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### Amis on Larkin's life, loves and letters

The Centre's Professor of Creative Writing, Martin Amis, hosted his first public event of the new academic year on 2 October. The novelist and critic was joined by poets James Fenton and John McAuliffe for a discussion of the work and legacy of Philip Larkin, in the impressive surroundings of the University's Whitworth Hall.

As explained by event chair and Centre co-director John McAuliffe, Larkin has long been considered one of Britain's most influential and enduring poets.

His reputation was complicated in the early 90s however, when the publication of his letters and a biography by Andrew Motion suggested he harboured unsympathetic far-right prejudices. The chair therefore invited Amis and Fenton to begin by summarising their own views of the man and his work.

Martin Amis's consideration of Larkin dwelled on his importance for novelists, and his knowledge of the man as a close family friend. In his view Larkin's poems' descriptive power, in his characterisation and phraseology, could not fail to be esteemed by any novelist.

At the personal level, Larkin was Amis's brother's namesake and Godfather, and a regular figure in their childhood. He conceded that rumours of the poet's hatred of children and meanness probably were true, saying that, although he was benign and even approving towards the young Amises, the ritual 'tipping of the children' was solemnly administered in pennies, not shillings.

Fast-forwarding to his adult experiences of the man, Amis recalled a 1982 dinner with Larkin and his long-time girlfriend Monica, the horror of whom was "something to be believed." Monica was the basis for his father's Margaret Peel character in Lucky Jim, and his son was also unimpressed by her personality and increasingly 'urka-like' physical characteristics.

He spoke of her compulsion to dominate such social occasions; when not actually speaking letting out an unforgettable "grunt of satisfaction" to remind the assembled of her centrality. In his view, all Larkin's women were "...plain and of a certain type" (of rather pious egotists); a situation the writer allowed to arise out of emotional laziness and a fear of women.

Amis also noted that Larkin's failure to continue writing novels was predicated on his apprehensive relation to the women in his life. As an example, he recalled that Larkin had once written that his never-completed third novel "should be an assault on Monica", but chose instead to continue his nearly 40-year relationship with her and turn to poetry and different subject matter as a writer.

Returning to his reputation as a poet, James Fenton explained that Larkin was not yet a key figure when he himself started out - the legacy of modernism then being the main point of contention. Originally indebted to Auden, Yeats and Hardy, Larkin's reputation took off only in the mid-70s, when his earlier works of fiction were also re-printed.

Despite its shakiness in the 90s however his reputation had recently been reinforced and grown further, and - alongside Ted Hughes and Thom Gunn - he had become one of the representative poets of the past half-century.

Fenton did not feel though that the personal ennui suggested in Larkin's work was always entirely honest. The poet had described his childhood as "a forgotten boredom", when it had simultaneously included both the wartime bombardment of the north-east and a Nazi-supporting father who had taken him to rallies in Germany.

Fenton also felt that Larkin's implication of a non-existent or unsatisfactory sex-life was false, although, as Amis pointed out, his adult life had lacked many of the 'normal experiences', such a marriage and children, that most men at that time would expect.

According to Amis, the sentiments which readers of his letters later found distasteful were characterised by Larkin as mere "groans of rage", and the sheer entertainment value of the letters had done much to repair his reputation. They also provided insights into the writer's deep-seated fear of death, which he shared with Amis's father Kingsley, although the last letter between the two reveals a stoicism, calmness and will to tackle the subject head-on in his final days.

After opening up the discussion to questions and comments, the panel spent time chatting to and signing books for the audience of students, members of the public and school groups - which totalled almost 600 despite appalling weather conditions.

[Listen to a recording of the event](#)



John McAuliffe, Martin Amis and James Fenton

noise

- ▶ MA alumna's birthday treat
- ▶ Mulcahy & Viney Foster new talent
- ▶ Demolition man
- ▶ Manchester meets Muldoon
- ▶ Dying for Dyer
- ▶ Amis debates Literature and Terrorism
- ▶ Michele Roberts meets her public
- ▶ Centre UG named student sports writer of the year
- ▶ Crawford and Sansom reading
- ▶ New appointees show what they can do
- ▶ MA novel becomes a feature film
- ▶ Centre joins Literature Festival
- ▶ Amis, Banville and Self debate contemporary literature
- ▶ Mark Piggott's first novel accepted
- ▶ Clare Wigfall publishes debut
- ▶ John McAuliffe's poetry collection launched
- ▶ M.J. Hyland appointed
- ▶ New Research Fellows appointed
- ▶ Martin Amis joins Manchester

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