

NOVELISTS

Almost Amis

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By Christian Lorentzen 4/26/11 10:50pm



On Monday night, I was on 10th Avenue talking to the biological granddaughter of Brooklyn literary lioness Paula Fox. I asked her if she read Martin Amis. “I like *Money*,” said Courtney Love, sitting on a bench and smoking a cigarette outside a film premiere after-party. “I like John Self in *Money*,” she said. “I don’t relate to John Self, though. He’s a very bad man.” Ms. Love had no opinion about the fact that Mr. Amis is moving this summer to Brooklyn.

Mr. Amis is that rare literary scion who may have outstripped his laurelled father—Kingsley Amis, the author of *Lucky Jim*. Arriving in 1974 with *The Rachel Papers*, a roman à clef about love in late adolescence, Mr. Amis was the enfant terrible of the erstwhile Angry Young Man. He toiled at the *Times Literary Supplement* and *The New Statesman*, where he met his friend and rival Christopher Hitchens, before achieving escape velocity from day jobs. After the triumphs of *Money*, *London Fields* and *The Information*, the British press shuddered that the son, who had inherited his father’s satiric gifts but wrote novels with a wider thematic scope, was now more famous than the father. The reception of Mr. Amis’ books in the past decade has been mixed, but his every utterance tends for better or worse to constitute an international event, often on a weekly basis.

He was almost as precocious and soon just about as famous as Norman Mailer, and his love life was nearly as storied as Mailer’s, if never so violent. There was the dedicatee of *The Rachel Papers*, Gully Wells, now an editor at *Condé Nast Traveler*. There was Tina Brown: “The love affair with Tina Brown was a love affair ...” Mr. Amis wrote in his 2000 memoir *Experience*, “but it was over too soon, as if something much longer had been compressed into six or seven months.” We know what became of her. There was his lost daughter Delilah Jeary, who only learned Mr. Amis was her father at age 18. There have been two marriages, and four more children.

‘I don’t know if I ever will become a New Yorker,’ said Amis.

And so Mr. Amis and his wife, the author Isabel Fonseca, are coming to Cobble Hill. And what's it like being a writer in Brooklyn? "I expect it's like writing in Manhattan," Colson Whitehead once wrote in *The New York Times*, "but there aren't as many tourists walking very slowly in front of you when you step out for coffee." More likely, there are other writers walking in front of you. It's a zone of infestation. Not only of novelists but reporters, pundits, poets and those often closeted scribblers who call themselves editors and agents. Not to mention bloggers, or whatever counts for being an online writer these days.

They all compete for the same advances, freelance fees and salaries. They enable each others' drinking habits and wreck each others' marriages. And you're always liable to bump into one of them when you're out to buy a pomegranate or a pack of cigarettes. Throw a dart across the barroom and you might poke one. They're like bedbugs with bylines, and there'll soon be a new bug in town, who might just be the biggest bug of all.

"To some degree I have emulated him," said Jennifer Egan, author of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, which won this year's National Book Critics Circle Award and Pulitzer Prize. "I find his sense of humor so fantastic and extreme. It's something I've made a bit of a study of."

Ms. Egan belongs to the slice of the Brooklyn literati that has just entered its prime. The book contracts are steady and robust. The glossy assignments come so easily they can be comfortably turned down. Some of these writers can even afford sports cars.

Of Mr. Amis' move to Brooklyn, Ms. Egan, who lives in Fort Greene, told *The Observer*, "It seems like good karma."

"When I moved to Brooklyn 21 years ago I knew one person and it was a strange, stigmatized thing for me to have done," said Kurt Andersen, the novelist and radio host who, no matter what he's up to, will always be able to say that he founded *SPY* (now available in its entirety free on Google Books). "I'm happy it's lost its stigma." Mr. Amis, he said is "icing on the cake of the cool kids moving to Brooklyn.

"If anything, to the degree that Brooklyn has become known as a place where there's a writer every 50 feet, this is just a further certification of that."

Certification is not something of much value in the writing trade. An M.F.A. doesn't get you anywhere if you can't write well or finish a book. For those still starving while striving for that first book advance or magazine contract, Mr. Amis could stand as a towering example.

"Martin Amis is exactly who we've all been waiting for," said Starlee Kine, a journalist and prominent radio personality at work on her first book in Williamsburg, where she lives next

door to Henry Miller's childhood home. "And if there was ever a neighborhood that could use someone like Martin Amis, it's Cobble Hill."

"But oh God," she said, "what I am not looking forward to are the articles—not this one—but, you know, the *Times* Modern Love column where some Cobble Hill person befriends him at the gardening store. That's going to be a nightmare. But I like to think that he will take it all in stride, and then in three years a book will come out that will be a perfect send-up of the neighborhood and it will capture it in a way that no American novel could, and then there will be a q-and-a between him and Jonathan Franzen where they will have to compare their critiques of gentrified American neighborhoods."

While Ms. Egan, Mr. Andersen and Ms. Kine were not alone in their enthusiasm for Mr. Amis' imminent relocation, some writers who call the borough home, concerned that the short man might cast too long a shadow, were less than welcoming.

"It will cause Brooklyn writers anxiety," said David Gargill, a journalist who recently decamped from Henry Street for Hudson, N.Y. "they believe that his oeuvre has taken literary possession of London and they'll doubtlessly consider his arrival on the shores of Kings County an invasion of their terrain, both real and imagined."

"We've got, like, three Jonathans here," the journalist Daniel Radosh wrote *The Observer*. "We don't need any fucking Martins."

Attempts by *The Observer* to contact novelists Jonathan Safran Foer and the novelist Jonathan Ames went unanswered. Jonathan Lethem, the author of *Motherless Brooklyn* who now lives in Southern California and teaches at Pomona, declined to comment.

Paul Auster was in transit to Europe.

I was, however, able to reach Mr. Amis. Speaking by telephone from London, he confirmed that he and his family will be moving to Cobble Hill.

"We'll be keeping a flat in London," said Mr. Amis, "but we'll be based there and our daughters will be going to school there."

I was unclear, especially given the vividness of *Money*, how much time Mr. Amis had spent living Stateside.

"I lived in Princeton for a year when I was 9, 10 years old, and I've spent chunks of time in New York, but not longer than a few months here and there."

And what attracted him to Cobble Hill?

“I’ve only been there a few times,” he said, “and it’s my wife who makes these decisions. But it looks Arcadian. Much quieter and calmer than where we live in London and of course much calmer and quieter than Manhattan.”

I asked how familiar he was with Brooklyn’s literary culture.

“I hear there are lots of novelists called Jonathan who live in Brooklyn,” he said. “And Paul Auster is a friend of ours and Siri [Hustvedt, Mr. Auster’s wife]. So we already know two.” Mr. Amis said there were “several” novelists he’d never met whose books he admired. “I don’t want to name names. That’s invidious.”

I mentioned a talk I’d been pointed to by Mr. Hitchens in which Mr. Amis spoke of his project of becoming an American writer. Was this move part of that project?

“It wasn’t a wholly serious remark. I’ve always felt I was a kind of Mid-Atlantic novelist. You know when I started out, the English novel was about the ups and downs of the middle classes. It was before the great infusion from India—when the empire struck back so rewardingly for the English novel, the British novel. So I’ve always had more of an eye on the American way of going at a novel, with quite a lot of size and space and trying to write about the highs and lows of society rather than just the middle strata.”

The next subject was tricky. An interview recently appeared in the French magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* and made headlines when it was reported on by the London press. *The Guardian* declared, “Martin Amis bemoans England’s ‘moral decrepitude’: Novelist despairs of country with ‘philistine’ royal family where ‘celebrity is the new religion’ and ‘all is rotten inside.’” Further, the paper reported, “The novel Amis is currently working on, *State of England*, will, he believes, ‘be considered as the final insult’ to his country.”

“I started it long before we decided to move to New York,” Mr. Amis told me, “and it was just, you know, my next novel. There’s no particular timing about that. It’s satirical, as most of my novels are. That interview with the French papers being horribly garbled and translated into French and then out again with all sorts of misrepresentations—it says I wish I weren’t English. What a fatuous remark that would be for anyone to make anywhere all over the world, to say I wish I weren’t what you are.

“And of course I’m English, and although it’s not quite right to be proud of an accident of birth, I think any consideration of British history and British literature would put it very high on any list of homelands. I love the English people. I think they’re wonderfully tolerant and ironic and

cheerful, despite what is said about them. I've lived in England for 50 years. I haven't just come and looked at the place and not liked it. I am English, inescapably and happily English."

But there's no contradiction between being English, or Kansan for that matter, and becoming a New Yorker.

"I don't know if I ever will become a New Yorker in that sense," Mr. Amis said. "I'm very much looking forward to a change in scene."

With that Mr. Amis was out of time.

Many Brooklyn writers had time to offer Mr. Amis their thoughts and advice on his change in scene.

"Brooklyn?" said the philosopher Simon Critchley. "Just like London, except fewer wankers, better Yemeni food and even a Barneys Co-op. Who knows, maybe they'll have things in Martin's size. Cobble Hill? I used to stalk Gabriel Byrne, when he lived on our block. Now I'll be stalking Martin Amis."

It's rare for literary authors to attract stalkers, about as rare as the author who can elicit universal raves at a film premiere.

"I'm a huge Martin Amis fan," said Simon Rich, a novelist and writer for *Saturday Night Live* who recently purchased a brownstone in Brooklyn Heights, "but I'm a little bit concerned for him. If he wants to be taken seriously as a Brooklyn artist, he'll need a mustache, and last time I checked he was clean-shaven. It doesn't matter how good *Money* was. He needs to grow at least a Fu Manchu or he'll be laughed off the L train."

Informed that Mr. Amis would be living by the F train, Mr. Rich said, "The F's not as strict but he'll probably still need some basic muttonchops."

Photographs of Mr. Amis from the 1970s, when Clive James dubbed him a "stubby Jagger," show that he did at times sport a mild set of sideburns, and his mullet haircut wouldn't look out of place on the streets of Greenpoint today.

"It wasn't just the way he looked," writes Ms. Wells, Mr. Amis' then girlfriend, of him at the time, "the skintight black velvet pants, the snakeskin boots, the gossamer shirts covered in swirling jungle flowers, with huge rounded collars and cuffs so long they must have had six buttons—it was everything about him."

Whether he is game for behavior along the lines of the debauched weekend chronicled in his 1975 novel *Dead Babies* is an open question.

“If Martin Amis is interested in drugs, he can email me,” said Tao Lin, a Williamsburg resident and the author of the novel *Richard Yates*. “I’ll gladly help him.”

If Mr. Amis is moving to a zone of Brooklyn known better for its vegan cuisine and its proliferation of strollers than for its ease of scoring cocaine, that may be appropriate for a 62-year-old husband and father of two high-school-age children.

“I tend to hang out with other writers whose kids are connected to my kids,” said Ms. Egan. “I think everyone is softened by the life that their kids live. That’s the great equalizer: Everyone has to go to the playground no matter how angry they are. But he’s going to be Martin Amis no matter where he is.”

“I think probably his best plan of action,” said Ms. Kine, “would be to throw a block party as soon as he gets to town—just be proactive and take the upper hand. I see him manning the grill.”

On Friday night I visited the office of *n+1* in Dumbo, where editor and novelist Benjamin Kunkel, who currently lives in Buenos Aires but set scenes in his novel *Indecision* not far from Mr. Amis’ new home, had just delivered a talk on the state of the South American left.

“There are many short writers in Brooklyn,” said *n+1* editor Keith Gessen, author of the largely Brooklyn-set *All the Sad Young Literary Men*. “And we welcome him to our ranks. If he’s buying a large home, we’d all like to live with him.”

Mr. Amis’ new house is 5,300 square feet, four floors, 22 feet wide by 60 feet deep and at the time of purchase was configured as three separate apartments, with a minimum of eight total bedrooms.

“Does he garden?” asked the green-thumbed journalist Matthew Power, who lives in Prospect-Lefferts Gardens. If Mr. Amis practices horticulture, he now owns a garden to tend.

Contrary to Mr. Lin, who asserted that the best place to write is “at home,” Mr. Gessen advised Mr. Amis to work at the Starbucks on Court Street.

“It has a basement that’s very quiet,” he said. “Tell Martin. You can just buy one coffee and just go downstairs and spend eight hours there and there’s nobody who will bother you. It’s better than the Park Slope Starbucks. There’s fewer homeless people. There’s no visual distractions.

It's very nice there."

Some *n+1* interns and their friends, all Columbia undergraduates, were in attendance for Mr. Kunkel's talk. I was curious if the youth still read Mr. Amis' novels, so I cornered three of them.

"None," said the first.

"None," said the second.

"Two," said the third. "*The Rachel Papers* and *Money*. *Money* is better than *The Rachel Papers*. *The Rachel Papers* hit closer to home because the protagonist was more like me. I was anxious about how I was being portrayed, about how I compared to the character, whereas *Money* was just mind-blowing."

On Saturday night, I had dinner with my long-lost college girlfriend. "That was definitely your Martin Amis phase," she said of our relationship.

Somehow during this phase—which followed a Nabokov phase, a Burroughs phase and a DeLillo phase, then yielded to a Roth phase, a Pynchon phase and a Moravia phase—I never read *Money*, but I read six novels, two story collections, the memoir and two books of journalism. With the exception of *London Fields*, which I reread last spring, I hadn't been back to any of them in about a decade.

The seedy circa-1980 New York of *Money* is barely recognizable now. "In a way that's a New York I don't even know," Ms. Egan, who moved to the city in 1987, told *The Observer*. "That was a really long time ago."

"I hit a topless bar on Forty-Fourth," says John Self, in one of *Money*'s early scenes. "Ever check out one of these joints?" I never have, though one still persists, around the corner from my office, and whenever I pass by after 3 a.m. a prostitute asks first if she can buy a cigarette, then if I 'wanna hang out, sweetie?"

In a decade of living in Brooklyn, that happened to me on Seventh Avenue all of once. Mostly after dark you hear the voices of 40-something divorcees sitting on park benches, somehow flirting by talking about how much they miss their kids. You couldn't write *Money* here today. The only possible reference to Brooklyn I found in the novel was a mention of a short film by John Self, titled *Dean Street*.

"Having been here for close to 20 years," the English-born journalist Lawrence Osborne wrote *The Observer* in an email, "I'd say the arrival of Martin Amis is more baffling than game

changing. Will it add to the already insufferable levels of comatose smugness and dullness? I can only pine for the days of anxiety and excitement. But writers, like drug addicts, have to live somewhere, I suppose.

“This is part of the neurotic exchange between New York and London, where London now feels like the horrible, bawdy, rasping New York of the 1980s, and New York feels like the genteel, provincial, slightly dopey Disneyland London of the same period. Having just come back from five months in London, I feel this. Brooklyn compared to Hoxton is kind of boringly sane—the bad food, the dead streets at night, the whispering beards.”

Around the time Mr. Amis purchased his brownstone in December, I was pondering, not for the first time since I moved here in 2000, leaving Brooklyn. “Money worries aren’t like other worries,” says John Self, “If you’re \$10,000 in debt, it’s twice as worrying as being \$5,000 in debt but only half as worrying as being \$20,000 in debt. Being \$10,000 in debt is three-sevenths as worrying as being \$23,333 in debt. ... As of now, I don’t have any money. And this is really *worrying*.” Now this was my New York. But no longer. Next month I’m joining the neurotic exchange and moving to London, a city I mostly know through Mr. Amis’ books.

Brooklyn, of ample hills, is now his.

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Emily Witt contributed reporting.

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Not that anyone cares but I'm torn about Martin Amis as a writer. Style ? Innovation ? But above all he has bettered his father -- no mean feat.

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StacyV

Brooklyn is definitely the place for him, if he wants to retain any of his celebrity. In America, only writers read Martin Amis, and the country is too big for a writer that nobody reads to sustain any fame. Also, Americans for the most part don't like satire. So outside of Brooklyn, he's nobody, and whatever he might say to the contrary, he wouldn't be who he is today if he didn't want to be famous.

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dhg

Amusing take on Martin Amis. Living in London I can tell you his rep is pretty much shot here (not that he's been usurped - I would say the throne of Greatest Living British novelist is vacant) and his output is pretty much reduced to novellas published as novels via large type and wide spacing. He seems very happy - trouble is, to apply the Montherlant quote Amis himself has dropped more than once, 'Happiness writes white.'

Of his novels, must reads are 'Money' (1984), 'London Fields' (1989) and 'The Information' (1995) - IMO the rest you can leave. I think his memoir 'Experience' is great, as is the collection of criticism 'The War Against Cliche'.

Not that Mr Amis will read this but if he does, Hey, you're almost 62, ditch the short leather jacket! And while you're at it, you can tell your old mucker Clive James to take the one he's way too fond of sporting to his nearest clothes bank.

PS I think you'll find the Dean Street mentioned in 'Money' is a reference to the one in Soho, London.

5 months ago

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Ctreader

That's kind of absurd Stacy... I would venture that the reason Amis is leaving London is probably because he's tired of the British press, who are incredibly unfair to him... if he wants to "maintain his celebrity," there would be no reason to leave London... The British press seems borderline obsessed with roasting him

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Bob10101010

kids these days. no martin amis read??

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