

Fiction is harder than fact

An excerpt from Dinitia Smith's report on "A Monster in the House," the *New Yorker* Festival panel at the Directors Guild Theater Saturday 28 September (New York Times, 30 September 2002):

Is there a monster in the house? Is there a baby writer sitting over there on the floor storing up memories of family fights and betrayals for future books? Beware. That was the message from writers on a panel at the *New Yorker* Festival called "A Monster in the House," at the Directors Guild Theater Saturday.

There was Martin Amis, son of Kingsley Amis: two generations of family scavengers. There was Amy Tan, who in *The Joy Luck Club* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1989) and other books portrays a succession of dour, truculent, interfering mothers. There was Roddy Doyle, who struggled to remember those few occasions when his parents fought, "the odd argument here and there, the silences," he said, to depict the bad marriage in *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (Viking Penguin, 1993). Finally there was Dave Eggers, author of *Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (Simon & Schuster, 2000), a searing account of his parents' death and of caring for his younger brother, complete with vivid details of his mother's physical decay, details some parents might hope never to have revealed. [...]

The festival had a voyeuristic lure, the chance to get close to writers and learn the story behind the story. At the panel on "A Monster in the House," moderated by Bill Buford, the magazine's fiction editor, Ms. Tan said it was not she but her mother who was "that monster in the house" she seemed to torment me." But her mother, in her maternal pride, was upset that people thought that she was the mother in Ms. Tan's novels, because "she felt people didn't give me credence for having an imagination."

Mr. Eggers showed *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* to his family before it was published. "They would say, 'I'm funnier than that,'" he said. Or, " 'I'm better looking than that.'" He changed lines. "You end up trading favors," he said.

"I had one friend ask me for a pseudonym," Mr. Eggers said. "Then he found out he might be doing better with the ladies if he put his name back in."

After that, writing his first novel, *You Shall Know Our Velocity* (coming out next month), was a breeze. "You don't have that responsibility to 65 people," he said. "Fiction is easier. Trust me."

Mr. Amis had the opposite view. Writing his memoirs of his father, *Experience* (2000) and *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million* (2002), which involved their political differences, was exhausting, but "I was a better father and husband when writing nonfiction," Mr. Amis said.

"I feel like a real imposter in my own house when I'm finishing a novel," he added. He recalled Salman Rushdie's description of coming down from his study after writing 400 pages. "You say to your wife, 'How was your day?' "As if the novelist really cares," said Mr. Amis.

When writing fiction, "you read to your children like you are a robot," Mr. Amis said. "I'm sure your children sense it," he said. "Your wife certainly senses it."

Mr. Buford uttered an amen to that: "The monster in the house."