

My long lost dad, Martin Amis

Delilah Jeary was 18 when the man she called Daddy revealed that her biological father was actually the novelist Martin Amis. Her mother had taken her own life years before – now her foundations were rocked again

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Delilah Jeary, with her daughter Eleanor. Photograph: Sarah Lee for the Guardian

Delilah Jeary has a theory about sibling rivalry. Actually, it is not her theory but her husband Matthew's. A social worker, his view is that if you keep telling a toddler what a fantastic big brother he is, he will strive to fulfil that role. "It is all about the narrative you tell them," she says. Her own [family](#) narrative has been rather more complex. When Delilah was two, and her brother, Orlando, three, their mother, Lamorna Heath, hanged herself. Heath, a writer, had had depression for many years. Her husband, the writer Patrick Seale, was left to bring up the two children alone, which he did, in spite of having learned, a few months after Delilah's birth, that he was not her father. During a short period when he and Heath were separated, Heath had had an affair with the novelist [Martin Amis](#), and Delilah was the result.

Amis knew about her. As he wrote in his autobiography, *Experience*, Heath had told him and had given him a photograph. "It showed a two-year-old girl in a dark flower dress, smocked at the chest, with short puffed sleeves and pink trim. She had fine blond hair. Her smile was demure: pleased, but quietly pleased."

He had shown his mother, who advised him not to do anything, and for another 16 years nobody else knew, until Seale decided to tell Delilah just before she started university.

"When do you tell the person something like that?" says Delilah. "Experts say now that you tell them immediately. You coo it over the cot. But for me, under the circumstances, I wouldn't have wanted to feel more different from how I already felt. My brother and my dad and I were this thick little unit, really close. I don't think it would have been a

particularly helpful thing to have known."

It took a while for Delilah to comprehend the idea that loving her new family did not mean stopping loving the other but adjusting her view of family. "You feel like an orphan," she says. "That you don't really know where you belong."

Delilah has no memories of her mother. She says that when she reached her 20s and became the age her mother was when she died, it became increasingly important for her to find out what her mother was really like, rather than simply see her in the context of her death. "You can see someone as this tragic, sad person, and it was important to me to give her back her story, to let her be a person rather than this sad suicide victim. That was one act of her life but not her whole life."

With her second child, 15-week-old Eleanor, in her arms and Isaac, two, at nursery, it is her own role as a mother that is uppermost in Delilah's mind. Indeed, she has helped to develop a website for mothers, iMama.tv, which is designed to be a hub of information about being a parent only via video rather than text.

Patrick Seale eventually married again – the writer Rana Kabbani – when Delilah was 10, by which time she and her brother were at boarding school. But until then he brought them up on his own. Delilah is full of praise for his wisdom and generosity. But she was aware of the mothers of girls at school taking them to parties, or picking them up, buying them underwear and, later, telling them to look after themselves. In retrospect, she feels she missed something. "I know now what it is about," she says. "I always thought it was that thing of someone whose mind was completely focused on you, where you're their priority. And I think if you don't have a mother, you lack that a little bit. That full beam."

She has filled the gap with friends, many of whom, she notes with interest, have absent mothers too. "I think because people who have mothers tend to speak to their mothers quite a lot on the phone, and I've noticed that people who don't have mothers want to do the same thing but don't have that person they can call five times a day." These, then, have been her mother figures, together with Isabel Fonseca, Amis's wife, who has been "a huge influence". She is also close to her mother-in-law.

Then there's her brother, Orlando, an actor and musician, with whom she shared a flat for 17 years, from the age of 16. "He was like a mother to me as well," she says. "We performed that function for each other, being really close, growing up together, living together." It was all the harder then when they found out that they were not siblings but step-siblings, and that only one was related by blood to the man who had brought them up. "It was really difficult for both of us because it was the first thing that had happened to me that hadn't happened to him," says Delilah.

She had never for a moment suspected. So convinced was she that her fair hair was about to turn brown like the rest of her family's that she dyed it blond. Nor did she even in her teenage years feel a hint of alienation. "My fantasy was about having a mother," she says. "It would be, maybe she's not dead or something, those kinds of things. Not that maybe I'm from a different family."

Six months after the revelation, she finally met Amis. He was in America and she had had an opportunity to read some of his writing. "I knew there was Kingsley Amis. I knew there was Martin Amis. I'd read *The Rachel Papers*. He was just a writer, and I was 18. I wasn't really aware of society and what people say and all that sort of thing. I was a kid, really."

Meeting Amis – she calls him "Martin", or "My dad" while Seale is "Daddy" – was "nerve-racking and great as well, that thing of meeting someone who is instantly

familiar to you on a really profound level, and that's very comforting".

There was also the fact that they looked alike. Having never resembled any of her siblings when she was growing up, she still gets a thrill when she is out with Amis and his four children because they all look similar.

But in joining the Amis clan she gets more than a familiar set of genes. She also becomes a chapter in a tangled story of ex-wives and lovers, children born outside of marriage, alcoholism – both her grandfather, Kingsley, and aunt, Sally, drank heavily – provocative statements about women and sex, all of which has been extensively documented, not only by journalists and biographers but also by the Amises themselves. For the Amis family narrative is principally one about writers.

Delilah is not a writer, other than the storytelling involved in 10 years of working in television, and she is dismissive about the more lurid tales associated with the Amis side: "Put them in a room together and they are just a family."

She regularly sees her seven siblings – Orlando, Amis's four children by his two wives, Louis, Jacob, Fernanda and Clio, and Seale's two children with Kabbani, Alexander and Jasmine. And she keeps in close touch with both her fathers, who, while not babysitting types, are devoted grandfathers.

But her focus is on building her own little family and on the happiness she has found in motherhood. "Maybe because of not having a mother, becoming a mother has been really fulfilling," she says. "You want to spread that joy."

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