

Remembering Iris Murdoch

[James Diedrick's note: The following is an extended excerpt from the February 9, 1999 PBS NewsHour interview with Martin Amis and James Atlas, conducted the day after Iris Murdoch's death. It begins with a brief biographical sketch of Murdoch by NewsHour reporter Elizabeth Farnsworth, who also conducts the interview].

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: British novelist Iris Murdoch, who died yesterday at age 79, had lectured at Oxford University in philosophy, and philosophical concerns permeated her novels. *The Sea, the Sea*, which received Britain's prestigious Booker Prize in 1978, was, she wrote, "a fictional philosophical journal." "I can tell you, reader, about my past life and about my 'world view' also, as I ramble along," she wrote. "Why not?" In the *Black Prince*, published in 1973, she created an unsuccessful novelist deeply concerned with questions like, what is truth? But the book is also about seduction, suicide, romance, and murder. Other works included *A Severed Head*, *A Message to the Planet*, and *The Green Knight*. In all, she wrote 26 novels. She was fiercely private and only occasionally agreed to book signings and interviews. But in the past year, she was intimately revealed in her husband John Bayley's new book, *Elegy for Iris*. It lovingly chronicles their life together as Murdoch succumbed to Alzheimer's Disease, which she called "a very, very bad, quiet place, a dark place." She lost her fight with Alzheimer's yesterday. Her husband, who cared for her throughout the disease, was by her side when she died.

More on Iris Murdoch and her work now from British writer Martin Amis, author of 14 books, including *Heavy Water and Other Stories*, and James Atlas, who profiled Iris Murdoch for *Vanity Fair* magazine in 1988. He's now a staff writer for *The New Yorker* magazine and editor of a new series of biographies of historical figures. Mr. Amis, you knew Iris Murdoch for a long time. Tell us about her as a person.

MARTIN AMIS: Well, she was a great friend of my father's--[Kingsley Amis]--and the only woman he ever allowed that might have been more intelligent than him. She--I don't think there could be any equivalent in America to Iris and Iris and John. I mean, they were fabulous bo-ho slobs, basically, and both incredibly brilliant.

FARNSWORTH: How do you mean, "slobs"?

AMIS: Oh, you know, John would come up to you and take an olive, fur-covered olive out of his jacket pocket and say, "Do you have one of these? They're frightfully good." It's a sort of oxonian. There are many dongs and intellectuals in Oxford who for a while, you know, very much reveled in their eccentricities. And no one could have been more extreme than that couple. But I was always extremely fond of Iris. And I once won a rather meaningless sort of award, and there was a dinner for it, and Iris was there and kissed me on the mouth at the end of the evening, as she always does, and it was very pleasant. She was very—she had a sexual aura, despite her kind of Bohemian, almost tramp-like

appearance on some occasions. And I said to her, and I meant it, that that was the crowning moment of the evening, is being kissed on the mouth by Iris Murdoch. That meant something, the prize didn't.

FARNSWORTH: James Atlas, what do you remember about her from your interviewing her in 1988?

JAMES ATLAS: Well, I remember her being an incredibly gentle person. She had--it sounds like a cliché, but she really did have a saintly aura about her. She was someone who had a tremendous sense of humility and reticence. And I met her at a luncheon at a friend's house in Oxford when I was going to profile her. And I talked to her for an hour, and then she turned to me and said, "And what do you do?" She had no idea that I'd come to interview her, that I was writing for a magazine. She was really, in a sense, otherworldly in a way that, as Martin says, you just wouldn't find a person like that in America. She didn't read her reviews. She inhabited some other ethereal realm, and yet she also knew a great deal about the passions of people's lives. I mean, she was not inaccessible.

FARNSWORTH: What were her main themes, Mr. Amis?

AMIS: Her single main theme was love. And I once--I reviewed many of her novels, I was very addicted to her novels. I said it's as if, you know, in the world, she inhabits, the tap water contains love potions, or people creep around pouring love potions into each other's ears. People fall terribly and irreversibly in love. And it's almost like a courtly love. It has its physicality, but it's much more a form of worship. That is the single, you know, the single value that she explored and what meant most to her.

FARNSWORTH: Mr. Atlas, she once said that "Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than one's self is real." She really didn't care much about people terribly obsessed with the self, did she?

ATLAS: No, she was an extremely selfless person and very aware of other people's suffering, which comes through very strongly in her books, the sense that as she once said to me, people really do go through tremendous private ordeals of the soul. And that's what her books were really about. She didn't have any concern for her reputation in that sense or where she stood. She was really much more concerned with trying to simply express these themes. As she said in one of her books, in the book *In the Brotherhood*, the effort to try to be good and the difficulty of being good. And yet I think we should also make it clear that her books were not so innocent and Oxford and donnish and only charming. They were also full of violence and adultery and betrayal. I mean, she lived a life.

FARNSWORTH: How important was she, Mr. Atlas, as a novelist?

ATLAS: Well, I don't know if you want me to rank her. I mean, certainly Martin would have a better assessment of her career in England. She was certainly one

of the two or three preeminent novelists of her generation. There's no question about that. And she was also very important as a philosopher. She had a very serious reputation as a metaphysician. In this country, she had her audience. It was a somewhat limited audience. Though when I interviewed her at the "Y" in 1990, we filled the hall in New York, and 1,200 people came to listen to her, were enthralled. So, she certainly had a following here.

FARNSWORTH: And, Mr. Amis, did she have a huge following in England?

AMIS: She was a very central figure. And I think she was the preeminent woman novelist in the second half of the 20th century in England. As Jim was saying, she had--you know--what you get from her is a really luminous intelligence. She was heavy-weight intellectual, as well as the most, Jim said, "ethereal"--she was the most freakish kind of noticer of things, but underscored by--underscored by a real brain.

FARNSWORTH: And Mr. Amis, this book that her husband has written about their life together as she got Alzheimer's and then became very, very ill with Alzheimer's, it's almost another chapter in her literary life, isn't it, or in her life and what we know about her?

AMIS: It is. And I think it's in many ways a beautiful memorial to her. I mean, let us not forget that John Bayley is a tremendous intellect, too, and a man who began as a poet, and a poet whom many people thought was going to be a great poet. It's--you know, you could argue that that book takes you in further than you want to go, but, as you said, it's a loving book. And it's about--he is in the end writing about a child. And Iris in the end became a child who had no real idea of her achievements and was happy watching "Teletubbies." And it's such a--that's such a, you know, tragic paradox that a great brain was reduced to childishness, that I think, you know, John Bayley felt that he could say what was in his heart about her. And she doesn't lose dignity in that book, I don't think.

FARNSWORTH: Do you agree with that, Mr. Atlas, that she doesn't lose dignity?

ATLAS: Well, I think it is a very loving portrait, and it certainly takes you very far into that marriage. I was very--am very fond of John Bayley and his superior intelligence. I was a little uneasy about the way in which he seemed to possess her in her illness, as if someone who had been very elusive at moments in their marriage had now fallen into his domain. So, that's a hard theme. But, again, that seems to conform to the fact that these were not ethereal people, and that their marriage, like everything else about their lives, was rooted in reality and rooted in pain.

FARNSWORTH: Well, thank you both very much for being with us.

AMIS: Pleasure.