

Biographer writes 'consensual kiss-and-tell' about life with Martin Amis

Julie Kavanagh recalls years with young literary star as he developed 'Byronic magnetism' to match his rising fame

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Portrait of the artist as a man about town ... Martin Amis in 1977. Photograph: Hulton Getty

She called him Lazy Shit, he called her Spider, but their relationship eventually ended after she discovered he was sleeping with her best friend. Biographer Julie Kavanagh has written a "consensual kiss-and-tell" of the years she spent with [Martin Amis](#) during the 1970s, revealing his string of affairs and giving a glimpse into the lifestyle of a celebrated group of *littérateurs*.

Kavanagh visited Amis this April in Primrose Hill, just a week before he finished his new novel, to discuss her article, and said it was "disorientating – yet also reassuring – to see glimpses of the young man I'd loved in the manners and expressions of a near-sexagenarian".

But she says the two of them "swiftly fell into an easy, jokey rapport", where "there seemed no limit to what I could ask him or what he could reveal to me. We could even laugh now about the histrionic full-stop in the note I wrote after we'd broken up: 'I'll never forgive you. Ever.'"

First introduced by her half-sister, Amis's former literary agent the late Pat Kavanagh, Kavanagh writes in [an article for quarterly magazine *Intelligent Life*](#) of the affairs the novelist had over the course of their relationship – with "bohemian beauty" Lamorna Seale, with whom he had a child; with the critic Lorna Sage; with the *New Statesman*'s then literary editor Claire Tomalin; with her best friend Emma Soames, the granddaughter of Churchill. She tells, too, of how Amis's confidence grew in proportion with his literary fame: "The feelings of profound unattractiveness from which he claims to have suffered a couple of years before we met – feelings of short-arsed, physical inadequacy which he novelises time and again – had given way to Byronic magnetism."

She also touches on meals at the Amis household, where father Kingsley used to take part in a "verbal singles match" with his son. "Their banter was invariably funny, with Martin touchingly delighted by his father's intonations and inventions, and sometimes pleading to borrow a Kingsleyism for his own [fiction](#)."

Kavanagh goes on to reveal that Amis's forthcoming novel, *A Pregnant Widow*, which he has called "blindingly autobiographical but with an Islamic theme", will feature his former flatmate Rob Henderson as one of its main characters. "Westminster-educated

Rob was the model for [central character of The Rachel Papers] Charles Highway's reedy voice with 'habitual ironic twang', his silky, brown hair, and long, thin, nose, and he also bore a strong resemblance to Gregory, the co-hero of Martin's third novel Success," she writes. "He's dead now, but he still haunts Martin's imagination."

She tells of the time he wrote Dead Babies – which he dedicated to her – when "if his typescript was fizzing with concentrated nastiness, his letters, noting the town filled with couples, or expressing 'street sadness for you and London', were full of elegiac wistfulness", and of their nights at home in the house they shared, she cooking dinner, he sitting nearby "chuckling away as he re-reads his own prose – something he did a lot".

They would lunch at a Turkish-Cypriot restaurant on Theobalds Road most Fridays with a "literary mafia" including the poets Craig Raine and James Fenton, Clive James, Kingsley Amis, Julian Barnes and Christopher Hitchens – "the Hitch" - where they'd eat kebabs or a "Yobs' breakfast" (a mixed fry-up) with "gallons" of red wine. "Its abbreviation 'YB' was collectively understood by the group, as were the other code words, expressions and inflections: 'rig' (penis); 'tonto' (mad); 'sock' (house); 'Taxiiiiiiiiiiii!' (desperate to get out of a situation); 'unlucky' (said with a yobbish dip); 'hot in the cot' (good in bed)," writes Kavanagh. "I didn't know then that this was a golden era; that each player would become a star in his own right, and eventually an elder statesman."