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Dirty Little Secrets

Martin Amis, author of the new novel 'Yellow Dog,' discusses the fragility of masculinity, the popularity of pornography and the British literary scene's most talked about dental work

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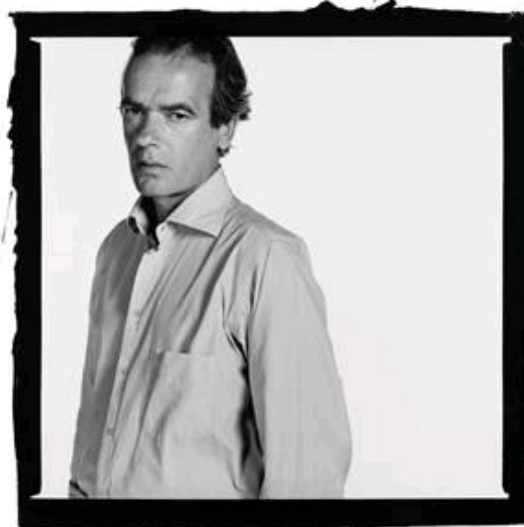
By Justine Elias
Newsweek

Dec. 4 - Any novel that dares to satirize pornography, incest and doomed airliners can expect to be received with at least a few murmurs of discomfort. And if the author is Martin Amis, expect to hear snarls of outrage.

"Yellow Dog," Amis's 10th novel, has drawn both praise ("great comic extravagance," said the London Times) and rage ("like seeing your favorite uncle being caught in a school playground, masturbating," wrote one critic, a former fan.)

That's been the story of his career. Amis's debut novel, "The Rachel Papers," written while still an Oxford undergraduate, drew both prizes and jealous sneers (the author is the son of the late Kingsley Amis, who wrote "Lucky Jim"). Now 54, the younger Amis is one of Britain's foremost literary figures, and his novels "Money," "London Fields" and "The Information" earn a rare combination of critical attention and wide popularity.

Yet in his native country, Amis's fame is tinged with bitterness. Newspapers feasted on the upheavals in his personal life (a 1995 divorce, a second marriage and his discovery that he had a grown daughter from a long-ago affair) and his



Courtesy Miramax Books

Author Martin Amis

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business dealings (Amis dropped his British agent longtime friend, to sign with an top American rep ruthlessness.)

Even a health crisis, an agonizing bout with periodontal disease and dental implant surgery, was somehow spun by British commentators into evidence that Amis had gone Hollywood. The author finally answered back with "Experience: A Memoir," which turned out to be his most emotional and critically hailed work.

Newsweek talked to Amis during his U.S. reading tour about "Yellow Dog's" scathing reviews, what drew him to pornography as a subject and what's shocking in an unshockable age. Excerpts:

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NEWSWEEK: You have the most famous literary bite since Dracula. How are your new teeth feeling?

Martin Amis: [Pause] Fine. Thank you. They are comfortable.

Having published a memoir, are you not accustomed to personal questions?

Questions I don't mind. Then there's commentary. I seem to attract this heat. I, the book, took a weird corrosive jolt this time. It just got established you could say whatever the hell you liked. In England, I couldn't avoid reviews. I'd be walking down the street and on the newsstand it would say, up by the publication title, MARTIN AMIS IS S--T. It's like watching your child being ragged in the schoolyard. What's truly galling is when you wake up and it is in your head, when what should be in your head is what you're writing next. But if you answer back, you're accused of whining. You can't win.

Yet you began your literary career as a reviewer, at the Times

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Literary Supplement. What have you been writing about, commenting about, all this time?

Masculinity. And that is a disquieting subject.

Why?

Poor guys, in a way. It's all so fragile. The male idea can be so brutally undercut. Basically, the fear of impotence whips the carpet out from underneath you in a way that is hard to think of a female equivalent. The humiliation of that. Or so they taught us. Whereas the real secret is, you can't protect yourself from that fragility. To be simplistic about it, there is that doubt in the male, and much trouble comes from it. It is doubly humiliating because, between you and me, it's very funny. But don't ever laugh at a man.

Yet you do it all the time. You write, in "Yellow Dog," in the voice of an ateful tabloid reporter, an incest-promoting gangster, a foul-mouthed porn princess. You're so convincing, at times, it'd be easy to blame you for--



... inventing pornography and incest myself? Well, the whole subject is disquieting. Thinking about masculinity is disquieting.

It takes a vicious attack, a head injury that leaves him sex-obsessed, to transport "Yellow Dog's" actor- protagonist from respectable London to the Hollywood porn industry. What brought you there?

I wrote about the adult-film industry in Southern California for Talk magazine. I wanted to go experience it and then wait for some satirical distance, so you could go at it from a certain height and not be down there among it.

What surprised you about what you found?

Of course access to pornographic material has all changed with the Internet, but there is no tradition of it being produced in England. We had one the most conservative set of laws. It was illegal until recently to buy the videos. You had to go into some filthy shop that'd suck the shoes off your feet. Now that the Internet is here, every white-collar worker is an accomplished masturbator who puts in 18 hours a day slumped over a screen.

Would any of this trouble you if you were not the father of young daughters?

I haven't sort of had time to think about them in relationship to this, but talking to my grown-up daughter and her contemporaries about it--my sons, the eldest is 19, are diffident on the question--I get the feeling that pornography is sort of sex instruction now for the young. It's not some dumpy old biology teacher. Habits, routines, that for my generation just weren't on the menu now are, because they have got one eye on pornography. If our children's sexuality is being formed by

some medallion-in-the-chest-hair artist at Wicked Pictures, that is not an unimportant part of the question.

We have adult-film actresses as famous as pop stars and TV series about porn kings. Is pornography becoming mainstream?

I think that is going to be a costly illusion. In that everyone will think, "How uninhibited, how unf--ked up I am." And yet, all these innovatory anxieties, brooding about it. They can't get round the central thing that pornography will never be respectable as long as masturbation isn't respectable--and it isn't respectable. We are never going to feel proud of that. It's the dirty little secret, D.H. Lawrence called it. People are on their dignity about it.

Speaking of dignity: What is your porn star name?

How does it go again? The street you grew up on, and your first pet's name? The Grove ... Bessy. Bessy Grove? Would that be it? Hang on! That's no good. Grove is all right, but it would have to be the first male pet: Rex. Rex Grove. That's good. That is it! I'm launched.

Justine Elias has written on arts and culture for The New York Times, the Guardian, the New York Daily News, Film Comment, Premiere and other publications.

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