

A Satirist Rages at England, America Books: British author Martin Amis has spent the last two decades infuriating and delighting critics and readers. His new book is likely to do the same.

[Home Edition]

Los Angeles Times (pre-1997 Fulltext) - Los Angeles, Calif.

Author: KEVIN ALLMAN
Date: Mar 29, 1990
Start Page: 1
Section: View; PART-E; View Desk
Text Word Count: 1902

Document Text

(Copyright, The Times Mirror Company; Los Angeles Times 1990all Rights reserved)

Martin Amis is in town for 24 hours, ensconced at a chic West Hollywood hotel. It is the acerbic Briton's first visit in six years to Los Angeles, which he once described as "the land of the innumerate billionaire, where a game of Scrabble is a literary event, where the prevailing values are those of the pocket calculator."

"I'd spent a total of about 3 1/2 weeks in Los Angeles," he says, when asked about the quote. "That was really a distillate of what literate Los Angelicans had told me. Dominick Dunne talked interestingly for an hour and said that it was a pocket-calculator kind of town. . . . I can't prove a sentence like that, so I wouldn't quite say that now."

Nevertheless, he did say it, and Martin Amis has spent the last two decades infuriating and delighting critics and readers with his opinions. His new novel "London Fields"-with its cast of pub-crawlers and wrecked nobility-should be no different. It's the latest in a series of scathing novels about the low habits of the lower class and the low habits of the upper class.

"I don't think I have ever really written much about the middle classes, except in my first novel," Amis explains, hand-rolling the first of many cigarettes. "It's always either the high or the low. In this case, one is a remnant of the nobility, and the other is, as one critic said, a skid mark on the underpants of Thatcherism."

Amis lights up his cigarette and laughs at the phrase.

Fairly or unfairly-and, no doubt, partly because he is the son of the long-respected novelist Kingsley Amis-Martin Amis, even as he enters his third decade of writing, is still regarded in many quarters as some enfant terrible. "A maddening genius," said the Sunday Mail after the release of "London Fields," while an earlier critic called him "the nearest thing to a Nabokov that the punk generation has to show."

He is on a juggernaut book tour of the Colonies, giving several interviews and book signings a day for "London Fields," published this month in the United States by Harmony Books. The book, with a first printing of 30,000, is in its third printing within the month. A year after publication in England, it is still on British bestseller lists.

Given his disdain for the conventional interview, he is polite and precise-not at all "a supercilious little brat," as one prominent British literary agent had called him.

Only once does a small bit of temperament flare. He says with a sneer to a reporter who has never been to London, "You have this terribly touching American idea that London was sort of beefeaters and baronets and everyone was very polite to everyone else."

No, not really-and especially not after reading "London Fields."

In his look into the very near future, Amis presents the city in the throes of the fin de siecle: The middle class has vanished, tap water tastes like "tepid soy sauce," and the lumpen proletariat spends its days committing petty crimes and getting stoned on a cheap liquor called "porno." London, it can be assumed, is not going to recover.

It is a vision that contrasts with Amis' life of comfortable domesticity in London with his wife Antonia, a philosophy teacher from Boston, and two young children.

"There's only one way for London, or England, to go," Amis says. "There's no other journey for it to make than to go from a second-echelon power to a third-echelon power. There's just nothing there. . . . The English style of decline wouldn't be like the American decline, where you would get revolution and violence. In England, it's more sullen acceptance.

"It's like London traffic: passionless, awkward, dumb. New York traffic is fist-on-the-horn, psychotic. London traffic just churns around and around, slightly bedraggled. Passionless."

The 40-year-old Amis' vision of the 20th-Century world as a sour-breath dystopia, where luxury corrupts just as surely as does poverty, has been a continuing theme in all his novels, beginning with "The Rachel Papers," published in 1973.

A seamy tale of bored middle-class youth and their sexual escapades, its elegant prose style was compared to that of the noted British novelist and satirist Wyndham Lewis, even as its characters were described as "about as appealing as bacilli" on a washcloth. The book won Amis the prestigious Somerset Maugham Award at the age of 23. (For his part, Amis regards "Rachel" as "a mixture of clumsy apprenticeship and unwarranted showing off.")

Like the one living writer for whom he professes an unabashed admiration, Saul Bellow, Amis is a brutal satirist, but he's also an outraged moralist. In 1987, he wrote a collection of short stories, "Einstein's Monsters," a savagely funny look at the nuclear threat.

But nothing, it seems, outrages him more than the last decade of conservative politics on both sides of the Atlantic. He holds conservative politics responsible for any number of social ills, including homelessness, the vanishing of the middle class, and "the selling off of irreplaceable assets" such as North Sea oil in Britain and AT&T through deregulation in the United States.

He also blames conservatism for crime and violence, particularly in the United States. "I think most people in England now would rather pay more taxes than have this feeling on the street," Amis says. "It seems to be in the nature of a New Yorker that he's more willing to step over a corpse every 10 minutes than dig into his pocket for taxes."

Manhattan, its culture decayed with filth and drugs, was a major character in his last novel. "Money: A Suicide Note" published in 1984 is the tale of John Self, a director of commercials, as he Concorded back and forth from London to New York setting up his first big motion picture deal. Amis' gift for beyond-explicit detail limns Self's self-destruction, from high-class drink-and-drug parties to paid sexual encounters on 42nd Street.

"A brilliant and frightening novel," said author Anthony Burgess of "Money," noting that it was also "totally devoid of such outworn properties as charm."

"Money," like his earlier novels "Dead Babies" and "Success," reignited some old arguments in the book review pages. Amis often angers critics who want to like his work by being deliberately vulgar and explicit-and frustrates those who want to dislike it by equally being brilliant and precise.

His nonfiction reportage, such as an extremely opinionated piece about the 1988 Republican national convention, for Esquire, is grounded solely in observation rather than conventional investigative journalism.

"I just followed my nose," explains Amis blithely. "I'm not that kind of writer who can infiltrate the Mob and write about that. My writing takes place at the typewriter."

Perhaps Amis' harshest critic is his father. Both father and son have in the past been matter-of-fact about the fact that Amis pere has actually finished very few of Martin's novels.

"My mother rang me up, and said that he got to about Page 80 with 'Money' before he flung it across the room," says Amis. "That's when the character named Martin Amis appeared in the book. He's not keen on that sort of thing."

Are the inevitable comparisons between their works tiresome?

"I think it's a bit of drag for him being asked about me, but it's not a drag for me being asked about him," says Amis, lighting his next cigarette. "Simply because I'm the younger one. No novelist likes to see the next lot coming up, even if your own son is in the pack. Especially, perhaps, if your own son is in the pack."

Amis turned his sulfurous attentions to the United States again in 1986, two years after "Money," with "The Moronic Inferno and Other Visits to America," 27 essays about such uniquely American phenomena as the Atlanta child killings, Jerry Falwell, and Claus Von Bulow.

Critics were divided on "The Moronic Inferno." Few argued with the quality of the prose, but many thought Amis' targets were too broad for such a talented critic, and found his conclusions disappointingly jejune. Amis tells his readers, for instance, that Hugh Hefner is a pajama-party sybarite.

One "Inferno" essay, though, originally written for the Guardian in 1985, was critically lauded across the board.

"Double Jeopardy: Making Sense of AIDS" was recognized as a cool-headed analysis of the AIDS crisis on both continents in a time when much AIDS reportage verged on the hysterical, "a sane and remarkably empathetic piece of reportage," said the New Republic.

"In England, we're still in denial about it," said Amis when asked about the AIDS epidemic. He blinks and adds slowly, "I think AIDS is possibly an environmental (disease). I look at that cute little monkey that's supposed to be the cause of it. I can't blame it on that monkey. I can't believe that. I think we did it.

"It gives you the suspicion," he adds, "that the years of health, the years of feeling good, might be numbered. In its efforts to feed itself, the planet has mutated the human body with chemicals, as well as with dirt and waste and so on. And the immune system is the first to go."

Cancer-ridden, inoperable, sinking into a morass of proud know-nothingism: That's Amis' view of the Western world circa 1990. It comes as quite a shock, then, when he says, almost shyly, "Let's not forget that I love America, too-and liberal democracy is a great thing. That still is here . . . in threatened form. It's a wonderfully vocal, self-critical country." He pauses and reflects. "The quality of its leaders has declined disastrously. The quality of what it wants from its leaders has declined disastrously."

Hollywood has not flocked to or fawned over Amis, as it has most other best-selling, respected authors. His sole Hollywood credit was as scriptwriter on the Farrah Fawcett sci-fi vehicle "Saturn 3," a credit that he refers to as "a debit." An adaptation was recently made of "The Rachel Papers," however, and he says that "Money" will be filmed with Gary Oldman in the role of John Self.

"I'm more of the take-the-money-and-run school when it comes to Hollywood," says Amis. "The novelist and the scriptwriter are a world apart, really, if only because the scriptwriter is one of a team and the novelist is a god in his own universe. Nobody tells the novelist what to do. Nobody tells him that this scene is too expensive, that this actor won't say that, or how the scene will be reduced or that the sun isn't shining today. And they're going to (mess) you around something rotten. . . . I learned that writing a book review was a more exalted form than writing a script."

Asked about his popularly perceived persona-an unholy hybrid of Wyndham Lewis and Sid Vicious-Amis shakes his head. "I think it's all too much colored by my novels," he says. "And that's why it's sometimes got a hostile edge to it, I think, because people think that if they wander into a novel by me they might be harshly treated or ridiculed. I think I play upon that central fear we all have, and I have, which is that we'll be seen through. Everyone suspects that they are a joke, which other people will one day get.

[Illustration]

PHOTO: Author Martin Amis autographs a copy of "London Fields" for Santa Monica resident Isaac Harary at Book Soup in West Hollywood. / JAVIER MENDOZA; PHOTO: Martin Amis

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.