



Anna Ford to Martin Amis: stop your immature whingeing

Former newsreader accuses writer of a moan too far in open but highly personal Guardian letter

Jon Henley
The Guardian, Saturday 20 February 2010
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In an open letter to Martin Amis, Anna Ford accuses the author of 'narcissism' and an 'inability to empathise'. Photograph: Juan Martin Msis/EPA

One is a literary titan, arguably the most original stylist of his generation, sparkling chronicler of the absurdities of our postmodern times, author of some of this country's best – and best-known – modern fiction. Or, if you prefer, an arrogant misogynist with some highly unpleasant views and a reputation as a serial womaniser who would have got nowhere without his dad.

The other is an elegant former newsreader, cool, classy and currently employed as a non-executive director of J Sainsbury plc, where she chairs the board's corporate responsibility committee. Or, if you prefer, an oft lusted-after and plain-speaking beauty with no time for patronising males and a penchant for throwing wine over them at parties.

When the two fell out, it was never going to be pretty. But the feud brewing between Anna Ford and [Martin Amis](#) looks like being more than usually ugly: [in an open but highly personal letter to Amis in the Guardian today](#), Ford accuses the author of "narcissism", an "inability to empathise" and an unwillingness to look "closely and honestly at himself" in relation to other people.

"I just opened up my Guardian last week," Ford said yesterday, "and I thought: Oh, for heaven's sake, there's Martin whingeing again. He really ought to just stop. It annoyed me so much I decided to write a letter. It's a For Heaven's Sakes letter, really."

[Amis's article](#), in last Saturday's Guardian Review, argued that far from "stirring up the press" by being "controversial-on-purpose" whenever he has a new book out (his latest, *The Pregnant Widow*, was published this month), it is newspapers that stir themselves up by misrepresenting him. Recent headlines such as "Martin Amis: 'Women have too much power

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for their own good" and "Amis calls for euthanasia booths on street corners" were, he said, essentially down to the media's own "chaotic perceptions", based in at least one instance on "a mishmash of half-quotes".

Getting "taken up (and recklessly distorted) in the press is not something I do," he wrote. "It's something the newspapers do. The only person who can manipulate the fourth estate is Katie Price."

For Ford – who has known Amis for 30-odd years, but concedes that "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" – the writer's complaint was a moan too many. "Obviously when you are an author you put your work into the public domain," she said.

"But Martin seems to think that having highly controversial views on a number of subjects – nuclear warfare, Iraq, Muslims – is not going to attract criticism. It seems to me that if you're going to be a controversial writer, then you have to expect people to have an opinion about you, and you have to take the rough with the smooth. It's this unattractive, immature whingeing that really gets me. He just ought to stop."

Ford, who retired from television in 2006 after having been only the second woman newsreader at ITN and being on the presenting team for the BBC Six O'Clock News, the Today programme and (briefly) TV-am, is considerably harder on Amis in her letter, asking whether the author might not be better taking "a closer and more honest look at himself in relation to others" rather than "complaining about reckless distortions and chaotic perceptions".

She also relates two very personal anecdotes about her late husband, the cartoonist Mark Boxer, a close friend of Amis. Amis once visited Boxer in bed shortly before he died of a brain tumour in 1988 not just out of affection, Ford alleges, but because he was "filling in time before a plane". The author subsequently wrote a piece in which he described crying as he left; tears of which Ford "saw no evidence".

She also says that when one of her two daughters was studying English at university reading Amis, she was unaware that he was her godfather. "We invited you to lunch," Ford tells Amis. "You paid scant attention to Claire (didn't even cough up the statutory five bob expected from godfathers!) and she hasn't heard from you since. Can I suggest that this level of narcissism and inability to empathise may be at the root of your anger with the press and your need to court attention?"

Like his father Kingsley, Amis, who left his first wife, Antonia Phillips, for the American writer Isabel Fonseca, is frequently accused of misogyny. Last year, one former girlfriend, Julie Kavanagh, described him as an inveterate womaniser. Kavanagh also published a long list of alleged Amis lovers and mistresses, several of whom have publicly accused him of "behaving appallingly".

Ford, a 70s feminist icon as well as a male fantasy figure whose looks inspired poetry from a fellow ITN newsreader, Reginald Bosanquet, was once known as "Angry Anna" because of her fondness for speaking her mind to "bureaucratic, bullying, invariably masculine" BBC bosses. She has never been slow to condemn male behaviour that she considers patronising or sexist.

The veteran broadcaster Sir Robin Day once said "every man in the world would like to sleep with Anna Ford". The next time she saw him, at a garden party, she called him a "silly old fool" and pushed him over into a bush. [See footnote.] She also famously threw a glass of wine over Jonathan Aitken in fury at his part in her sacking from TV-am.

Amis declined to comment on Ford's letter, saying – with some restraint – that he would prefer to speak to her personally.

• This article was amended on 22 February and 10 March 2010. The original said that Anna Ford was ITN's first female newsreader. This has been corrected. Anna Ford says that the much repeated Robin Day anecdote is incorrect. In the garden-party encounter with Day, she said to a friend who was with her, "Shall we push him [Day] into this bush?" but did not do so, and walked away. The original Day quote was, she notes: "You only got your job in television because men wanted to sleep

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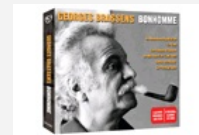
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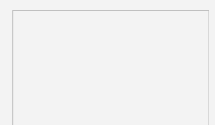
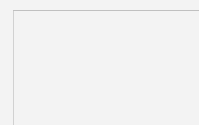
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- Martin Amis and the Marxist literary critic Professor Terry Eagleton were engaged in a very public row over alleged Islamophobia after a 2006 interview with the Times in which Amis said Muslims ought to "suffer until they get their house in order", with measures including deportation, curtailing of freedoms, and strip searching "until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children". Eagleton subsequently described Amis's father, Kingsley Amis, as a "racist, antisemitic boor; a drink-sodden, self-hating reviler of women, gays and liberals", and added: "Amis fils has clearly learned more from [his father] than how to turn a shapely phrase."
- Amis and the writer Christopher Hitchens fought over Amis's 2002 book *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million*, in which Amis argued that denial and a blind attachment to Marxism had led western intellectuals to ignore the crimes of Stalin. Hitchens, an old friend, was among the accused. In a savage response in *The Atlantic*, Hitchens in turn accused Amis of "solipsism", and of "insulting" the memories of Stalinism's many leftwing opponents. "Hard work," he wrote, "is involved in the study of history. Hard moral work, too. We don't get much assistance in that task from mushy secondhand observations."
- Amis fell out with another old friend, the novelist Julian Barnes, over Amis's decision to drop Barnes's wife, Pat Kavanagh, as his literary agent after 22 years. Barnes subsequently wrote to Amis expressing the hope that he might be every bit as successful as two other clients of Andrew "The Jackal" Wylie, his new agent, namely Salman Rushdie (then under a fatwa) and Bruce Chatwin (who died of Aids). Barnes signed off, Amis wrote, with "two words consisting of seven letters. Three of them are Fs."
- In 2007, the novelist and screenwriter Ronan Bennett accused Amis of racism in the *Guardian*, saying that various of his comments on Muslims made him guilty of "as odious an outburst of racist sentiment as any public figure has made in this country for a very long time".

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