

The Australian

Martin Amis forces cancellation of unflattering biography

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PUBLISHER withdraws book after letter from celebrated novelist.

MARTIN Amis has bared his teeth and chewed up a book that threatened to intrude on certain aspects of his private life.

Small independent publisher Peter Owen has decided unilaterally to withdraw the book after receiving a warning letter from Amis's agent, Andrew "the Jackal" Wylie.

Amis and Wylie were angry that the biography by Richard Bradford, a Northern Ireland-based professor of literary history, was being described as an authorised biography of the celebrated novelist. A stickler for precise use of language, Amis argued that he had not actually authorised the book, even though he agreed to give five face-to-face interviews to Bradford in return for having an "editorial say" over the contents of the biography.

Amis, who has read half the book, told the biographer that he was unhappy about some of what he had written about his "nearest and dearest".

Amis also demanded that Bradford should not talk to his mother (who has since died), his brother or former wife.

The row has led Peter Owen to scrap publication and hand back the rights to Bradford. He is seeking a new publisher and trying to assuage other concerns Amis has over material in the book.

"We will have to sort this out between us," Bradford says.

Amis, feted for his early novels *The Rachel Papers* and *Money*, and more recently derided for *Yellow Dog*, has generated strong passions among those whom Bradford wanted to interview for his biography. Amis was happy for Bradford to talk to friends and fellow writers Christopher Hitchens, now fighting cancer, and Clive James, and to Alexandra Wells, a former lover known as Gully, and his wife Isabel Fonseca.

However, there were tensions over others, including the novelist Julian Barnes, the poet James Fenton, and Claire Tomalin, with whom Amis had an affair in the late 1970s.

"He [Amis] told me he and Barnes were friends again," Bradford says.

Not according to Barnes. The two fell out in 1994 when Amis left his agent, Pat Kavanagh, for the more aggressive Wylie. Kavanagh, who died last year, was Barnes's wife. Contrary to Amis's claim, Barnes has not really forgotten or forgiven.

Tomalin, a noted biographer herself, refused to talk to Bradford, claiming she had nothing to say.

"My biographies are of dead people. I don't think one should talk about one's living friends," she says.

"All I'll add now to you is that I have lots of nice things to say about Martin."

After Amis hired Wylie as his agent in the mid-1990s he earned an advance of pound stg. 500,000 for his novel *The Information*.

Some material in Bradford's book will not please Amis. "I point out that his friends Hitchens and Fenton privately mocked him when they were working together in the 1970s," says Bradford, a professor at the University of Ulster.

"Martin was not political like those two, and they took the piss out of him for this."

The popular portrayal of Amis, Hitchens and Fenton as a happy gang in the 1970s is something of an illusion, says Bradford.

"It was not the close-knit group Martin likes to paint," he says.

Even so, the book recounts how Amis rebuffed a pass from Hitchens, a bisexual, at the launch of *The Rachel Papers*.

His love life was also complicated. While living in the 70s with Julie Kavanagh (half-sister of his former agent, Pat), Amis was having an affair with her best friend, Emma Soames.

Amis was also reluctant for Bradford to delve into his first marriage. He refused to agree to Bradford talking to his first wife, Antonia Phillips, the American philosopher, and declined to tell the biographer about how the marriage broke down.

"I had to get all that from others, though Martin did say that the end was his fault," says Bradford.

In fact, in the latter stages of his first marriage, Amis had begun a relationship with Isabel, his present wife.

Since the publication of Bradford's biography is now in abeyance, Amis has longer to read the manuscript. This may mean negotiations over what is finally published get sticky.

The novelist has proved touchy about reviews: he also complained when Bradford used some biographical details about him in a review of Amis's latest novel, *The Pregnant Widow*.

The novel has not done well, though it was not as savagely slated as the 2003 novel *Yellow Dog*. That particular work was described by the novelist Tibor Fischer as "not-knowing-where-to-look bad". Yet Amis thinks it is one of his best three books.

Anthony Howard, biographer and former editor of the *New Statesman* magazine when Amis, Tomalin, Fenton and Hitchens all worked there, says: "I would never have allowed any person I was writing a biography about to have editorial say."

Amis previously objected to a 2008 biography of himself and his father, and a "deathbed diary" of his father by Eric Jacobs, who befriended Kingsley Amis in his latter years.

"My biography of Martin is not a hagiography," Bradford says. "I'm a fan of my subject, but not a complete one."

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