

Martin Amis in new row over 'euthanasia booths'

- Novelist wants euthanasia booths for elderly
- Warning of 'civil war' between young and old

Caroline Davies
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 Article history



Author Martin Amis believes the 'silver tsunami' of increasingly ageing people puts pressure on society. Photograph: Rex Features

Martin Amis has never fought shy of an argument, whether it be with the critic Terry Eagleton (over Islamist extremism), his pal Christopher Hitchens (over Stalin) or fellow novelist Julian Barnes (over Amis leaving his agent – Barnes's wife).

But none of those opponents were as tough as his new target promises to be. Now 60, Amis has picked a fight with the grey power of Britain's ageing population, calling for euthanasia "booths" on street corners where they can terminate their lives with "a martini and a medal".

The author of Time's Arrow and London Fields said in an interview at the weekend that he believes Britain faces a "civil war" between young and old, as a "silver tsunami" of increasingly ageing people puts pressure on society.

"They'll be a population of demented very old people, like an invasion of terrible immigrants, stinking out the restaurants and cafes and shops," he said. "I can imagine a sort of civil war between the old and the young in 10 or 15 years' time.

"There should be a booth on every corner where you could get a martini and a medal," he added.

His comments were immediately condemned as "glib" and "offensive" by anti-euthanasia groups and those caring for the elderly and infirm. Supporters of assisted suicide, meanwhile, insisted that a dignified and compassionate end should be on offer to those who are dying.

Alistair Thompson, from the Care Not Killing Alliance, said Amis's views were "very worrying". "We are extremely disappointed that people are advocating death booths for the elderly and the disabled. How on earth

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can we pretend to be a civilised society if people are giving the oxygen of publicity to such proposals?

"What are these death booths? Are they going to be a kind of superloo where you put in a couple of quid and get a lethal cocktail?"

The [Alzheimer's Society](#) said there were 700,000 people with dementia in the UK and the figures were set to rise. "It is understandable that people in the early stages of dementia may reflect on the subject of euthanasia," said Andrew Ketteringham, of the Alzheimer's Society. "However, glib and offensive comments about 'euthanasia booths' and 'demented old people' only serve to alienate those dealing with this devastating condition and sidestep the hugely important question of how we can best support those affected to live well and maintain their dignity."

Amis, whose forthcoming novel, *The Pregnant Widow*, is due to be released shortly, stood by his comments, made in an interview in the *Sunday Times*.

He told the *Guardian*: "What we need to recognise is that certain lives fall into the negative, where pain hugely dwarfs those remaining pleasures that you may be left with. Geriatric science has been allowed to take over and, really, decency roars for some sort of correction." He said his comments were meant to be "satirical", rather than "glib".

His stance on euthanasia had hardened since the deaths of his stepfather, Lord Kilmarnock, the former SDP peer and writer, in March aged 81, and his friend Dame Iris Murdoch, the novelist, in 1999, aged 79, two years after her husband revealed that she was suffering from Alzheimer's.

"I increasingly feel that religion is so deep in our constitution and in our minds and that is something we should just peel off," he said. "Of course euthanasia is open to abuse, in that the typical grey death will be that of an old relative whose family gets rid of for one reason or another, and they'll say 'he asked me to do it', or 'he wanted to die', Amis said. "That's what we will have to look out for. Nonetheless, it is something we have to make some progress on."

Answering critics who said his comments were "offensive" to [older people](#), Amis, a grandfather, said: "Well, I'm not a million miles away from that myself."

He added: "I had a friend who was desperately ill and she wanted to go to Switzerland, to Dignitas, but she was defeated by bureaucracy at this end. And, I think it is existentially more terrifying to feel that life is something you can't get out of."

"Frankly, I can't think of any reason for prolonging life once the mind goes. You are without dignity then."

In his interview, Amis said his stepfather had died "very horribly". "He always thought he was going to get better. But he didn't get better and I think the denial of death is a great curse."

He said Iris Murdoch, whom he had known for a very long time, was "a friend, I loved her. She was wonderful. I remember talking to her just as it started happening, and she said, 'I've entered a dark place'. That famous quote. Awareness of loss is gone, the track is gone. You don't know the day you've spent watching *Teletubbies*; it just vanished."

The pro-euthanasia pressure group *Dignity in Dying* said: "Like all too many people in the UK, Martin Amis has witnessed the bad death of a loved one." But, it added: "Dignity in Dying's campaign for a change in the law is not about the introduction of 'euthanasia booths', nor is it in anticipation of a 'silver tsunami'. Our campaign is about allowing dying adults who have mental capacity a compassionate choice to end their suffering, subject to strict legal safeguards."

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 **Real4**
25 January 2010 9:08AM

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 **microbrain52**
25 January 2010 9:12AM

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On this delicate ,difficult, emotive matter if one is in sufficient control of ones faculties and has decided one has " just had enough" then my decision will be to self administer a good stiff " Brompton Cocktail " with either Bach or Beethoven blasting in the background.. all in all a not unpleasant blast off

 **themaskedavenger**
25 January 2010 9:12AM

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 **paulatome**
25 January 2010 9:14AM

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Perhaps Mr Amis did not put it very tactfully but his point on choice and the right to refuse to be kept alive against all ods and well past our sell by date makes a lot of sense. People of course will choose to moan and pick on the "booths" things rather than addressing the more pressing issue... We are talking about the right to choose, not saying let's get everyone killed against their will.

 **MonsieurBoulangier**
25 January 2010 9:15AM

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I read this interview, his comments on suicide booths and the silver tsunami were obviously throwaway. What a load of old reactionary cobblers this article is.

 **upnorthkid**
25 January 2010 9:17AM

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Yawn. Talent lite public school boy with permanent shoulder chip derived from unsuccessfully trying to follow father's career goes down pub with journalist who can't be bothered to challenge him to provide any actual facts. Media storm ensues marginally increasing sales of new novel released on, oh look, Feb 4th. Can't you journalists follow the example of the book buying public and just ignore him?

 **ThomasY**
25 January 2010 9:18AM

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paulatome: The point is that once you legalise euthanasia that you will create a situation where pressure will be exerted on older people or the infirm to 'do the decent thing'.

 **Saqiw**
25 January 2010 9:18AM

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Who cares what Amis said. We need more people willing to go the extra mile to



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cause offence to remind us of what we've lost in recent years, freedom of speech.



gavinscottw
25 January 2010 9:22AM

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sexedup
25 January 2010 9:23AM

Maybe the old could just bore themselves to death reading London Fields

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whitworthflange
25 January 2010 9:25AM

The booth idea which everyone is so exercised about was clearly a throw away remark in bad taste, which should have been thrown away. The real point about being able to die at a time of your own choosing when in terminal pain, or when the light is about to go completely remains.

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paulatome
25 January 2010 9:27AM

Thomas Y: Where you see pressure to do the decent thing, I see the right to choose and I believe our society can remain humane and caring nevertheless. We have no right to tell people how to live and how to die, they have the right to choose what they think is best for them and we as a society should allow them and help them whatever their choice may be. It is not about preaching.

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LenFirewood
25 January 2010 9:27AM

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monopolygod
25 January 2010 9:30AM

"Silver Tsunami..." ?

Aimless Kant right for trophy.

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Milton
25 January 2010 9:33AM

This is *not* news because a famous writer made a "satirical" remark, which some people might have found offensive, during an interview.

It is news because he has ripped off a kind of cultural scab and made us think about something which is, in fact, profoundly uncomfortable and unsettling.

We *do* have an ageing population; a relatively shrinking younger generation (whose own prospect of old age prosperity has already been greatly diminished) *will* have to support a greying and economically unproductive older generation; medicine's ability to prolong life is *not* the same as its ability to prolong quality of life; and many older people, especially those whose health has deteriorated, will look around them at the lives they have lived and the state of the world, and decide: "Enough. Time to check out."

Perhaps that sounds unfeeling, and I'm sure it upsets those indoctrinated with various superstitious beliefs, but I absolutely agree with the principle that people should be able to decide for themselves when to die. The very least we can do is allow it to happen with peace and dignity. When my heart and mind so dictate, I'll take the martini, think of my children and die with a smile on my face. As Mark Twain famously observed, we shouldn't be afraid of death; we were all dead for a long time before we were born.

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Masamune
25 January 2010 9:33AM

Nicked from Futurama?

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suicide_booth

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LenFirewood
25 January 2010 9:37AM

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25 January 2010 9:37 AM

MonsieurBoulanger wrote:

I read this interview, his comments on suicide booths and the silver tsunami were obviously throwaway. What a load of old reactionary cobblers this article is.

=====

I thought only the Daily 'Heil' did that! Ah well Amis was right to raise the issue this demographic 'timebomb' is a direct result of our 'progressive' feminist activated and liberal culture. Already we know that retirement ages for both sexes are going to be raised - not so bad perhaps for those in fairly good nick for their age but for many others they will never see retirement at all.

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Spikediswhack

25 January 2010 9:39 AM

Surely it's best not to give him attention. He's obviously thought "Ooooh, it's been a while since I was in the news, why don't I offend someone and get some coverage". As said before, it's not even his idea, it was on Futurama.

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ThomasY

25 January 2010 9:40 AM

Paulatome: "Where you see pressure to do the decent thing, I see the right to choose and I believe our society can remain humane and caring nevertheless. We have no right to tell people how to live and how to die, they have the right to choose what they think is best for them and we as a society should allow them and help them whatever their choice may be. It is not about preaching."

Who is preaching here? Amis?

The Health Service would have a vested interest in "offering choice" to its patients and pointing out "its benefits". It would help free up beds and cut costs.

Relatives fighting over the will will also have a vested interest in asking, very nicely of course, their loved ones if they had considered the possibility of euthanasia and its benefits and mention that the money spent on care home fees could easily be spent on young Simon's education or help pay for granddaughter Lizzie's wedding. Should help persuade granny to do the decent thing.

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CarefulReader

25 January 2010 9:40 AM

I wonder, is he bigoted towards old people in general, or just oldist extremists?

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FuriousOrange

25 January 2010 9:41 AM

I think Martin Amis's name could be put to use in weather forecasts when needing a metaphor for damp, overcast, with occasional drizzle.

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redbigbill

25 January 2010 9:41 AM

Never read any of the man's books and probably never will but have to agree in principle with what he says. I'm in my 60's, plagued with just about every ailment you could invent and there is no way I'm gonna hang about in pain, being grumpy in some old folks concentration camp disguised as a care home.

I say concentration camp with a reason, my wife has worked in both the state and private system care homes and no way would I want to end my days in any of them. Don't want the medal but a couple of martinis would go down well before.

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Pietrozed

25 January 2010 9:42 AM

I think Mr. Amis has been very brave to raise such a contentious issue, as sooner or later our society is going to have to face up to it. Indeed, if all of these booths were placed in Labour marginals in the run up to the next election, we might be able to get rid of enough elderly Daily Mail readers to save us from the forthcoming Cameron Junta.

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Peterhigg

25 January 2010 9:44 AM

Amis likes to throw away portentous remarks and is far too faux for my liking. His

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comments on Islam are pretty useless.

However there is an issue that whilst the aged grow in numbers, society does not grow in wisdom.

When was the last time you went to an eminence gris for advice on ontology?

The old only seem to know where to get a cheap lunch, what the price of fish is, and how to coo about their childrens' achievements.

The last wise man in Britain was Raymond Williams, the Marxist. And he is dead.

So there is a silver tsunami of old children- and though euthanasia booths is a childish solution, there is a real problem with the world filling with aging buffoons.



fredvallier
25 January 2010 9:49AM

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Yawn. Talent lite public school boy with permanent shoulder chip

Amis was actually educated at a comprehensive school. As for his relationship with his father, a number of things come into that but I doubt envy is among them.

His remark wasn't a policy proposal. He was being satirical. You know, like Defoe's thing about eating babies. It's an old British tradition that, judging from some of these posts, is, sadly, dying on its feet.



DaveNabal
25 January 2010 9:50AM

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A perfect load of media-concocted bollocks. Amis goes off on a flight of a dark Ballardian whimsy in an interview; Guardian transcribes it po-faced, calls up some worthy organisations for a response; said organisations responds with a gale of sanctimony and literal-mindedness; Guardian reports a ?storm?.



fredvallier
25 January 2010 9:50AM

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Sorry, correction: the babies was Swift. More coffee, waiter.



rosyglow
25 January 2010 9:52AM

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Why are you taking this so seriously? He's a novelist, their minds are different. Did you all get equally upset when P.D. James wrote in 'The Children of Men' about the old people going off into boats and drowning themselves? As an oldie f I hope if I become unable to care for myself I'll be sent on my way painlessly rather than forced to spend years in a half-life .. nothing dignified about that.



Briar
25 January 2010 9:53AM

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How typical of Amis to get onto a topical bandwagon and present himself as its driver. As usual, he supports the mob opinion, which regards old people as offensively unattractive and obstinately in the way. The young have more right to life than those who are older. So naturally he sets himself up as the general of the youngsters in the civil war he hopes is coming, which he does not question, nor try to oppose, but which he instead aims to promote and intensify. Trust Amis always to take the line of least intellectual resistance.



colgan
25 January 2010 9:56AM

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Amis takes an issue, does a bit of dubious research and then engages in some hyperbole which stops him from really engaging with the subject and unintentionally discredits what are in many ways valid points ...plus ca change.



Catostreetcon
25 January 2010 9:57AM

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I suppose you might get lucky with the occasional walk in , thinking it was a photo booth or a toilet, but to be aware that you are entering such a booth well... you'd be in possession of your marbles. Amis is obviously raising the issue of assisted suicide and pointing out that once this is accepted in law 'tis but a small step to the creation of the Ministry of Death.



Zagradotryad
25 January 2010 9:57AM



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northsylvania
25 January 2010 9:57AM

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Flippant, yes and bleak, but that makes headlines.
The increasingly elderly population is a huge demographic change that must be addressed though. Unfortunately a universal solution, even the false choice of handy euthanasia booths would not work, in that all humans including the elderly, have periods of hopelessness that would encourage overuse. For those who are indeed facing the prospect of rapidly increasing debilitation, a dignified and timely exit should be a guilt free choice.



Arhoolie
25 January 2010 9:59AM

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DaveNabal
25 January 2010 10:02AM

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I'm always amazed by people's insatiable need to be outraged by something.
Honestly folks, some of you wouldn't know satire if it bit you on the ass. Amis wasn't making a white paper proposal. I think the bit about a 'martini and a medal' is a clue about how to take this comment. Put your knickers back on and pipe down, for crying out loud.



neek
25 January 2010 10:03AM

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"What are these death booths? Are they going to be a kind of superloo where you put in a couple of quid and get a lethal cocktail?"

Hahaha.. All a bit Brass Eye really is it..

Strikes me that he wasnt being entirely serious.



Gobalman
25 January 2010 10:04AM

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Martin Amis is doing us all a favor, drawing our attention to the global problem we have, that is to many older people with little to do, who often are a burden to society as the services required to look after them is woefully inadequate.

In other societies the elderly are looked after in a far more reverential way in that they are an active part in the "Family" and are looked upon as a reference of knowledge and understanding.

Our society has thrown all the family values out of the window in preference to capitalism and individual greed, and therefore the family has no real role in the looking after of the seniors in society.

Change the moral and ethical values we have today in the financial, business and environmental areas if you really are serious of looking after the elderly.
Martins comments have made us think! so it should; as it is the result of how families has been brought up in the last 50-100 years of social welfare and benefit system that has tried to say that the state will look after us from cradle to grave and responsibility is removed from the family.

Old people homes are a symptom of our inability to look after the elderly in a coherent family unit and society has to build these poor substitutes as a consequence.

Social Services should wake up to the poor service they provide and the public should demand a bigger say in legislation in enabling the elderly to stay within a family unit and have the necessary support of tax reform and physical welfare help to make it happen.

Big bonuses by the banks will only ever create an ever bigger gap in the have's and have'nots and the quicker we slam the greed culture shut the better.



AdamBoult
25 January 2010 10:06AM



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I'm enjoying Martin's unconvincing attempt to look deep in thought in the photo at the top of this page.



ArtemisClydeFrog

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25 January 2010 10:06AM

Man has a point. We have an older generation in this country now who had all the benefits of state funded education and relatively cheap housing, owning at least 1 home and in some instances 2 removing the right to free education, not saving for a pension who seem to think the younger generation don't deserve the helping hand they recieved.

The younger generations in this country will be forced into servitude to pay for the old.

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MickGJ
25 January 2010 10:07AM

If only the Guardian could solve global warming with the ease with which it makes molehills into mountains.

Amis has for a long time been preoccupied with his need—or failure—to come to terms with his own ageing and mortality. He's talking about himself—can#t people see that?

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BalbKubrox
25 January 2010 10:08AM

@redbigbill:

Never read any of the man's books and probably never will but have to agree in principle with what he says.

I read one once - "Night Train" I think - and it didn't make me want to read any more of them. Clever, but seriously lacking in empathy.

He's right in principle: I've worked in a care home myself - actually quite a good and well-funded one for cerebral palsy sufferers - and after what I saw there I'd cheerfully volunteer to be burnt at the stake rather than end my days in one. But somehow you can't help thinking of Eric Idle's immortal reply some years back to the "Guardian" Saturday-quiz question "Do you believe in the death penalty?" Idle answered "Yes: but only for other people."

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snowleopard
25 January 2010 10:14AM

when is this country going to come to its senses we are well behind every body else and its about time we stood up for our selves if someone wants to do a assisted suicide let them if they have had enough of life and they are in that much pain help them . thats the only problem with this government they talk about what they want to do we have no say what goes on if my wife got that poorly and she said help me i would

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BryanC
25 January 2010 10:19AM

Please don't mistake brainless blurring for satire. Amis hasn't been genuinely interesting for years (if ever?), but he clearly has some mates at the Guardian who think he is edgy and interesting. He's an unoriginal fool.

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stripsidebob
25 January 2010 10:26AM

I see the usual reactionary twaddle is being trotted out by those who fail to properly dissect what MA is saying. He uses satire and offensiveness to open up debate about modern sensibilities.

Of course he doesn't envisage euthanasia booties. He says so himself.

What is plain is that, as should be expected from this literary lion, he gets to the real grist of the debate when he notes the "*it is existentially more terrifying to feel that life is something you can't get out of*"

Having experienced the helpless pit of grief by losing both beloved grandfathers to dementia (and seen the similar fallout experienced by my wife in similar circumstances) I agree wholeheartedly with the core of what MA is saying. Nothing can be more terrifying than seeing the void coming, knowing it will claim you and what that will mean to your family, and yet being shackled with the impotence of societies mores and double standards.

We must also ensure that the debate is had to safeguard those unfortunate souls who may fall foul of abuse. Just keeping quiet for the sake of not offending those who deal with such trauma does little to ensure the the right decisions and strategies are made for future generations.

If all you're going to do is jump on the sensationalist headlines of MA's latest 'outrage,' and not attempt to read any deeper meaning into it, maybe you ought to be

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offended.



AnMailleach
25 January 2010 10:26AM

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There has been a massive transfer of wealth from the young to old in the form of the housing boom/ bubble and now in the form of pensions. Many of the old are expensive, unhappy, and will end up dying in increasingly poorly funded hospices. Amis's remarks were flippant, but he has a point, both about the way people die (and lack a choice about this because of the moral stance of a minority religion imposing its barking mad views) and because we simply can't afford the current form of pensions where we have to keep adding more people to the population in order to pay for pensions (an environmental catastrophe that has started to happen).

Giving people a choice about their death is humane and sensible.



slabman
25 January 2010 10:26AM

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I find myself in the unusual position of agreeing with Martin Amis. This is the most important choice that remains irrationally closed to us. I hope that, should I need it, I can legally make this choice and facilities exist to make it happen. Yes, some people will be pressured into it, just as they are now pressured into selling their homes and going into care where they may face many miserable years. I only hope I'm still rational when it's time to choose.



marbleflat
25 January 2010 10:27AM

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Masamune (25 Jan 2010, 9:33AM);

Nicked from Futurama?

Nicked from Robert Shekley (Immortality, Inc.) originally.



DaveNabal
25 January 2010 10:30AM

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You can criticise Amis's politics and interview persona all you like, and I grant you that he's written a few poor books. But anyone who's read London Fields or Money and says he can't write simply doesn't know anything about literature.



rahannafirrell
25 January 2010 10:31AM

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If there are booths for bonking, why not for dying... sounds perfectly good. But why do we get into such a tizz about it... the dying I mean... because its horrible and its something we don't know about but I do like the idea of the booth - it would have to be nicely kitted out, though. Anyway, Mr Amis, good on you - terrific idea.



fullmoon
25 January 2010 10:35AM

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Unlikely to ever happen in the UK. Folks still have to make the trip, probably quite painful at that stage in their lives, to Switzerland if they want a dignified end.

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