

Series: Author, author

# Martin Amis muses on the fourth estate

'I'm not turning into Kingsley. I'm already Kingsley'

**Martin Amis**

The Guardian, Saturday 13 February 2010  
Article history

The following correction was printed in the Guardian's Corrections and clarifications column, Tuesday 16 February 2010

"In truth this is easily the most unusual thing about me," wrote Martin Amis in the column below. "I am the only hereditary novelist in the anglophone literary corpus." A reader points to at least one other, Anthony Trollope, following from his mother Frances.

I was born in Clapham in 1922. My literary career kicked off in 1956 when, as a resident of Swansea, South Wales, I published my first novel, *Lucky Jim*. This was followed by *That Uncertain Feeling* and *Take a Girl Like You*, among others; but my really productive period began in 1973, when I published both *The Riverside Villas Murder* and *The Rachel Papers*. 1978 saw the appearance of *Jake's Thing* and *Success*; in 1984 it was *Stanley and the Women* and *Money*; in 1991 it was *The Russian Girl* and *Time's Arrow*. This last was shortlisted for the Booker prize; but I had already been a winner with *The Old Devils* in 1986. I am, incidentally, the only writer to have received the Somerset Maugham award twice – the first time for my first first novel, the second time for my second first novel.

That period, alas, came to an end in 1995. Since then, though, I have been far from sluggardly. This year, for instance, at the age of 88, I publish my 37th work of fiction, *The Pregnant Widow*, and next year will see another novel, *State of England* – my 67th book, which nicely sets the scene for my 90th birthday. I have written five volumes' worth of journalism; I have taught at Princeton, Cambridge and Manchester. May I quote Anthony Burgess? "Wedged as we are between two eternities of idleness, there is no excuse for being idle now." I have been married four times (two of my wives are novelists), and I have eight children and seven grandchildren – so far. Oh, and I almost forgot to mention my *Collected Poems* (1979).



The creature described above is of course imaginary. But such a phantasm, such a monster of longevity and industriousness, seems to exist in the minds, or in the anxiety dreams, of a tiny stratum: British – no, English – feature-writers who occasionally address themselves to literary affairs. Incidentally, this is what they're groping to express when they say I'm "turning into Kingsley". They should relax: I'm already Kingsley. In truth, this is easily the most unusual thing about me: I am the only hereditary novelist in the anglophone literary corpus. Thus I am the workaholic and hypermanic, and by now very elderly, Prince Charles of English letters. I have overstayed my welcome. I have been about the place for much too long.

About 90% of the coverage has passed me by, but some new tendencies

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are clear enough. What's different, this time round, is that the writer, or this writer, gets blamed for all the slanders he incites in the press. Some quite serious commentators (DJ Taylor, for one) have said that I'm controversial-on-purpose whenever I have a book coming out. Haven't they noticed that the papers pick up on my remarks whether I have a book coming out or not? And how can you be controversial- on-purpose without ceasing to care what you say? The Telegraph, on its front page, offers the following: "Martin Amis: 'Women have too much power for their own good'." This is the equivalent of "Rowan Williams: 'Christianity is a vulgar fraud'." I suppose the Telegraph was trying to make me sound "provocative". Well, they messed that up too. I don't sound provocative. I sound like a much-feared pub bore in Hove.

And yet experienced journalists will look me in the eye and solemnly ask, "Why do you do it?" They are not asking me why I say things in public (which is an increasingly pertinent question). They are asking me why I deliberately stir up the [newspapers](#). How can they have such a slender understanding of their own trade? Getting taken up (and recklessly distorted) in the newspapers is not something I do. It's something the news- papers do. The only person in England who can manipulate the fourth estate is, appropriately, Katie Price. But there I go again. No, the vow of silence looks more and more attractive. That would be a story too, but it would only be a story once. Wouldn't it?



To return briefly to the longevity theme – and all the stuff about street-corner suicide parlours, and the "silver tsunami" (which is the demographers' shorthand for what has been described as "the most profound population shift in history"). The press reacted to my remarks with righteous dismay; but I saw no recent headlines saying "Terry Pratchett is mad", by way of commentary on his resonant statement about euthanasia. In addition, it turns out that 75% of Britons (but none of the political parties) agree with him and agree with me. Thus the euthanasia question, eerily, is the reverse image of capital punishment at the time of its abolition. The people wanted judicial killing, but the government, highmindedly and quite rightly in this case, said no.

Of course, Sir Terry's dignified remarks were taken from a public lecture; mine were a mishmash of half-quotes from a satirical novel. For the interested, the passage reads (I am referring to Europe's distorted age structures): "*Hoi polloi*: the many. And, oh, we will be many (he meant the generation less and less affectionately known as the Baby Boomers). And we will be hated, too. *Governance, for at least a generation*, he read, *will be a matter of transferring wealth from the young to the old*. And they won't like that, the young. They won't like the *silver tsunami*, with the old hogging the social services and stinking up the clinics and the hospitals, like an inundation of monstrous immigrants. There will be age wars, and chronological cleansing . . ."

Then, too, Sir Terry has Alzheimer's – a condition made yet more tragic by the liveliness of the mind it here afflicts (I am thinking also of Iris Murdoch and Saul Bellow). And Sir Terry is older than me. Or is he? Well, yes and no. I am 88 – but I am also 24. Look at the photographs. A 60-year-old grandfather, I am still the "bad boy" (not even the bad man) of English letters. Who could possibly "manipulate" perceptions as chaotic as these?

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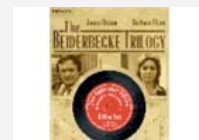
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