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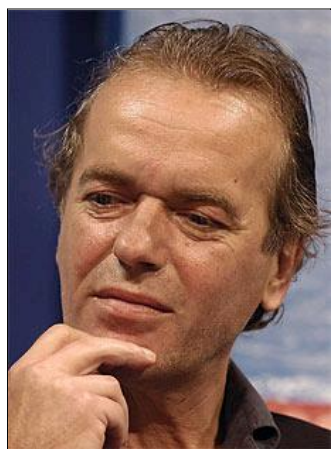
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Is Martin Amis turning into his father?

by GEOGGREY LEVY Last updated at 23:46pm on 27th September 2006

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Martin Amis has written a new novel

The arrival of a new Martin Amis novel is not something to be greeted, like those of humbler writers, with a mere drinks party.

Goodness, no. There must be music and dancing, a genuine red letter day celebration.

Hopefully, we shall at least be spared ringing church bells when celebrity guests take to the floor in London's West End tonight, to launch Amis's latest book, *House Of Meetings*.

Whether the ballyhoo will give Amis any greater success in reaching the global audience of millions who so enjoyed novels such as *Lucky Jim* by his father Kingsley Amis — whose long-awaited biography by Zachary Leader will soon be published — is very doubtful.

What's more, time, it would seem, is running out. Although only 57, the one-time enfant terrible of British fiction is brooding about getting old.

He even says - astonishingly for a writer who, it must be said, doesn't suffer from modesty about any of his work - that he no longer considers his writing is what really matters in life.

'It has become clearer and clearer to me that when you get into the last lap of your life, you don't really think about your work at all,' he remarked just the other day. 'What you think about is (a) how it went with the women in your life and (b) your children - work comes very much third.'

This from a writer who not long ago was declaiming: 'What I care about is literary durability, that's all that matters to me.'

In his new book, the main character pointedly remarks that men 'always die in torment because they're not congratulating themselves on their achievements in the world, they're reproaching themselves for the bad things they did'.

Could Martin Amis be troubled by his conscience? Like his father, he has regularly used his own life and the people in it as a matrix for his novels. And he has inherited the restless libido of Sir Kingsley, who died in 1995 aged 73. Both left their wives and young children for other women.

Martin Amis was only 12, with an older brother and sister, when his father abandoned their down-to-earth mother, Hilly, for fashionable writer Elizabeth Jane Howard.

'It's appalling — I wouldn't recommend being deserted like that to anyone,' says Hilly, who later married the less successful writer Alastair Boyd (the seventh Lord Kilmarnock). 'Martin was not quite in his teens when the whole horrible thing happened, and it had a huge impact on him.'

An impact so great that Martin's school work suffered. He also vowed that he would never leave his wife when he grew up. But he did. 'You would have thought that having seen what it did to us, it wouldn't happen to him,' adds Hilly, who met Kingsley in 1946 at Oxford, where she was working as a model at Ruskin College. 'But there you go — that's Martin.'

Martin was himself the father of two young sons, Louis and Jacob, when he walked out on his first wife, the American philosopher Antonia Phillips, for her best friend and fellow American, Isabel Fonseca, a writer and heiress. They married in 1997 and have two daughters, Fernanda, nine, and Clio, six.

Perhaps Martin's reflective mood about growing old and 'shrinking and dying' has something to do with the fact that Kingsley was just about the age that Martin is now when the serial womaniser suffered the crushing blow of finding himself becoming impotent.

Kingsley had long realised that leaving Hilly had been a mistake. After the initial sexual flare, his years with Jane Howard after their 1980 marriage were marked by bitter professional jealousies and endless rows. Eventually she left him.

Kingsley, who had famously spent much of his life bedding whatever girl happened to be available and writing jolly letters to his best friend, poet Philip Larkin, about his experiences, turned to his typewriter over his private problem and wrote *Jake's Thing*, a witty book about sexual therapists. And in his hour of need, he turned to ex-wife Hilly.

What resulted was a comic arrangement worthy of a Kingsley Amis plot. He went back to Hilly, not into her bed but into her care. He had money and, as luck would have it, Lord and Lady Kilmarnock did not. So he took a house in London's Primrose Hill and the Kilmarnocks joined him there in the basement, with Hilly looking after him and cooking, like a housekeeper.

For a man who'd built a reputation as a misogynist (he 'regarded women as 'intellectually inferior' and 'pests') and as a mighty boudoir swordsman (his impotence made his misogyny worse), it was a bruising comedown. But he was relieved to be back with Hilly, even if not physically comforted by her.

'Stopping being married to someone,' Kingsley had written years earlier, 'is an incredibly violent thing to happen to you, not easy to take in completely, ever' - words that his son, Martin, was to quote emotionally many years later in his own autobiography, *Experience*.

Martin has also expressed his guilt about leaving his wife and children. In *Experience*, he described confessing to his father how the episode left him 'physically terrible, bemused, sub-normalised, stupefied and always about to flinch or tremble from the effort of making my face look honest, kind, sane'.

'Only to him,' he wrote, 'could I talk about what I was doing to my children. Because he had done it to me.'

Some friends claim the suffering can actually be seen in his deeply gaunt and harried face, so unlike the chubby cheerfulness always worn in the outside world by his father.

Unlike Kingsley, however, Martin's domestic switch has been an unqualified success. While the departure from one wife may have been filled with torment, his arrival at the bosom of the other has been blessed with the kind of wall-to-wall contentment other deserted spouses would consider he doesn't deserve.

While frequently claiming that he is 'not interested in money', he is able to luxuriate at the Fonseca family's 100-acre summer residence in the Hamptons on Long Island, where they have almost as many gardeners as roaming deer, though, naturally, he has always lived off his own earnings.

Angry allegations about his interest in money emerged when he changed his loyal and long-serving literary agent with the same finality as he changed wives. The agent he dumped was Pat Kavanagh, wife of fellow-author, friend and tennis partner Julian Barnes. He left her for American agent Andrew 'The Jackal' Wylie, who got him a two-book contract worth £460,000.

Six years later, he and Barnes - whose books remain more popular than Amis's in America - are on friendly terms again. Amusingly, Amis still claims he made the switch not to get more money, but merely to prove that he could get it.

Meanwhile, life with 'The Jackal', as well as with the delightful Ms Fonseca, remains stable. Friends say that, unlike his father, he would never cheat on his wife.

Indeed, life is so sound and secure for Martin Amis that you would have thought that, far from dismissing his work as beyond worry now, his writing is the only thing left that he has to worry about. He has none of the family or health concerns that beset his father at the same age and which sent him scurrying back to the comfort of Hilly, with whom he lived until he died.

For her part, Elizabeth Jane Howard believes Kingsley only returned to his first wife for security. Now 83 and living in Suffolk, she said yesterday: 'Kingsley suffered from severe chronic anxieties and the arrangement with Hilly went a long way to allay them.'

'I haven't the faintest idea if Martin would do the same in similar circumstances though I would say it would be very unlikely. They're not very much alike. Kingsley had more of a sense of the absurd and never took himself too seriously.'

'He could do things without worrying what people thought. But people change as they get older and I haven't seen Martin for three years or heard from him in ages.'

Family friends will be surprised at this apparent neglect, since Martin Amis has talked and written fondly of his former stepmother, saying he 'got very close to loving Jane'. It was she, he acknowledges, who was responsible for rescuing his education by arranging for him to go to an A-level crammer.

The result was a place at Exeter College, Oxford, or as he jubilantly put it when giving his father the good news: 'I don't mean the University f***** College of the South West of England, I mean EXETER COLLEGE, OXFORD.'

'I'm sure he would have become a writer, whatever happened to his education,' Jane Howard says modestly. 'He's not a writer because his father was one. If Kingsley had been an electrician, Martin would still have been a writer.'

As for Hilly, she and 79-year-old Alastair Kilmarnock now live frugally in Southern Spain, in what used to be known as 'reduced circumstances'.

Martin refers to his mother as 'a very extraordinary person...the only woman I have ever come across who doesn't have an atom of theatricality in her. She never says anything for effect.'

For her part, she tells me: 'I'd have liked to see Martin on Newsnight the other week but our satellite dish has gone wonky and we haven't the money to get it fixed.'

'Martin rings up once or twice a year and I last saw him about a year ago. I'm looking forward to when he next visits - I hope it's not too late.'

This is a pointed reference to the heart problems for which she has been treated at a Spanish hospital.

One unexpected benefit of living in Southern Spain has been getting to know her author son's 'secret' daughter Delilah, who has spent time at Seville University improving her Spanish. 'She's lovely,' says Hilly, who fertilised her geraniums with a sprinkling of Kingsley's ashes. 'Pretty and fair-haired, a really nice girl.'

Delilah, now 29 and working in television, was the product of a liaison graphically described in Martin's autobiography. He told the story of how, at a party, he met Lamorna Searle, the wife of Patrick Searle, a friend from his time at The Observer newspaper.

Leaving little to the imagination, Amis told how, within moments of meeting her, he had abandoned the girlfriend he was with and crept away with the Lamorna, a brilliant artist who suffered from manic depression. When he reappeared, his mouth was covered in lipstick.

A brief, tumultuous affair followed and eventually the winsome Lamorna admitted her infidelity to her husband. She also told him that Amis was the father of their daughter. Soon afterwards, she told Amis himself.

Two years after Delilah was born, troubled Lamorna hanged herself. Searle, with great understanding, brought up Delilah as his own and only when she reached 19 and was about to read English at Oxford, told her who her natural father was.

She has since become an integral part of the Amis family and is a particular chum of Martin's half-brother James, 34, Hilly's son by Lord Kilmarnock.

All in all, one is entitled to describe Martin Amis as incredibly fortunate. Unlike his father, he faces old age with utter contentment. If Kingsley were still here, he might even base a novel on his son. How about: Lucky Martin?

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Here's what readers have had to say so far. Why not add your thoughts below?

In literary circles Martin Amis may be a lion, but to me he will always be a bit of a damp squib. He also appears to be mean spirited and arrogant. Scarcely a recommendation. My hat is definitely off to Patrick Searle, what a brave and generous man.

- Sarah, London, England

Amis is a dreadful writer, self indulgent and totally boring.

- Michael J Rigby, Chorley Lancashire

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The gunman behind the Amish school massacre in which five girls were shot dead had told his wife shortly before opening fire that he had molested two young girls related to him decades ago and was tormented by 'dreams of molesting again,' police revealed today

[Is Cheryl taking fashion tips from Posh Spice?](#)



It's said she gave her advice on planning her wedding. And now it appears Victoria Beckham has been giving advice to Cheryl Tweedy on how to dress too. The Girls Aloud singer was spotted out in exactly the same outfit the ex-Spice Girl was snapped in last month

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