

BOOKS BLOG



Latest news on guardian.co.uk

Last updated seven minutes ago

News

Video shows police bundled protesters to ground

Sport

England women win Twenty20 title

Books

'I feel I should be there'

Previous

Blog home

Next

The Martin Amis gossip will go away. His work won't

The mischief he gets up to on the page is the really fascinating thing about him



Me-ism in the right hands ... Martin Amis. Photograph: Xavier Bertral/EPA

At Jonathan Cape's launch party for [Martin Amis's](#) autobiography Experience (he'd had some 50 years' worth of it then – everything has come early for Martin) his editor prophesied that this was "a book which would be read in 200 years time". Just like Ben Jonson said of Shakespeare.

Brave words, even with a bellyful of dry sherry. Will Amis Jr "last"? Time, as Orwell said, is the only critic whose opinion matters. I (sherrylessly) prophesy that a couple of books of Amis's will be in the electronic Oxford Companion in 2209, and – less palpably – his voice, that unmistakable "Amism" – will have left a lasting, tonal, impression on British fiction.

One other thing can be prophesied with even greater confidence: our distant descendants will not give a toss about [who shaggy young Martin shagged in the 1980s](#) – much as it seems to preoccupy us nowadays, as the man himself enters the Viagra years.

Amis is our grand master of "I narration". Henry James, fiction's great legislator, [distrusted these fictional ego displays](#). It was, he believed, too primitive: like the immature child's "me, me, me". Amis's fiction suggests the opposite. In the right hands me-ism can be very subtle, and no hands are more right than Amis's.

What are the greatest "I" works in our literature? My list would include: Robinson Crusoe, Tristram Shandy, Jane Eyre, Great Expectations, Midnight's Children, Remains of the Day and – putting my own money where John Self's mouth is – Money.

No one, as far as I know, has ever satisfactorily explained the magic by which small black marks on a white surface become a "world". Does one "see" a novel? Some (Henry James's for example) one certainly does. But Amis's novels one hears. Take the opening sentence of his first published work. The Rachel Papers:

Buzz up!

Digg it



Posted by **John Sutherland**
Wednesday 3 June 2009
14.45 BST
[guardian.co.uk](#)

larger | smaller

Books
Martin Amis · Fiction

Culture

More from Books blog on

Books
Martin Amis · Fiction

More blogposts

More on this story

News: Amis in 'consensual kiss-and-tell'

More about Martin Amis

Bestsellers from the Guardian shop



Vintage Documentaries on DVD
Three classic British post-war documentary collections on DVD.
From: £12.99

- Visit the Guardian reader offers shop
- Green & ethical shopping at Guardian ecostore

Other Culture blogs

Film blog



Music blog



Theatre blog



TV & Radio blog



Charlotte Higgins on culture



Tom Service on classical music



Gareth McLean on TV



Jonathan Jones on art



Most viewed on guardian.co.uk

24 hour - 7 day - Most talked about

24 hours

- Iran protests: live - 20 June 2009

My name is Charles Highway, though you wouldn't think it to look at me.

One can't but hear that cocky-rueful adolescent voice. More importantly, the reader's ears prick up. One is not just hearing, but listening. You could do a little anthology of Amis's hook-in-jaw opening lines. My personal favourite is that from his least admired novel, *The Information*:

Cities at night, I feel, contain men who cry in their sleep and then say Nothing.

It's Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* in 16 words. It looks easy, until you try it yourself.

Sometimes the Amisian opening doesn't come off. That in his trickiest novel, *Time's Arrow* (the only one of his works to be shortlisted for the Booker – what a national disgrace that is) is itself rather too tricky for my taste:

I moved forward, out of my blackest sleep, to find myself surrounded by doctors ... American doctors.

The joke is that the narrative is actually moving backwards. By the time readers have worked out that counter-intuitive fact they're all over the place.

I'm in two minds about the opening to Amis's last published novel, *House of Meetings*, partly because the author seems to be in two minds himself.

My little brother came to camp in 1948 (I was already there), at the height of the war between the brutes and the bitches

....

Now that wouldn't be a bad opening sentence. But then he decides it would be a bad opening sentence: and sets off on an entirely different tack.

"Where does Martin Amis's narrative voice come from?" asks Neil Powell in *Amis and Son*. Not, he thinks, from dad, but – all too obviously – Holden Caulfield. "If you really want to know" hangs, like a career motto, over all Amis's fiction.

I can't wait for the hook to go through my jaw with the opening sentence of *The Pregnant Widow* – advertised for next September. As for what it tells us about who he slept with – I really don't want to know.


[Previous](#)

[Blog home](#)

[Next](#)

[Printable version](#) [Send to a friend](#) [Share](#) [Clip](#) [Contact us](#) [Article history](#)

Comments

 In order to see comments, please turn JavaScript on in your browser.

2. [Iran in turmoil: live - 21 June 2009](#)

3. [My year without sex, by Hephzibah Anderson](#)

4. [Gordon Brown: I could walk away from this tomorrow](#)

5. [Iran protests: live - 19 June 2009](#)

[More top stories](#)

7 days

1. [Iran protests: live - 17 June 2009](#)

2. [Cats outsmarted in psychologist's test](#)

3. [Iran protests: live - 20 June 2009](#)

4. [Iran protests: live - 19 June 2009](#)

5. [England v West Indies - as it happened | Rob Smyth](#)

[More top stories](#)

Free P&P at the Guardian bookshop



[Spirit Level](#)
£20.00 with free UK delivery



[Spooning with Rosie](#)
£18.99 with free UK delivery

- [Browse the bestseller lists](#)
- [Buy books from the Guardian Bookshop](#)

Books blog by numbers – today

[Comment](#)

Comments

1. [Poster poems: Fame](#) (80)
2. [Poem of the week: From A Midsummer Night's Dream](#) (46)
3. [Guardian book club: Possession by AS Byatt](#) (38)
4. [Bloomsday around the world](#) (31)
5. [Which cities are the most 'science fictional'?](#) (28)

On this blog

[Awards and prizes](#)

[Booker club](#)

[Festivals](#)

[Fiction](#)

[Hay festival](#)

[Words and language](#)

[Biography](#)

[Poem of the week](#)

[Poetry](#)

[World literature tour](#)

Sites we like

[Complete Review](#)

[Book Ninja](#)

[Galley Cat](#)

[Fiction Bitch](#)

[Book Slut](#)

[ReadySteadyBook](#)

[dovegreyreader](#)

[LibraryThing](#)

Rent DVDs

[DVDs](#)

[Games](#)

Top 5

1. [Iron Man](#)
2. [Taken](#)
3. [WALL-E](#)



4. [The Kite Runner](#) 

5. [In Bruges](#)

Search Actor / Title / Director

Join our DVD rental service today and get a free 30 day trial

Books blog weekly archives

← Jun 2009

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	1	2	3	4	5

Latest reviews

[See a psychiatrist? Are you mad?](#)

Review: Doctoring the Mind by Richard Bentall

Salley Vickers

applauds a brave work that argues that mind-altering drugs do more harm than good to the mentally ill

[In pursuit of happiness](#)

[Watch out Reacher, here comes Hunter](#)

[There's only one Luma Mufleh ...](#)

[You can take the man out of Damascus...](#)

[More books reviews](#)

Related information

Books

[Martin Amis · Fiction](#)

Culture



JG Ballard: Portraits of the artist

20 Apr 2009:

A look back at the life and work of the pioneering novelist JG Ballard

[More galleries](#)

2 Jun 2009

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

24 May 2008

Decca Aitkenhead talks to author Isabel Fonseca about her latest book

7 May 2008

Amis ventures back to London Fields for film adaptation

16 Dec 2007

The interview: Terry Eagleton



Sartre's Sink: Doing DIY with the greats

21 Nov 2008:

Mark Crick performs 'Hanging Wallpaper with Ernest Hemingway' and 'Boarding an Attic with Edgar Allan Poe'

[More video](#)