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## Amis and Son: Two Literary Generations

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WHEN MARTIN Amis was asked what he would have done if his father had not been a novelist he said, with some sarcasm, that if his father had been a postman he (Martin) would have been a postman, and other variants, with rising irritation.

Amis and Son, Neil Powell's would-be critical biography of Kingsley Amis, author of *Lucky Jim* and *Take a Girl Like You*, and Martin Amis, his son, author of *The Rachel Papers* and *London Fields*, is a kind of commentary on this text. It is a silly and sickening book that is liable to be taken more seriously than it deserves.

It is essentially a critical book, buttressed by biographical summary that tends to be used as an increasingly impertinent crutch for the evaluative judgements that keep jumping about between the lives and the works of Amis father and son.

It is less obviously debilitating in the case of Kingsley because the burden of Powell's book is that Smarty isn't half the writer that his Dad was. Smarty Anus, you'll recall, is *Private Eye's* empathic nickname for Martin Amis, a homage of an epithet if ever there was one.

So we get plenty of excavation of Kingsley's South London lower-middle-class roots, his insincere contempt for Cambridge, where he finds himself working at one point, plus his irresponsible infidelities, his phobias about being left alone in the house and his refusal to fly, plus his weakness for the booze, his philistinism towards high culture beyond literature, his irresponsibility as a husband and father, the ghastriness of his treatment of Elizabeth Jane Howard (the novelist wife) and the unevenness of the fiction that is, in spite of everything, sometimes very good.

The emphasis, though, is on Kingsley as a bit of an old ratbag. When he exclaims to Julian Barnes about being brought his breakfast by a peer of the realm (his first wife's second husband, Lord Kilmarnock, who with Tilly, Martin's mother, became the increasingly frail and ageing Kingsley's nurse), we are supposed to feel that we have the measure of the man or at least an important insight into his vanities and insecurities.

Powell is the kind of narrow and overweeningly snooty critic who is constantly confusing the limitations of human beings with the faults of their work. It is not a vice confined to the British, but one they exhibit with a peculiar intensity and obnoxiousness.

At its worst this kind of writing is constantly sliding into what sounds like social condescension. It is especially dominant where

criticism and biography meet, as in the truly appalling studies of Anthony Burgess and Laurence Olivier by Roger Lewis.

Any writer of the first rank works in the negative mode (think of Doctor Johnson or Robert Hughes) and often the quality of criticism will be indicated by the fierceness of the negativity, but there is also a criticism that resembles this as death resembles life and takes the form of loud-mouthed, sneering rehearsal of prejudice.

There's plenty of condescension towards Kingsley in this book but the real target is Smarty, the fruit of Kingsley's self-indulgent loins who grew up semi-literate. He was at once neglected and pampered by his father and allowed to fall in love, not least during his childhood sojourn at Princeton, with America, of all dreadful things.

Hence the appalling way in which he writes, with such impossibly deracinated writers as Nabokov and Bellow as his models. Besides, the fellow has a mind addled by popular culture and uses idioms that no self-respecting Englishman would countenance.

Twenty-five or so years ago Angela Carter remarked that literary critical London was hyperconscious of the superiority of American vernacular and its use in fiction.

Shortly after this Martin Amis set about reclaiming the vast underworld of London street talk and the way contemporary Britain actually talked in his mature fiction. Powell's culpable stupidity about this goes most of the way towards disqualifying him from saying anything of critical interest about Martin.

Amis and Son is a book by a critic of some intelligence who nonetheless constantly dissipates his insights because his swaggering irritation at one of his two subjects makes him blindingly daft.

Of course, this is just the book many people will want to read about the guy with the Jaggerish looks, born with a literary silver spoon in his mouth, who forsook his good old agent Pat Kavanagh (and therefore fell out with her husband, his great literary mate, Julian Barnes), who ran off to America to get all that expensive dental work done (beat that for a betrayal of the old Dart) and who is now married, damn his eyes, to the beautiful Isabel Fonseca.

It's easy enough to be irritated by Martin Amis. You can be dismayed at Yellow Dog. You can even go halfway with Tibor Fischer's assessment, quoted by Powell, of Martin Amis as "an atrocity-chaser ... constantly on the prowl for gravitas enlargement offers (the Holocaust, serial killers, 9/11, the Gulag, the Beslan siege) as if writing about really bad things will make him a really great novelist", and still acknowledge that, on a good day, he is one of the most significant writers in Britain to have produced fiction in the past 30 years.

Barnes said to me in 1991 that he thought the reception of his own work and Martin Amis' had been helped by the fact the dominant form of English fiction had ceased to be social realism with a comic twist.

In other words the old Devil himself, Sir Kingsley, was no longer cock of the walk. Powell's Amis and Son is an attempt to turn the clock back and it will be applauded by the kind of reader who thinks, like him, that it is harder to write novels like those of Barbara Pym or C.P.Snow than it is to write Ulysses.

It is to the enduring glory of the author of London Fields that he tried to take the British novel into the sordid and glory that Kingsley could not dream of and would not countenance.

You're free to think that none of Martin Amis has as sure a place in the canon as Lucky Jim, but that's not the point. Powell is an interesting guide to the ins and outs of Kingsley's fiction, and some of his tips about particular books may be worth following. On the other hand he is an admirer of Martin's Time's Arrow - the Holocaust novel that runs backward - so you have to wonder.

What defeats him is human beings and the way the details of a life might illuminate a writer's work.

The word about this book is that it's the bollocking Martin Amis always had coming to him. It isn't, it's a spiteful and thoughtless book by a vain and shallow critic who is defeated by everything in his hugely talented contemporary that shows up his own narrowness and pettiness and lack of feeling for the rough and ready words and grand ambitions that might encompass a world or transform it in fiction.

*This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2008/07/21/1216492335565.html>*