

[Martin Amis: glib, offensive - but he also has a point](#)[Children's](#)

Written by Kate Wilson

Sunday, 13 February 2011 19:17

"If I had a serious brain injury I might well write a children's book" - so said Martin Amis said in a television interview. Publisher Kate Wilson disentangles the valid points from the crass wording

“People ask me if I ever thought of writing a children’s book. I say, “If I had a serious brain injury I might well write a children’s book”, but otherwise the idea of being conscious of who you’re directing the story to is anathema to me, because, in my view, fiction is freedom and any restraints on that are intolerable.”

These are the words of Martin Amis (pictured with his wife, Isabel Fonseca, at last year’s *Galaxy National Book Awards*), interviewed by Sebastian Faulks for the series *Faulks on Fiction*.

Amis went on to say, “I would never write about someone that forced me to write at a lower register than what I can write.”

Martin Amis is, perhaps, increasingly more remarkable for his controversial comments “about women and about Islam as well as about writing for children” than for his novels. Maybe comments like this are as much about keeping him in the public eye as making a serious point, but there are, I think, four separate but connected thoughts in this particular sound bite.

The first, and the simplest, is the crassness of the “brain injury” reference. Inevitably, the implication that writing for children is for those with diminished intellectual capacity has angered children’s authors, including Charlie Higson and Anthony Horowitz.

Katherine Langrish pointed out, “People who make shoes or clothes, or who prepare food for children, aren’t generally considered less skilful than those who do the same things for adults” why is the opposite so often assumed to be true of books?

Jane Stemp, whose book *The Secret Songs* was shortlisted for the 1998 *Guardian Children’s Fiction Award*, and who has cerebral palsy, said: “I have brain damage”; So Amis couldn’t have insulted me harder if he’d sat down and thought about it for a year.

The “brain injury” reference caught the headlines “I used it myself” but, I think, the other points are much more interesting, and I find that I agree with the essence of what Amis is talking about.

Amis claims that “the idea of being conscious of who you’re directing the story to is anathema to me”. Let’s leave aside whether Amis is being disingenuous in saying that he does not write with a sense of what will appeal to his readers. I think that most good children’s authors *do* write with a clear sense of their audience. This doesn’t mean that all children’s authors do: in her angry [response](#) to Amis’s comments, Lucy Coats says she doesn’t, as writer for children, write in a way that is prescribed by a sense of her audience: “When I write fiction, I research and plan just as (I assume) Amis does. Then I sit down and let what comes, come. The story generally tells itself without any

inner voice saying, "Oh, but you're writing for children" you mustn't say *this*, or "goodness, certainly not *that!*"

Certainly, as a publisher, with a commercial imperative, I judge children's writing by whether I think it will appeal to a child reader. Are there characters with whom the child reader will empathise? Is the subject matter likely to interest the child? And at Nosy Crow we're publishing books for "children" from babies to teenagers, and, I hope, making carefully calibrated decisions for every book we choose. We aim to have a sense of the core readership for every book we publish: we always ask ourselves, "Who is this book for?" Of course, if the appeal of a book goes beyond that target readership, so much the better. And, in children's book publishing, there's an additional complication: the person who will ultimately read your book is not the person who will buy your book. The person who will buy your book will be, in the vast majority of cases, an adult. So you also, as a publisher, have to find ways of signposting to an adult the ways in which a book might appeal to the child for whom they are buying.

Amis goes on to say, "Fiction is freedom and any restraints on that are intolerable." I think that authors and publishers of children's books do impose restraints on themselves. Earlier today, I decided against zombies, albeit unthreatening comedy zombies, appearing in a book that I judged would have a core audience of 6 to 9-year-old boys. Some of the younger readers were too young for zombies, I decided: the creatures were just too scary. I don't think that I'm alone as a children's book publisher in confessing to having a kind of moral (or, maybe, better, an "appropriateness") compass "an individual one, a fallible one" that operates in my head when I am choosing children's books for publication. I think that many writers have it in their heads when they are writing children's books. As a publisher, I do think hard about the "messages" in the books we publish. I would find it hard to publish a children's book in which violence or cruelty triumphed over gentleness and kindness. I wouldn't publish a novel that celebrated or justified racism, sexism or homophobia. I spent a few months working in adult publishing, and it was interesting to be free from this compunction "and I did, really, feel the difference. I know, of course, that many children face violence, cruelty, injustice and chaos every day in their lives. I am aware that children's books need to reflect a world that contemporary children recognise. But I think that children's books have a role in shaping children's world views, and I, for one, think that it is important to offer them narratives and characters that are exemplars of hope, justice, tolerance, generosity and redemption.

Finally, Amis said that he "would never write about someone that forced me to write at a lower register than what I can write". The Ernie Wise-like syntactic inelegance is amusing in the context, though it was just a spoken aside in a TV interview. But the question he raises (at least, I think this is what he's talking about) is a real one: does writing for children require an author to limit their vocabulary? As a publisher, I'd say that, honestly, the answer is "yes". I am the first to acknowledge that children often discover new language through books, and I think it's great that they do. But I would strongly advise an author to edit swearing out of a novel with a core audience of 8-year-olds even though I know that most children are familiar with those words in the playground and, often, at home. Nor can I imagine publishing a picture book with the words "recondite" and "meretricious" in it. In fact, unless the point was that a character spoke in an unusually orotund way, I'd advise the avoidance of those words in a novel aimed at children younger than 12. And books for babies, I'd say, should have simple texts that reflect babies' evolving language skills.

So, on the whole, I think we should leave "recondite" and "meretricious" to Amis, but acknowledge that, while the "brain injury" comment is both glib and offensive, there is some truth in the other things that Amis said: children's publishers and, I think, many successful and loved children's authors are aware of their audience, and, free from solipsism and with a sense of responsibility, they pitch their stories, their characters and their language to that audience. I think we should be proud to do so.

Kate Wilson is founder and Managing Director of Nosy Crow. For responses to her opinion, see the [Nosy Crow website](#).