



# Slow Birthing

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## The slow birthing of *Yellow Dog*

### **The first published mention--*Portland Phoenix* interview with Chris Wright, July 2000:**

"If *Money* says something about the kind of person Amis was when he wrote it, then you have to assume he wasn't counting his blessings at the time. It's wonderful for Amis that he is so content these days, but for those of us who relish his misanthropic bite, this development raises a troubling question: what kind of novels can we expect from the snapshot-wielding doting daddy before us? The worst-case scenario presents itself with depressing clarity: a literature of burping babies, domestic wrangles, trips to the all-night pharmacy.

'Just to reassure you,' Amis says, gesticulating with his scraggy cigarette, 'the novel I'm writing is very much the same stuff. There's a guy in it called Clint Smoker, who works for a newspaper that's rather like the *Daily Sport*, called the *Morning Lark*. There's also pornography in it, and an East End gangster, and a parallel royal family. The king is Henry IX, and he has a daughter who is kind of entrapped in a sexual thing by . . . I don't want to give too much away.'"



### ***San Francisco Chronicle* interview with Jonathan Curiel, 4 November 2001 (*Sunday Review*, p. 2):**

**Q:** What are you working on now?

**A:** Just a couple of months ago, I finished another memoir, but it's the political one. And it turns, in fact, into a short biography of Stalin. It sounds weird. My father was a Communist for 15 years -- during the war and after -- and [the memoir] is about that great lacuna in Western thought, of the indulgence of communism, and, in fact, our irrational desire for a perfect society.

And now I'm back on the novel that I put aside 2 1/2 years ago. I'm 30 pages in. It's about masculinity again, with the usual high-low characters. It's even more extreme than usual, in that there's a royal family in it, as well as a criminal family. But, like all writers, I'm having to completely relocate myself after Sept. 11. I can tell you, it's a totally new feeling where you have to fight to shed yourself of distraction. You always have to do that. But now it's a real battle to get to the novel. To get past all the other stuff that you pollute yourself with over the breakfast table -- like reading the newspapers -- and you have to convince yourself that what you're writing matters.

Luckily, I know it will now be a novel about what it feels like to be living in our current era, which established itself on Sept. 11. It will be called the Age of Security, but now we'll feel it is the Age of Insecurity. Everything is qualified now. Everything is contingent. The verities that you depended on a few weeks ago are gone -- and gone, I think, for our lifetimes. So it's a weird process. You go up there and you have to convince yourself that this matters. And then you get going. And you do, in fact, forget about the 21st century -- although you're writing about it -- but you've escaped into your fictional world. And then, after an hour, you suddenly realize you haven't been thinking about whether your kids are going to get anthrax, and there's a sort of weird, guilty feeling, which I think is going to be the condition for a long time.

I did call my latest book *The War Against Cliche*. These things do matter. "The War Against Cliche" matters. And it's their victory if they seem to stop mattering. So that's the great adjustment that we all have to make -- that what we cared about before is still just as important as it was.



**From Jonathan Heawood's interview with Amis for the *Observer Review*, 8 September 2002:**

**Observer:** You mention once or twice [in *Koba the Dread*] the idea that if you put two people together, and give one absolute power over the other, torture quickly ensues.

**M.A.** Yes, the thoughts of torture will be more or less automatic, I think.

**Observer:** How much was the Fred West element of *Experience* still in your mind?

**M.A.** This convulsion in my writing life is a lot to do with that, with my cousin, and having a horrible, inverted kind of link with this little one-man death camp. Both *Experience* and this are kind of wrestling with that. I never thought for a minute that fiction was at all trivial; it's a very high pursuit, but I just couldn't ... didn't feel playful enough. You have to feel playful to write fiction.

**Observer:** So you called a two-book moratorium on fiction?

**M.A.** I'm only cautiously positing that as an idea in retrospect. You certainly don't say, Right -- two books off!

**Observer:** Even *Night Train* was a departure from your familiar terrain. Is your writing driven by a fear of predictability?

**M.A.** A quest for novelty? I don't think it can be, because the novel I'm writing at the moment has a character called Clint Smoker. It's so me, it feels like I'm going through my hoops.

**Observer:** How big's that going to be?

**M.A.** Not very long, and more comic than I've done for a while.

**Observer:** Right back to the lightness of *The Rachel Papers*?

**M.A.** No, more like *Money*, perhaps. Where you give various characters and ideas their head, but not a long novel. You can say of Graham Greene that he wrote about the same things but he just got older as he did them. The perspective is like a shadow moving across a lawn.

**Observer:** What is the changing perspective?

**M.A.** Time. Age. Mortality. That can make you all frisky as well. A terrible sort of giddy, senile friskiness comes over us. I can tell I'm doing some new things in the one I'm writing now because it's tough; you know you're trying to coax the language into maximum effect.

**Observer:** What's the novel called?

**M.A.** I haven't got a title yet. Maybe *Men in Power*. One of the main characters is the King of England, Henry IX.

**Observer:** Now?

**M.A.** Yes, but it's a slightly different universe. His father was Richard IV and his grandfather was John II. So in numerical terms the next one up from the three worst kings. It's a tripartite novel. It's on a sort of three-character loop, but then it changes halfway through. I'm assuming the reader will be wondering intensely how these three characters are connected. One of them's Clint Smoker, who works for a paper well below the *Sun* in its intentions and strategies.

**Observer:** *The Sport*?

**M.A.** *The Sport* is so marvellous in its own way that it's hard to satirise. It's already satirising itself. The third character's an actor who's also a bit of a writer, who gets hit over the head in the first chapter. He's been attacked, deliberately, for something he's done, and it all is connected.

**Observer:** How far on are you?

**M.A.** One hundred-odd typed pages, second draft sort of thing, another 50 in long hand. It won't be much longer than 250.

**Observer:** How do you write?

**M.A.** I do a lot of longhand. I've come to think that the process of writing a novel is finding out about the novel. When you've done your year or two of longhand

and you go back to start at the beginning again, you're amazed by how little you knew about it. You've got some little throb or spark that gives you a sentence or a situation and for the next few years you're just finding out more about the novel.

**Observer:** How much do you write a day?

**M.A.** Sometimes I write so fast I can hardly keep up. And other days I'd be hard-pressed to write the dosage instructions on a Nurofen packet.

**Observer:** You don't force out 1,000 words every day?

**M.A.** No. I'm very impressed by writers who can do that, but it's much more of a groping business. If I'm having a day where I don't feel I can write the instructions on a Nurofen packet I won't sit there staring. I'll read and I'll be alone. I think that reading, being alone, waiting, is a huge part of it all.



## **Reports from Amis's reading at the *New Yorker* festival, 27 September:**

### **Martin Amis Update**

By Mark Riebling, 09/28/2002

Last night I went to the Knitting Factory to hear our hero read from the second draft of his novel-in-progress. I meant to go straight home, to put down all my fresh thoughts, and indeed to start a double review of *Koba the Dread* and Hitchens' *Letters to a Young Contrarian*, a review which now seems to have grown into a feature article, about the drift to the right in British letters, promised in July to *National Review*. I neither began the article nor preserved my impressions. Instead, I went with [Aaron Haspel](#) to a party, at a club, thrown by a woman I once dated. The later the evening became, the more I seemed to be living in an early Martin Amis novel. My head still hurts. But is here is what I can recall.

1. As I was lingering beforehand in the bar, he came in. I seemed to be the only one who recognized him: I stole furtive respectful glances, Kinbote-to-Shade. He was looking well, in a blue blazer -- tanned, longer haired, less gaunt, less wrinkled, less damaged than in the recent photos. He reminded me very much of Richard Burton: The same stenoriant and vaguely nasal voice, the same carriage and implied plumage. He paid for his own drink, an act which seemed to me glorious and strange.

2. The event was part of the *New Yorker* Festival, and it was sold out. As he settled in at the mike, he asked us all to be gentle with him: the book was "not quite there." He said he would point out some of its weaknesses along the way.

3. The book opens by breaking the same "rule" about six times in a row: consecutive sentences begin: "But...." He enters, in other words, *in disputans res*. These sentences deal, if I remember rightly, with death and family and hospitals -- very much the stuff of *Experience*. He has endured recently the death of his father, the death of his sister, the death of his first marriage. The ghosts haunt this novel, and they are his guides.
4. He is a changed man, and one expects from him changed work. Yet he is not so changed that he is not Amis. He has suffered acutely, but not for very long. There is still something sheltered about him. His flirtation with the Nuclear Freeze Movement did not give him the lived left-wing politics of Hitchens or Fenton. When the bluff and vigorous Fenton went onstage after him -- to read poems about weeks spent with guerillas in a wide range of muddy hells -- one grasped how comparatively narrow, how writerly, how Philip Roth-like Amis' own experience has been.
5. Still and all, he is changed. He is a family man: the most heartfelt passages are about children. Strikingly, too, the characters all seem to be people with whom we would like to spend time, even without the glaze of the Amis style. Not because they are "interesting" -- people who are merely interesting soon become boring -- but because they are good, or feel bad about not being so, or know or sense that they should be (there is a kind of implied infinite regress of the moral sense).
6. Some aspects of the novel are teasingly allegorical. The lead character's wife is named "Russia," the King's servant "Love"; there is a "homeless" boy who lives at home with his mother (I myself was mulling all this in a dark club called "Light"). Amis has given us outrageous names before ("John Self," in *Money*); but here he is so gracefully heavy-handed as to put me in mind of Aksyonov, Zamiatin and Bulgakov (the first two referenced appreciatively in *Koba*).
7. If, as Aristotle says in the *Poetics*, the best point of style is mastery of metaphor, then Amis shows no signs of decline. Someone climbs into the "flight deck" of an SUV; jet contrails are "spermatazoa," a toddler's teeth "twin grains of rice."
8. What is the book *about*? I can't really say. He read only the first chapter, and then gave us just a "taste" of two other characters, "to show the range." The first chapter concerns a "famous" person, who everyone will take to be a sort of alter-Amis. He has quit smoking and drinking, but goes out once each year, on the "anniversary" of his quitting, to smoke and drink. Tonight is that night. He says goodbye to his family, to his second wife and to the children of his second family. He goes to a bar, and gets jumped by a couple of toughs. We leave him there, losing consciousness on the floor.
9. During the question period there was at first a long stupid silence. I had expected as many arms in the air as at Nuremburg in 1938, but mine was the only one. Though I was way in the back, in a dark corner, I was wearing a red shirt; so I went first. "Mr. Amis, you said you would criticize your work; and I

was waiting for you to do so; and you didn't. So I was wondering if you would do so now." I wanted to learn what I could, from the best writer working in this or any language. What could be more instructive than to hear Martin Amis trash his own stuff? He mumbled out a non-answer: He'd scrawled notes in the margins -- "more sunset here, that sort of thing" -- but had found it inopportune to break the rhythm once he started reading. "Next question..." Really, I don't blame him: but he set himself up for it, so *I just had to ask...*

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**A report on Amis's reading at the Apollo Theatre, Wednesday, October 16 2002, courtesy of Stephen P of the Amis Discussion Web:**

Thanks to dear Geoffrey's tip-off, I went along to this. I got a ticket right up in the gods - the Apollo theatre has one of those typical London auditoria which are about twenty feet front to back and eight hundred feet high (stalls, dress circle, upper circle, upper-upper circle, balcony, cumulo-nimbus, cumulo-stratus...). First off, I was pleased and surprised about the audience: the place was packed and there was a fifty-fifty gender divide (what were they doing there?)

The evening was much better than I'd anticipated.... I was pleased to see how eager Amo was to read from his forthcoming novel (as yet untitled, apparently). This was, we were promised, something of a 'scoop', since Amo's (and, incidentally, Jezzaroona's, I think) editor was in the audience and had not heard what we were about to hear.

Now I was worried about this novel; worried that he was going to try too hard to please us, after so long, and run through his box of tricks too fastidiously. The good news is, from the extract we heard (which went on for some time, about twenty minutes) was first class. Back to the best stuff (State of England is the nearest comparison). The prose is ungimmicky and just the right amount of 'flourishes' (I liked a teenage girl's navel being fogeyishly described as 'traumatised by bijouterie': echt Amis. Also the writer's first collection of short stories called 'Lucozade'). We heard of Zan (sp?), a writer in his early fifties on his second marriage with two small daughters (remind you of anyone) strolling to take a couple of cocktails (some straightforward but funny stuff here about cocktail names: Zan drinks a 'Dickhead'). He's marking the anniversary of giving up booze and drugs. He walks from his home by Regents Park (his wife, I think, was called Russia) to a bar called Hollywood, where he gets attacked (by Mal, I think, from State of England).

All in all, not *Money*, but more *Money* than *Night Train*.

So, not much time for questions from the audience, then. I had one about why the press, despite the horrid things they say about him, were practically horizontal in their crimson barges a few hundred feet directly below me while the urkas had been brought considerably closer to God. As things were being wrapped up I abseiled instead down to pavement level and got second in the

queue next door in the Lyric foyer for the book signing sesh. Some Yank had got in ahead of me with a couple of flimsy paperbacks and I smugly weighed in my hands my hefty first editions and rehearsed my bon mots. (I then turned to see, immediately behind me, some forty-something Dink Heckler-lookalike using his perfect mono-chin to anchor his pristine pile: midway up, I noted with some distress, an iridescent copy of *Invasion of the Space Invaders*, with its price ticket still attached like one of Nigel Tufnell's guitars.)

My moment, then, was not long in coming. (Though longer than it should have been: the Yank insisted on dedications in his tuppenny slim vols that ran to several hundred words). I shook the great man's hand and asked for 'name only'. I suggested to him that he look in on 'James Diedrick's website' and wish us all a happy Christmas. He repeated, in response, his assertion that he found James Diedrick 'assiduous'. Before I read *The War Against Cliche*, I had no idea what this meant. I thought it meant that he sheds his leaves in Winter or something. I see from the online dictionary that it means 'unremitting' which I suppose is a compliment. I said we'd all been talking about him for four or five years now and it was time he came and said hello. Then it became one of those situations where you're both talking at the same time and not really saying anything and I scuttled away, armpits duly and appropriately torched.

Fair play to Mart, say I, for taking the trouble of making his readers know he appreciates them. He actually thanked me for coming, which was sweet of him. He was less malformed and Alexander Pope-like than I'd imagined, which is indicative of how the media shapes one's opinion of people.



### **Reports on Amis's appearance at the 20 October 2002 Orange Festival:**

**"Amis aims below the belt in attack on Islam." Writing in the *Times* (London), Jack Malvern reports on negative responses to Amis's remarks on radical Islam, both at the October 20 Orange Festival and in an interview with the *Times*. Excerpts:**

MARTIN AMIS provoked outrage among the Muslim community yesterday by accusing Islamic militants of 'quivering with male insecurity'.

The author, whose next novel addresses the impact of the events of September 11 on the Western world, condemned the Bali bombers for generating a new kind of disgust.

'It was the softest of soft targets,' he said in an interview with *The Times*. 'It had no iconic value. It was no great feat of the imagination. It was just crude nihilism. It makes me feel there are no criteria whatever now about who is or is not a legitimate target.'

He described Islamic militants as sexually insecure, identifying their activity as a distinctly male form of violence. At an Orange Word literary event last week he

read an extract from his work-in-progress, in which a man is inexplicably attacked and knocked to the floor in a cocktail bar.

He told *The Times*: 'The emphasis in that chapter was to do with male insecurity. It seems to me that the key to radical Islam is that it is quivering with male insecurity. It's an equation that never fully works out. There's a huge injection of sexuality – men's sexuality -- in radical Islam.'

Amis, who lives in New York, said he had read parts of the Koran over the past 13 months and had reached an A-level standard of understanding. The attacks on the Twin Towers were an attack on all elements of civilisation, including comedy, he said. 'I don't think radical Islam is noted for its drollery or irony.' . . .

His work-in-progress is the first time that he has consciously tackled the subject of September 11 in a novel. Although there are no literal references in the novel to September 11, the fear it created is incorporated into the atmosphere. He said that most authors had not had time to let the events show in their writing, but this would happen next year. He has previously commented on the futility of writers' responses to September 11.



**From the *Sunday Telegraph*, 4 May 2003, p. 13:**

HEADLINE: The Literary Life

BYLINE: Mark Sanderson

THE CAST of Martin Amis's new novel, *Yellow Dog*, due in September from Jonathan Cape, suggests that he has lost none of his talent for creating a motley crew. It features a "dream-husband" Xan Meo, a "yellow journalist" Clint Smoker, a "porno tycoon" Cora Susan and a corpse called Kent Price.

However, Mr Amis apparently uses his characters to grapple with "Patriarchy, and the entire edifice of masculinity" and "the enormous category-error of violence, arising between man and man". Whatever that last phrase may mean, let's hope the description of *Yellow Dog* as a "comic novel" does not turn out to be a "category-error".