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Martin Amis responds: A poor godparent, yes, but I did not 'fill in time' at friend's deathbed

- Novelist responds to Anna Ford's 'ungenerous' attack
- Letter suggests 'personal troubles' behind criticisms

Charlotte Higgins, chief arts writer
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Martin Amis says Anna Ford was 'misremembering' in letter to the Guardian. Photograph: Xavier Bertral/EPA

Rarely one to turn the other cheek, the novelist [Martin Amis](#) – who was the subject of [an open letter from Anna Ford in Saturday's Guardian](#) accusing him of narcissism, neglect of his godfatherly duties and smoking over her late husband's deathbed – has counter attacked, calling the former newsreader's outburst "ungenerous and self-defeating".

[Amis retaliates against Ford](#), who is the widow of Mark Boxer, a close friend of Amis until his death in 1988. "I was astonished. I was best man at her wedding. [The attack] makes me wonder how long all this has been brewing," he told the Guardian today.

Calling Ford's letter "eagerly ungenerous and self-defeating", he said: "She'll regret all this. She is undermining the memory of Mark, whose friends really did adore him." He added, addressing Ford: "You only have to ask yourself two questions: if Mark were alive, what would he think and how would he feel?"

Amis rejects Ford's account of his visit to Boxer's sickbed, in which, she wrote: "You stayed far too long. You smoked over his bed." According to Amis: "I never smoked a cigarette in Mark's bedroom." And to Ford's claim that "you wrote a piece about your feelings and tears as you left. I saw no evidence of these," he responds: "I said my last words to him and he said his last words to me, and I remember very clearly what they were. Then I left, and managed to reach my car before I was overwhelmed."

He rejects Ford's charge he was "filling in time before you caught a plane at Heathrow" (the Ford-Boxer family home was in Brentford, near the London airport). That is misremembering, claims Amis; the flight in

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question was the next morning. He writes: "You are conflating two separate visits (and I made several such, not only to your house, but also to that Tudorbethan hospital in Maida Vale)."

However, to one part of Ford's indictment Amis pleads guilty. "It is true that I am a useless godfather," he writes.

Ford and Boxer's daughter, Claire, is Amis's godchild. When she read English at university, according to Ford, "she said she was studying Martin Amis and did I know anything about him? Oddly enough, I told her, he's your godfather. We invited you to lunch. You paid scant attention to Claire [...] and she hasn't heard from you since."

On this, Amis is penitent: "When I met her as a young adult, on the occasion you describe, she expressively and warmly reminded me of Mark (and I told her so). I will be writing to her to offer my apologies and regrets." He now recognises a "lost opportunity" for involvement in the life of a child who was "abruptly fatherless".

If Ford dealt out some pretty severe criticisms, accusing Amis of "narcissism and inability to empathise" and urging him to take "a closer and more honest look at yourself", Amis repays her in kind. "When you receive an unprovoked attack like this you are left wondering about the personal troubles of the aggressor," he said today.

He writes: "I wonder how it serves Mark's memory, or warms his ghost, to suggest that his two devoted friends (I and Christopher [Hitchens, the journalist]) behaved with such implausible callousness. What sane person 'fills in time' at a deathbed? We both loved him, and still mourn him. Many did, and many do. He was a powerfully delightful man."

Ford, who has been a fearless articulator of her feminist principles, was among the first female newsreaders on ITN. Famously, she threw a glass of wine over former Conservative MP Jonathan Aitken in anger at his part in her sacking from TV-am. She has said of Amis's writing: "As a feminist, I don't enjoy reading him; he may be one of our most distinguished writers, but I think his attitude to women is highly questionable."

Her letter to Amis was provoked by a piece he wrote for the Guardian, on the subject of reactions to him in the press. In Ford's estimation, he seemed "bemused, hurt and outraged". Amis, whose latest novel, *The Pregnant Widow*, was published this month, said: "I wasn't whingeing, in fact. I was cheerfully retaliating."

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