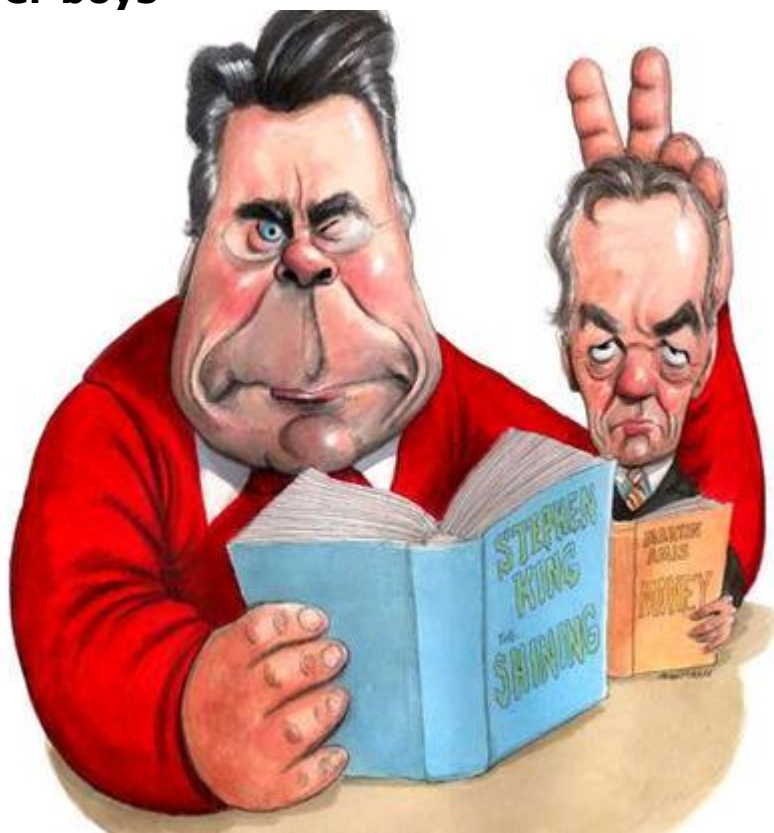


Cover boys



Stephen King and Martin Amis.

Photo: *John Shakespeare*

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Never write sex scenes. A weird story is best kept a short story. Martin Amis and Stephen King slug it out onstage. Madeleine Murray takes notes.

No writers could be more different than Martin Amis and Stephen King. Amis, enfant terrible of the British literati, inherited his famous father's flair for lacerating, bilious prose. King never knew his father, who left his Maine home to get cigarettes one evening in 1949 and disappeared forever. His mother supported her two young sons by working in a home for the mentally ill.

Amis's first novel concerned an Oxford-bound adolescent determined to sleep with an older woman. King's first published story, *I was a Teenage Grave Robber*, about a scientist who bred giant maggots, appeared in *Comics Review* in 1967.

Amis has been short-listed for the Booker prize, but only a couple of his novels have ever been filmed, quite forgettably. Intellectuals pooh-pooh King, yet more than 90 of his stories have been adapted for TV and films.

Yet on this Saturday morning at The New Yorker festival, the prince and the showman were meeting three other writers to discuss fantasy and invention in fiction.

King, rangy and relaxed, seemed to have recovered from his gruesome accident on a deserted Maine road six years ago. While trying to stop one of his Rottweilers rummaging in a beer cooler, Bryan

Smith crested a hill, swerved off the road and smashed into King, who was taking his daily six-kilometre walk. The impact threw the writer into a ditch four metres away, and left him with a shattered hip and pelvis, broken ribs, punctured lung and fractured thigh bone.

Six operations later, King no longer walks with a cane. But he looks slightly ghoulish, as if his mind were teeming with strange stories such as *Carrie*, *The Shining* and *Misery*. He was wearing a white T-shirt with "I make things up" printed in small letters across it.

The *New Yorker's* fiction editor, Deborah Treisman, introduced the panel of five writers. When she got to King, she said: "He is the only writer I know who has the gumption to refer to his own work as being like cheap whisky - very nasty and extremely satisfying." Everyone laughed, except King, who doesn't laugh at his own jokes, but roars at other people's.

Between the two more famous writers was A. M. Homes, an intense woman in her 30s, who has written three novels and several short stories, including *A Real Doll*, about a boy who dates, seduces and eventually rapes his sister's Barbie doll.

When she got to Amis, Treisman named a few of his brilliant novels - *Money*, *Time's Arrow*, *London Fields*, *The Information* - and said: "Amis occupies an iconic position as the leading satirist of his generation in both Britain and America."

Amis, slight but with a large head, resembles his father Kingsley more every year. One eye appears wary and critical, the other amused. He looked cool and imposing in a blue shirt, jeans and boots.

Treisman opened the conversation with a "basic question. When you sit down to write, what prompts you to write about something you can't possibly have encountered or experienced?"

"When I sat down to write *Carrie*, all I was hoping to do was to make \$200 to pay the rent," King replied in a laconic Maine accent.

When King and his wife were first married, he worked as a labourer in an industrial laundry. They were so broke they lived in a caravan. He had to use a neighbour's phone to find out that *Carrie*, which his wife had fished out of the waste basket, had sold for \$400,000.

"When I came to the field, it was not a big payday," he said. "When I started to work there, it was pre-big sellers like *The Exorcist*."

I was drawn simply because I've always been fascinated by how people cope with the incredible in their lives.

"The very fact of our lives is a mystery, we don't know where we come from, we don't know where we're going."

Treisman asked Amis why he revered realist writers, but Amis sidestepped the question. "I find that I've stuck to a rule - you don't have rules when you write, you just have an inkling," he said, in his sonorous British voice. "Nabokov calls it a pang. The process of writing is finding out more about that idea or that pang. When you come to the end of the first draft you go back and start again, and you're amazed by how little you knew about it."

"My rule - I see Henry James came up with the same idea - is that nothing odd works long. And I find my short stories are very bizarre. I wrote a short story called *The Janitor on Mars*. Now, I wouldn't have written a novel called that."

Everyone found this funny, especially King, who threw his head back laughing.

"Soon as it gets beyond a certain length, it's got to be realistic, it seems to me." Here, Amis turned to King and said: "I think you know what is realism, Stephen. I haven't read all your work, but from what I have read, you're a realistic writer. There are certain premises put forward that may be supernatural but the execution of it is realistic. You're not a fantasist. The definition of fantasy is there's no real reason for what happens next - an inconsequentiality which is absolutely delightful but very, very difficult to sustain."

A.M. Homes saw a chance to speak: "In the contemporary world, all lives are surrealistic and I think that events in the last few years have proven that to us. Even the other day, the Jet Blue plane people were flying around watching themselves flying around the air."

Homes was referring to a Jet Blue airliner that circled southern California for hours, crippled by faulty landing gear, while 140 passengers inside watched their own life-and-death drama on live television.

"They became most terrified when the television was turned off at the end. They thought, 'Oh God, something bad is going to happen!' They had to stop having the distance to watch it and had to actually live it."

King roared with laughter and said: "And there was a man on the news afterwards saying it was a 'postmodern experience'!"

"You can't make that up!" Homes said. "That's our job, to filter the culture."

When Treisman asked the panel where these ideas come from, King returned to the leitmotif that has inspired him: "What interests me is the intrusion of the peculiar, the unnatural or strange into normal life, and how people react to it.

"Essentially, what you were asking before, although you dressed it up prettily and I appreciate that, is where do you get your ideas. It's a basic question that every writer gets.

"Anyone who has worked in the field of the peculiar, the unnatural, gets it all the time. It's almost a clinical question, like, 'Did you have a childhood trauma?' Most of the time, it's just a divine flash that happens."

King told a story about leaving a New York hotel to get a coffee one morning about six years ago. "A lady under the canopy was on her cell phone and the doorman was getting someone a cab. I thought, what if she got this message on her cell phone that she could not deny and she had to attack everyone she saw - and she started with the doorman, she ripped his throat out."

This seems to be the essence of King's creative impulse - he puts unlikely things together or he looks at a situation, and asks, "What if?" Then he has the imagination and discipline to follow it through.

"I do think that, after a while, if you're a writer you kind of train yourself - or if you see yourself as a

writer. We're all amateurs, I mean, it's a crazy thing to do, make stuff up, but you train yourself to receive these ideas, you don't just toss them out and say, 'That's a crazy idea.' "

All the Stephen King acolytes in the room were sitting on the edge of their chairs at that point.

Treisman turned to the idea of fantasy as a world without rules: "It's a cliché to say you get to play God. If you're not writing strictly about our world, does that give you more power? You don't have to follow the rules of everyday life."

"As a writer, you really are God, omnipotent and omniscient," Amis said. "And you're not constrained by budget or the weather. Filmmakers are slaves to the weather and how much the crowd scenes will cost.

"The freedom is what frightens people off - when they take that first sheet of white paper and realise there aren't any rules at all. There are no limits.

"Also, we shouldn't forget - realism at its absolute rock bottom is also magical. Norman Mailer put it very well. One of the few downsides to being a writer - you come to a scene you know you have to write and you expect your subconscious to have done a lot of the work.

"Most of the time we're lying in a hammock with a drink while our subconscious does the work," he joked.

Treisman mentioned an Amis short story, which was both horrific and hilarious, about one of Saddam's body doubles. In it, a woman is forced to watch her child being fed to starving animals in aessian sack.

"That was true," Amis said, "though I did add that the animals had been injected with amphetamines. I began and abandoned a story about a terrorist - I ran straight into Islam. Once you start satirising Islam, it's very difficult to stop."

In response to Treisman's question about the role of fiction, Amis replied: "Fiction can do anything except dreams and sex, because they are not universalisable. It just doesn't work. *Finnegans Wake* is an amazing attempt to write about the life of the night, but it doesn't work. It doesn't hold, because it's too individual. Henry James said, 'Tell a dream, lose a reader.'

"And sex somehow just doesn't work on the page. We all admire Updike's incredibly strenuous attempts to rebuff that, but why is he telling us this?"

The discussion was turning into a free-flowing talk about how writers think. "When reality fails" was really just a rubric dreamed up by *The New Yorker* as a starting point.

Amis said: "You don't write about what happened, you write about what didn't happen. You don't write about your marriage, but about what would happen if someone a bit like you had married someone else."

After more talk, it was question time. A young woman stepped up to the microphone set up in the middle of the room and asked Amis how he found subjects.

The author of prescient, trenchant social essays, such as *The Moronic Inferno*, about America,

answered: "Two great subjects are given to you willy-nilly: your age and the age of the planet. Never before have they been so in step. We're coming to a stage where we see that the planet ages too - an idea that would not have occurred to a 19th-century farmer any more than it would have occurred to the dog at his feet."

Someone asked the panel who would be their ideal reader. Amis answered: "Nabokov said it was himself, but older. I sometimes think it's myself, but younger. I write what I would like to read.

Homes turned to Amis, and said: "You and Nabokov."

King answered in his bar-room drawl: "About six months down the line, I want to take the book out of the drawer and not stink up the joint. If I had an ideal reader, it would be my wife. I want her to like what I write."

The final question was, how do you take the flash of an idea and turn it into a novel?

Homes had the last word: "I'm going to whack and whack at this - like a pinata, maybe some day it will crack. You have to show up for work and write and write and write - you have to try and make that connection with other people. It's an ever-widening circle. It starts small and hopefully it expands, you keep at it and you get somewhere, hopefully."

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