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Martin Amis: 'Men are terrible. We can't help it'

Martin Amis has written some of the funniest, cleverest novels of the late 20th century. He tells Christina Patterson about his new book, and how he wishes the world was run by women

If Martin Amis is worried about security – about random visits, say, from Islamist nutters seeking revenge, or from latte-sipping liberals whose anti-torture instincts have, on reading recent Amis, been sorely tested – he clearly hasn't told his nine-year-old daughter. We've already had a nice chat about her day, and her lovely pink top, and the portrait on the wall, when I realise that this dark-eyed little girl, who pressed the buzzer on the outside gate, and opened the front door, and welcomed me in, hasn't actually told either of her parents that I'm there. She's delightful, of course, but I can feel the taxi-meter of precious interview time ticking away. So finally I crack and off she trots – serious, soulful, sweet – and here they are, Mummy and Daddy, one of the most glamorous literary couples in the world.

Mummy is Isabel Fonseca, the beautiful American heiress, writer, novelist, and second wife. And Daddy – well, we know who Daddy is. Amis fils, he used to be called, this writer of brilliant, glittering, savagely comic novels, this writer of coruscating, polysyllabic, look-at-me prose, this writer who is one of the most famous writers alive. Amis fils he used to be called to distinguish him from Amis père, angry young man turned grumpy old devil, poet, curmudgeon, pen pal of Larkin and creator of – yes – savagely cruel comic novels, and of one of the funniest books in the English language, *Lucky Jim*. If Kingsley was the colossus who loomed – a colossus who, famously, gave up reading his son's books – Martin was the sexy one, the hip one, the one who wrote the blistering satires on money and success, but did pretty well at garnering both.

And here, in this gracious Regency house, are the fruits of it: tasteful modern art, ethnic artefacts, artfully arranged antiques. In the corner, there's a pinball machine and the sofas are scarlet velvet. No "Martin Amis does Laura Ashley chintz" shock horror. No "Martin Amis does space, light and elegance with a funky twist", Goddamn him. Martin Amis does, by the looks of it, perfect happy families in massive, beautiful house. Martin Amis does brilliant, world-famous novelist and all this as well.

I am, it's clear, having the authentic Martin Amis experience. In the old days, it was young men who were sent to interview him: young men who would bask in the golden light of his glory, hoping perhaps that some of that precious, blessed stardust (pure testosterone, maybe, frozen into tiny, glittering crystals) might fall on their more slender shoulders and they too would open their mouths and issue forth searingly witty, searingly acerbic, searingly incisive pronouncements on literature and life. And they would go away and either write a homage to the master – one which, like "lucky" Jim, in his final, disastrous lecture to the faculty, unconsciously echoed the rhythms of the boss – or they would set about the arduous, but satisfying, process of dismembering him. If *Making Cocoa* for Kingsley Amis was an unlikely title for a best-selling poetry collection (one by Wendy Cope), Humiliating Martin Amis is surely one that would sell on its title alone.

They often sat in smoky pubs, these pugnacious young men, out-smoking and out-sneering the master. Sometimes, they even played tennis with him. Testosterone isn't just for the head, you know. You've got to show muscle. You've got to show fight. Luckily, I don't have to play tennis, or show muscle, or show fight. Luckily, I can sit on a nice, comfy sofa and sip white wine. And Marty doesn't play too much tennis these days either. Sorry, Martin Amis. It's tempting to slip into these matey diminutives when you're writing about Martin Amis. Tempting, perhaps, to indicate that you're on his level and can bring him down a

peg or two should you feel the need. Well, I'm not on his level. I haven't written a handful of the funniest, cleverest novels of the late 20th century, and I'm not keen on pegs. Even though I'm a woman. But we'll get back to that later.

"The last time I played tennis," he says, "I did something to my leg and I sort of felt ancient. Suddenly when you do that, distances look enormous for a while. And stairs." Oh dear! The man still sometimes described as the enfant terrible of English literature has trouble with the stairs. But then the enfant terrible of English literature will be 60 in August. "The day," he adds, "seems much shorter now. And when you're finishing something, you're not really good to do other things. It's hard enough doing a plausible imitation of a husband and a father, let alone a tennis player."

Whoa! That's enough Big Themes for an opening paragraph: intimations of mortality, relations between the sexes, relations between fathers and their children, relations between the inner world of the artist and the outer world of doing the washing up and, not least, the New Novel. "At this stage," he continues, "there's a sort of great terror that you have to get it done. My father once said you really just want to stay up all night for a month until it's done." And his father, too! This could keep us going all day!

But first sleep. I'm obsessed with sleep. Does he sleep? Amis sips his beer and turns, as he often does, to Nabokov. "Nabokov said that the world divides between people who sleep well and people who don't. This novel is partly about this great attack of sleep I had. I've always slept well. Then I had a sort of weird kind of physical breakdown around 2002 or 2003, where the main symptom was needing a fantastic amount of sleep. It was sort of marvellous just lying there."

Well, this is certainly a different Martin Amis. A Martin Amis happily snuggled up under the duvet. A Martin Amis, apparently, who "couldn't write for a bit" because his "handwriting collapsed" and who had "a sore throat that lasted a year". A Martin Amis who was, in fact, grieving for his sister, Sally, who died of alcoholism in 2000. "I think we live all our lives in shock," he says, "and then some muffler comes off and you get it. There were lots of tearful episodes. Not really knowing what it was about. And then I finally intuited that it was four years after she died, and these things queue up on you."

It's certainly a reminder that, as Amis points out later in our conversation, while levels of suffering may be relative, actual suffering isn't. A reminder, too, that those who sneered at the idea of writing about suffering while flopping by the pool of your house in Uruguay, as Amis did while writing his novella about the gulag, House of Meetings, couldn't sneer at the authenticity of its depiction. "It was an awful business writing it because I felt so guilty," he says. "You know, there's a Posy Simmonds cartoon of someone sitting with a cocktail saying to a dictaphone, 'On the third day, the last child dies.' It was a bit like that. And I just did a lot of suffering, but writerly suffering. It all seemed dead and incredibly presumptuous."

The test, of course, is whether something works, and House of Meetings works triumphantly. It's a dazzling, sickening, chastening and, yes, beautiful, portrayal of life in a Stalinist slave camp in the Arctic Circle. The reviews were universally rapturous. Which must have been a relief after some of the critical responses to his work in the past few years. Wasn't it? "Yes," says Amis. "Absolutely. I was so shocked by the reviews of Yellow Dog."

Yellow Dog, Amis's satire on the Royal Family, tabloid newspapers and London hard-men, which came out in 2003, was widely regarded as – well, Amis's donkey. "Yellow Dog isn't bad as in not very good or slightly disappointing," said Tibor Fischer in The Daily Telegraph. "It's not-knowing-where-to-look bad... It's like your favourite uncle being caught in a school playground, masturbating." Amis responded by insisting that the novel was in his "top three" (which it absolutely isn't) and declared that "no one wants to read a difficult novel, or deal with a prose style which reminds them how thick they are". Does he stand by that?

Amis stares out at the window. "No," he says. "Probably not. But I think people are too fragile now. Humour is... you don't see much of it. You see it a lot on the sort of V C sub-surface, stand-up and TV and that. But the comic novel has more or less disappeared... Think of the range of what you can't joke about now. It's almost everything. I'm writing [in the new novel, The Pregnant Widow] about 1970, and I thought, well, I've got to be honest and put in the sort of jokes that people told. And I realised that it would just make everyone hate these characters so much – their jokes about Jews, about black people. It was actually a satire on prejudice and it was funny. But now the only political constituency of people you can sneer at are white South Africans, or white southerners in America, and up to a point, Israel. And Israel's the unusual one, because they have slightly darker skin. But our whole kind of paralysis about Islam is to do with that."

Islam. Deep breath. Well, there are PhDs to be written on Martin Amis and Islam, but a quick summary would go like this: After September 11, Amis wrote a number of pieces on the Islamist terror threat and the rise of the suicide bomber. The first, published in The Guardian a week later, and again in The Second Plane, a collection of essays and stories on the subject published at the beginning of last year, outlined the horror of "an irrationalist, agonistic, theocratic/ ideocratic system... unappeasably opposed to the West's existence" and the need for Americans to "absorb the fact that they are hated, and hated intelligibly". Amis later recanted on that "intelligibly", dismissing his first response as "rationalist naivety" in a sphere where the rational is, he argues, no longer

as rationalist narrative in a sphere where the rational is, he argues, no longer relevant.

Liberals sniffed Islamophobia and blanched, but it was when Terry Eagleton, Professor of Cultural Theory at Manchester, where Amis now teaches literature to students of creative writing, unearthed some comments he made in an interview, that all hell broke loose: "There's a definite urge – don't you have it? – to say, 'The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.' What sort of suffering? Not let them travel. Deportation, further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they're from the Middle East or Pakistan... Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children." Amis, who later dismissed the comments as a "thought experiment" made in the heat of the foiled plot to blow up a series of jumbo jets, was widely accused of racism. In the pages of this newspaper, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown declared that he was "with the beasts", the "Muslim-baiters and haters". Amis responded with a letter in which he said that he longed for Alibhai-Brown's "soothing hand" on his brow.

"Yes, well," says Amis, who was clearly wounded by the row, "I said that sort of hypothetical thing about what a government might do, and of course the hypothesis was removed... The idea of hating someone because of the colour of their skin, or their religion – that's for the gutter. That's not part of serious debate. And racism is just the golden hand-grenade that you lob at anyone – you know it's going to stick."

OK, well, let's go back to where the fuss started, to what Amis has called his "political education". Up until about 2000, he had written mostly fiction and journalism about fiction. In 2002, he published *Koba the Dread*, an exploration, inspired by his father's early political leanings, of the indulgence of Western intellectuals towards communism and of the realities of life under Stalin. This was followed by a fictionalised exploration of the slave camps, *House of Meetings*, and then by *The Second Plane*. It was a "political education", in other words, which started when he was about 50. What took him so long?

"I wrote about nuclear weapons and I wrote about the Holocaust, but that was not political. I don't know. Hitch [his friend Christopher Hitchens] and James Fenton [the poet and another colleague at the *New Statesman* in the 1970s] were very left, and I just felt that I didn't want to belong to anything. And I think it was tremendously important for Christopher as a writer when he ceased to be ideological and he sort of bloomed."

And how did he respond when his best mate started writing polemic, too? Wasn't the deal that Hitch did the serious stuff and Amis did the funny stuff? "No," says Amis. "There's more that I can talk to him about. He used to complain in the 1970s that 'all Martin and I talk about is sex because he doesn't know anything about politics'."

"Geopolitics", says Amis in his introduction to *The Second Plane*, "may not be my natural subject, but masculinity is." You can say that again. Now, as well as the rogues gallery of hideous, solipsistic, sex-obsessed, success-craving males who people his fictional universe, there's a matching set of real-life equivalents: the Stalins, the camp commanders, the jihadist clerics, the constipated suicide bombers (fictionalised in a short story in *The Second Plane*) on their way, via the twin towers, to paradise. In the light of all this, perhaps his caricatures of appalling men were merely an accurate depiction of the essence of the male?

"I think so!" says Amis cheerily. "I was quoted by, I'm pleased to say, Germaine Greer, as saying that all men should be locked up until they're 28. Boot camp. That would knock some sense into them. We're terrible. We can't help it!" No wonder he now describes himself as a "gynocrat" who believes that the world would be better run by women. And no wonder his new novel, *The Pregnant Widow*, is about the sexual revolution. "My view is that they got it the wrong way round," he says, "in that what they should have absolutely nailed down as their only objective is that men should do 50-50 in the home. Instead, they went Napoleonic."

Uh, huh? And how much does he do? Amis makes a face. "I do a lot of driving," he says in the end. "And, in fact," he adds, "men get even more devious than you know. Men are so corruptive that some awful document arises and you go up and sort of stand near your wife looking helpless."

Do you. So, less delegation of "awful documents" to the wife. More washing up. More pegs, in fact. Anything else? "Well, there's another thing," says Amis, "but it's grim. It's to do with little boys and little girls. If a girl says, 'I want to marry daddy,' as they all do at some time, everyone goes 'ah'. If a little boy says, 'I want to marry mummy,' then he wakes up in hospital. The special status of the dad," he says emphatically "has to go."

Right. It sounds as though Martin Amis on the sexual revolution might be at least as controversial as Martin Amis on Islam. I'm not quite sure what to make of it. Eccentric is the word that springs to mind. A slightly peculiar extrapolation of the universal from what is clearly the particular. And this, from a man who rarely names a female intellectual influence. A man, indeed, who thinks the comic novel is dead, perhaps because people didn't think his last comic novel was funny. But you don't go to Tolstoy for haikus and you don't go to Muriel Spark for Dickensian breadth and you don't go to Jane Austen for analysis of the Napoleonic wars. And you probably don't go to Martin Amis for political solutions or the resolution of the sex war. You go to Martin Amis because he makes the English language sizzle and sing.

'The Pregnant Widow' will be published by Jonathan Cape in September. Martin Amis will be talking to Robert McCrum on Thursday 7 May at the Norwich Playhouse on behalf of Writers' Centre Norwich (www.writerscentrenorwich.org.uk), as part of the Norfolk & Norwich Festival. For event details, visit www.nnfestival.org.uk

Five Amis classics

House of Meetings (2006)

A devastating depiction, drawing on the history explored in 'Koba the Dread', of a Stalinist slave camp in the USSR, focusing on two brothers, their rivalry and their shared love of one woman.

Experience (2000)

A multi-layered memoir that takes on all the Big Issues: Kingsley, literary influences, friendship, divorce, love, loss, the media and, of course, "the teeth". Fascinating, of course, but also surprisingly warm.

Time's Arrow (1991)

The Booker-shortlisted tale of a Nazi war criminal in Auschwitz which, in reversing time, and some of the atrocities of the Holocaust, wrought a satirical, linguistic miracle.

London Fields (1989)

A murder story for the end of the millennium set in the pubs, and on the streets, of west London. Baroque, funny, hard-edged, it's a meditation on writing and on the postmodern world.

Money (1984)

Porn freak, jet-setter, hedonist, slob, John Self is a reluctant anti-hero of Amis's savage satire on the greed-is-good 1980s, a novel that now stands as emblematic of a bygone age.



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