read> [accessed: 5.03.2018].
- Leith S., *Why we love to hate Martin Amis*, "The Guardian", 15.08.2014, source: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/15/love-to-hate-martin-amis> [accessed: 30.12.2017].
- Lubimy Czytać, *Książka Roku 2015 Lubimyczytać.pl*, source: <http://lubimyczytac.pl/nagroda/26/ksiazka-roku-lubimyczytac-pl/120> [accessed: 30.03.2018].
- Mahlke S., *Stecker gezogen*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, "Die Tageszeitung", 30.10.2015, source: <https://www.taz.de/Archiv-Suche/!5245228&s=STEFAN+MAHLKE/> [accessed: 3.01.2018].
- Marra A. (rev.), *"The Zone of Interest" by Martin Amis: review*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, "SFGate", 24.09.2014, source: <http://www.sfgate.com/books/article/The-Zone-of-Interest-by-Martin-Amis-review-5778757.php> [accessed: 30.01.2018].
- Miasto Literatry, *Martin Amis – literatura wobec ciemnych stron historii*, 28.09.2015, source: <http://miastoliteratry.pl/martin-amis-literatura-wobec-ciemnych-stron-historii/> [accessed: 28.02.2018].
- Nogaś M., *"Strefa interesów". Historia miłosna z Zagładą w tle*, Portal Polskie Radio, 26.09.2015, source: <https://www.polskieradio.pl/9/399/Artykul/1512827,Strefa-interesow-Historia-milosna-z-Zaglada-w-tle> [accessed: 3.03.2018].
- Oates J.C. (rev.), *The Death Factory*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, "The New Yorker", 29.09.2014, source: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/29/death-factory> [accessed: 12.12.2017].
- Oltermann P., Penketh A., *Martin Amis's holocaust 'comedy' fails to find German publisher*, "The New York Times", 28.09.2014, source: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/28/martin-amis-zone-of-interest-no-german-publisherhtml> [accessed: 13.02.2018].
- Penguin UK, *The Zone of Interest*, source: <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/1098898/the-zone-of-interest/> [accessed: 19.01.2018].
- Posener A., *Auschwitz, wie es liebt und lacht*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, "Welt", 09.09.2014, source: <https://www.welt.de/kultur/literarischewelt/>

article132043269/Auschwitz-wie-es-liebt-und-lacht.html [accessed: 19.12.2017].

Preston A. (rev.), *The Zone of Interest* review – Martin Amis's impressive holocaust novel, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, "The Guardian", 7.09.2014, source: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/07/the-zone-of-interest-review-martin-amis-impressive-holocaust> [accessed: 20.01.2018].

Rebis, *Strefa interesów*, source: https://www.rebis.com.pl/pl/book-strefa-interesow-martin-amis,HCHB05205.html#book_details [accessed: 17.03.2018].

Rosenbaum T., *The Audacity of Aesthetics: The Post-Holocaust Novel and the Respect for the Dead*, "Poetics Today" 2006, no. 2, vol. 11, pp. 490–491, 493, source: <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2005-016> [accessed: 1.01.2018].

Rosenfeld G.D., *Munich and Memory: Architecture, Monuments, and the Legacy of the Third Reich*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2000, pp. 1, 23.

Spiegel H., *Die Liebe in Zeiten des Massenmords*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung", 20.09.2015, source: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/rezensionen/belletristik/martin-amis-holocaust-roman-interessengebiet-13807068-p2.html> [accessed: 4.03.2018].

Teleexpress Przewidywania Literackie, *Strefa interesów*, 21.10.2015, source: <http://www.tvp.info/22285172/strefa-interesow> [accessed: 4.01.2018].

The International Dublin Literary Award, *The Nominees 2016 Longlist*, <http://www.dublinliteraryaward.ie/nominees/the-zone-of-interest/> [accessed: 9.02.2018].

The Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction, *2015 Shortlist announced*, 24.03.2015, source: <http://www.walterscottprize.co.uk/2015-shortlist-announced/> [accessed: 13.02.2018].

The Zone of Interest, Martin Amis' Roman "Interessengebiet" auf Deutsch, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, "Focus", 8.09.2015, source: https://www.focus.de/kultur/buecher/literatur-martin-amis-roman-interessengebiet-auf-deutsch_id_4932765.html [accessed: 19.03.2018].

Wheldon W. (rev.), *The Zone of Interest is grubby, creepy – and Martin Amis's best for 25 years*, M. Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, "The Spectator", 16.08.2014, source: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2014/08/the-zone-of-interest-by-martin-amis-review/> [accessed: 1.02.2018].

Wirtualny Wydawca, *200 książek z Salamandrą – o serii wydawnictwa Rebis*, 20.05.2004, source: <https://wirtualnywydawca.pl/2004/05/12710/> [accessed: 1.03.2018].

Odbiór *Strefy interesów* Martina Amisa w angielskim, amerykańskim, niemieckim oraz polskim obiegu krytycznoliterackim

Streszczenie

Autorka, analizując omówienia krytycznoliterackie w codziennej prasie *online*, pokazuje skrajne różnice w odbiorze powieści *Strefa interesów* angielskiego pisarza Martina Amisa. Powieść ta zyskała uznanie krytyków w Anglii oraz Stanach Zjednoczonych, uzyskała natomiast mało pochlebne recenzje w Niemczech. W Polsce *Strefa interesów* uzyskała mieszane recenzje i była słabo obecna w odbiorze czytelników. Według autorki spolaryzowane oceny krytyków mają związek ze zwiększoną wrażliwością narodów bezpośrednio dotkniętych polityką Trzeciej Rzeszy na nieszablonowe podejście do literatury holocaustowej, która przepracowuje traumę poprzez łamanie tabu dotyczącego Zagłady.

Słowa kluczowe: Martin Amis, *Strefa interesów*, krytyka literacka, Holocaust, powieść, tabu.

Die Aufnahme des Romans *Interessengebiet* von Martin Amis durch die englische, amerikanische, deutsche und polnische Literaturkritik

Zusammenfassung

Die Autorin analysiert die literaturkritischen Diskussionen über Martin Amis' Roman *Interessengebiet* in der amerikanischen, englischen, deutschen und polnischen Tagespresse und kommt zur Schlussfolgerung, dass der Roman äußerst gemischte Rezensionen erhielt. Von den englischen und amerikanischen Literaturkritikern wurde er gut aufgenommen, von den deutschen hingegen eher negativ. In Polen wurde *Interessengebiet* unterschiedlich beurteilt, von den Lesern aber kaum wahrgenommen. Der Grund für die polarisierten Meinungen ist der Autorin zufolge die erhöhte Sensibilität seitens jener Nationen, die direkt von der Politik des Dritten Reiches betroffen waren, für eine unkonventionelle Herangehensweise an die Holocaustliteratur, die sich durch einen Tabubruch mit dem Holocausttrauma auseinandersetzt.

Stichwörter: Martin Amis, *Interessengebiet*, Literaturkritik, Holocaust, Roman, Trauma.