



Interviews

Martin Amis, The Art of Fiction No. 151

Interviewed by Francesca Riviere

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Martin Amis was born on August 25, 1949, in Oxford, England, where his father, the Booker Prize-winning author Sir Kingsley Amis, was a doctoral student. He grew up in the various university towns in which his father taught literature: Swansea, Princeton and Cambridge. His parents divorced when he was twelve.

At eighteen, a role in the film *A High Wind in Jamaica* took him to the West Indies. He returned to England in 1968 and, after taking “crammers” (courses designed to prepare one for university), he enrolled in Exeter College, Oxford. He graduated with first-class honors in English. In his early twenties, he wrote book reviews for the London *Observer* and soon thereafter worked as an editorial assistant for *The Times Literary Supplement*. His first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, was published in 1973 and received critical acclaim, winning the Somerset Maugham Award (a prize his father had also been awarded). While at the *TLS*, he published his second novel, *Dead Babies* (1975), which Auberon Waugh referred to as “nothing less than brilliant.”

From 1977 to 1980 he served as literary editor of *The New Statesman*, a socialist weekly, and wrote two more novels, *Success* (1978) and *Other People* (1981). In 1984, his best-selling *Money* appeared, followed by a collection of journalism, *The Moronic Inferno* (1986), and a collection of short stories, *Einstein’s Monsters* (1987), which focused on the nuclear threat and contained a polemical element previously unseen in his fiction.

London Fields (1990) again confronted nuclear holocaust and the death of the planet. One critic described the novel as “ferociously impressive.” Amis subsequently published another collection of journalism, *Visiting Mrs. Nabokov*, and a novel, *Time’s Arrow* (1992).

Soon thereafter, at the time of his divorce, Amis found himself the focus of a literary feud. When he left his longtime agent, Pat Kavanagh, the wife of his friend and fellow author Julian Barnes, to sign with Andrew Wylie, A. S. Byatt accused him of selling out to pay for his divorce and extensive dental work. His response to the scandal: “Envy never comes to the ball dressed as envy; it comes dressed as high moral standards or distaste for materialism.”

Since then, he has written two novels: *The Information* (1995) and *Night Train*, a best-selling detective thriller set in an unnamed city in the United States.

The following interview is the result of several meetings, the first of which took place in the summer of 1990, on a former turkey ranch near Wellfleet, Massachusetts, where he was vacationing. Dressed in tennis gear, tan and relaxed, Amis drank coffee and throughout the afternoon rolled his own cigarettes with a frequency reminiscent of John Self (in *Money*) who explains to the reader, “Unless I specifically inform you otherwise, I’m always smoking another cigarette.” Amis now lives in northwest London.

INTERVIEWED

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INTERVIEWER

When you are writing a novel, how do you start out? Is it with character or with theme? Or does something else come to you first?

MARTIN AMIS

The common conception of how novels get written seems to me to be an exact description of writer's block. In the common view, the writer is at this stage so desperate that he's sitting around with a list of characters, a list of themes, and a framework for his plot, and ostensibly trying to mesh the three elements. In fact, it's never like that. What happens is what Nabokov described as a throb. A throb or a glimmer, an act of recognition on the writer's part. At this stage the writer thinks, Here is something I can write a novel about. In the absence of that recognition I don't know what one would do. It may be that nothing about this idea—or glimmer, or throb—appeals to you other than the fact that it's your destiny, that it's your next book. You may even be secretly appalled or awed or turned off by the idea, but it goes beyond that. You're just reassured that there is another novel for you to write. The idea can be incredibly thin—a situation, a character in a certain place at a certain time. With *Money*, for example, I had an idea of a big fat guy in New York, trying to make a film. That was all. Sometimes a novel can come pretty consecutively and it's rather like a journey in that you get going and the plot, such as it is, unfolds and you follow your nose. You have to decide between identical-seeming dirt roads, both of which look completely hopeless, but you nevertheless have to choose which one to follow.

INTERVIEWER

Do you worry, as you go along, that what you've already written isn't up to par?

AMIS

You try to think about where you are going, not where you came from, though what sometimes happens is that you get stuck, and it's really not what you're about to do that's stumping you, it's something you've already done that isn't right. You have to go back and fix that. My father described a process in which, as it were, he had to take himself gently but firmly by the hand and say, Now all right, calm down. What is it that's worrying you? The dialogue will go: Well, it's the first page, actually. What is it about the first page? He might say, The first sentence. And he realized that it was only a little thing that was holding him up. Actually, my father, I think, sat down and wrote what he considered to be the final version straightaway, because he said there's no point in putting down a sentence if you're not going to stand by it.

INTERVIEWER

So that assumed he knew where he was going.

AMIS

He knew a lot more than I do about where he was going. That may come with experience in the craft. I tend to be more headlong.

INTERVIEWER

How important is plot to you?

AMIS

Plots really matter only in thrillers. In mainstream writing the plot is—what is it? A hook. The reader is going to wonder how things turn out. In this respect, *Money* was a much more difficult book to write than *London Fields* because it is essentially a plotless novel. It is what I would call a *voice* novel. If the voice doesn't work you're screwed. *Money* was only one voice, whereas *London Fields* was four voices. The eggs weren't in one basket. They were in four baskets. I was fairly confident that the hook, this idea of a woman arranging her own murder, pricked the curiosity. So although nothing much happens in five hundred pages, people are still going to want to know how it ends. It's a *tease* novel, in that respect.

INTERVIEWER

Did you read or hear somewhere that certain people were predisposed to being murdered?

AMIS



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Yes. I can't even remember when the idea or the scratch on the mind occurred. It wasn't even a book I read; it was a book review I read or heard about, or a conversation I listened to in a pub or a tube train. Anyway, all I needed was one sentence, which was the sentence you just outlined. And at that point I was thinking in terms of a very short novel, about the murderer and the murderee and their eventual conjunction. Then the introduction of a third character, Guy, the foil, opened the novel out into a broader kind of society, and then the narrator had his own demands for space to be met. And finally, time and place took over, i.e., London, a modern city at the end of the century, at the end of the millennium. That brought together all kinds of interests and preoccupations. Again, it must be stressed that you don't have your themes tacked up on the wall like a target, or like a dartboard. When people ask, What did you mean to say with this novel? The answer to the question is, of course, *The novel*, all four hundred and seventy pages of it. Not any catchphrase that you could print on a badge or a T-shirt. It's a human failing to reduce things either to a slogan or a personality, but I seem to have laid myself open to this—the personality getting in the way of the novel.

INTERVIEWER

How do you mean that?

AMIS

Judging by everything from reviews to letters I receive, I find that people take my writing rather personally. It's interesting when you're doing signing sessions with other writers and you look at the queues at each table and you can see definite human types gathering there.

INTERVIEWER

Which type is in your queue?

AMIS

Well, I did one with Roald Dahl and quite predictable human divisions were observable. For him, a lot of children, a lot of parents of children. With Julian Barnes, his queue seemed to be peopled by rather comfortable, professional types. My queue is always full of, you know, wild-eyed sleazebags and people who stare at me very intensely, as if I have some particular message for them. As if I must know that they've been reading me, that this dyad or symbiosis of reader and writer has been so intense that I must somehow know about it.

INTERVIEWER

When did you know you wanted to write, or when did you consider yourself a writer?

AMIS

I might as well do my dad here.

INTERVIEWER

Sure.

AMIS

I'm not at all reluctant to talk about my father, since it's become clearer to me that it is more or less a unique case. First of all, it doesn't seem that literary ability is very strongly inherited. As far as I know, my father and I are the only father-and-son team who both have a body of work, or, as my father would put it, who are both "some good." And you know, Auberon Waugh and David Updike may have come up with a novel or two here and there, but not two chunks of work, either in succession or synchronously, as we have. I want to make it clear that it's been nothing but a help to me. Maybe it was more difficult for him, funnily enough; it took me a long time to realize that. I don't know how I'd feel if one of my little boys started to write, but I do know that I feel generally resentful of younger writers.

INTERVIEWER

You do?

AMIS

You're not thrilled to see some blazing talent coming up on your flank. Dislike and

resentment of younger writers is something fairly universal among writers, and it may be more annoying, you know, when it's your own son. Also, it seems to me quite natural that I should admire my father's work and that he should have been suspicious and only half-engaged about my work. My father said to me that when a writer of twenty-five puts pen to paper he's saying to the writer of fifty that it's no longer like that, it's like *this*. The older writer, at some point, is going to lose touch with what the contemporary moment feels like, although some writers do amazing jobs of keeping able to do them, Saul Bellow being a good example. When my father started writing, he was saying to older writers—for instance, Somerset Maugham—it's not like that, it's like this. Of course, there was a reaction. One of the paperback editions of *Lucky Jim* has a quote from Somerset Maugham, which says something like today's universities are filling up with the new generation that has emerged since the war. Mr. Amis's observations are so sharp, his ear so acute, that he has caught their manners and mores exactly. That's where the quote ends on the book cover, but the original piece goes on—they are scum, they have no respect for values, for culture, etcetera. So a bit of "they are scum" is inevitable in the assessment of the younger writer.

Anyway, to get back to what it was like to start. All people rather like the idea of being a writer or painter at the age of thirteen or fourteen, but only the ones who succeed at it are ever asked when they first got the idea. I have said that I was aware at that age that my father was a writer, but I wasn't sure what kind of books he wrote. For all I knew they could have been Westerns or bodice rippers.

INTERVIEWER

You didn't read him?

AMIS

I didn't, no. I was too young really, and I wasn't reading anyone.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever discuss writing with him when you began?

AMIS

Not really. He was brilliantly indolent: he never gave me any encouragement at all. I later realized how valuable and necessary that was. I know one or two writers who've encouraged their children to write and it's a completely hollow promise because, to return to the more or less unique situation of my father and me, literary talent isn't inherited. When a writer-father says to a writer-son—and all sons, all people are writers for a little while—you can be me, you can be a writer, you can have my life, it's a complicated offer. It's certain to fall flat. So, perhaps out of natural indolence rather than prescience, he never did encourage me at all, and I never appealed for encouragement. What makes you a writer? You develop an extra sense that partly excludes you from experience. When writers experience things, they're not really experiencing them anything like a hundred percent. They're always holding back and wondering what the significance of it is, or wondering how they'd do it on the page. Always this disinterestedness . . . as if it really isn't to do with you, a certain cold impartiality. That faculty, I think, was pretty fully developed in me quite early on. One day, when I was still living at home, my father came into my room and I placed my hands protectively over the piece of paper in my typewriter. I didn't want him to see it. He said, later, that was his first suspicion. But then I did announce that I was writing a novel; I left home, and a year later the novel was done. I left the proofs of it on his desk and went off on holiday. When I came back, *he'd* gone on holiday. But he left a brief, charming note saying he thought it was enjoyable and fun and all that. I think that was the last novel of mine he read all the way through.

INTERVIEWER

That was *The Rachel Papers*?

AMIS

The Rachel Papers, yes. I think he slaved his way to the end of my third novel, *Success*, of which he said, The beginning and the end worked, but the middle didn't. As for the subsequent books, he read about twenty pages and then gave up. It took a bit of getting used to, this, because you felt it as a son *and* as a fellow writer. There was no sore feeling at all, partly because I was inured, but also because I saw that it was impossible for him to tell white lies as writers tend to do to their friends. I would much rather revise upward my

opinion of a friend's book than endanger a friendship. But he was not like that; in that way he was much tougher than me.

INTERVIEWER

Did you feel you were carrying the mantle of your father's legacy or competing with that? Was there any intimidation at the beginning, or did you just want to write and that was it?

AMIS

I suppose it was nice to know that however bad your first novel was, it probably would have been published out of mercenary curiosity. It was like having a lot of ballast; it was reassuring. The more eminent my father became, the more secure it made me feel. People were very generous to me to begin with, out of a mistaken feeling that it must have been hard for me. The only entry on the deficit side came later, after people who had been generous to me for a while probably expected me to write a couple of novels and then shut up, as writers' sons usually do. There's a feeling that it's a bit bloody much that I've gone on and on and here I still am. "Why were we so nice to him in the beginning?" Interestingly, only recently did I realize that it was much harder for my father than for me. Not *very* hard; I think he was quite pleased, most of the time, that I'm a writer. But much more annoying for him. I was never annoyed. It's natural to admire your elders and to despise your youngsters. That's the way of the world. There was a brief period when my father would snipe at me in print and use me as an example of the incomprehensibility and uninterestingness of modern prose. Thanks for the plug, Dad. But that was just amusing, that was just in character for him. And I sniped back.

INTERVIEWER

I read that when he came across your name as a character in *Money*, he flung the book across the room.

AMIS

I'm almost certain that it was the introduction of a minor character called Martin Amis that caused my father to send the book windmilling through the air. Because I had broken the contract between writer and reader, which says no messing about, no fooling with the reality level.

I once cornered him and asked him which prose writers he *did* admire—as usual, at dinner, he'd been dismissing great swathes of literature, one after the other. He was once asked to contribute an article in a series called Sacred Cows. My father said, What about my doing American literature? They said, Well, all right. My father said, How many words? They said, Eight hundred. My father said, Oh, I don't think I'll need as much space as *that*. When challenged, he said he did like one book by Evelyn Waugh, some books by Anthony Powell, and after about another thirty seconds he was reduced to Dick Francis. He didn't like Jane Austen, didn't like Dickens, didn't like Fielding, didn't like Lawrence, didn't like Joyce, didn't like any Americans. And was ill-equipped to judge any of the Russians, the French, the South Americans, etcetera. So I began to feel a bit better about him not liking my stuff either.

INTERVIEWER

In good company.

AMIS

Exactly.

INTERVIEWER

Is there someone whose work you read that was pivotal or a turning point?

AMIS

The first literature I read was Jane Austen.

INTERVIEWER

Was it influential?

AMIS

I would say that the writers I like and trust have at the base of their prose something called the English sentence. An awful lot of modern writing seems to me to be a depressed use of language. Once, I called it “vow-of-poverty prose.” No, give me the king in his countinghouse. Give me Updike. Anthony Burgess said there are two kinds of writers, A-writers and B-writers. A-writers are storytellers, B-writers are users of language. And I tend to be grouped in the Bs. Under Nabokov’s prose, under Burgess’s prose, under my father’s prose—his early rather than his later prose—the English sentence is like a poetic meter. It’s a basic rhythm from which the writer is free to glance off in unexpected directions. But the sentence is still there. To be crude, it would be like saying that I don’t trust an abstract painter unless I know that he can do hands.

INTERVIEWER

Their experimentations are based on a structure or knowledge . . .

AMIS

They’re based on the ability to write a good English sentence. Much modern prose is praised for its terseness, its scrupulous avoidance of curlicue, etcetera. But I don’t feel the deeper rhythm there. I don’t think these writers are being terse out of choice. I think they are being terse because it’s the only way they can write.

INTERVIEWER

Out of limitation.

AMIS

Out of limitation. So if the prose isn’t there, then you’re reduced to what are merely secondary interests, like story, plot, characterization, psychological insight and form. I get less and less interested in form, although I have the English writer’s addiction to it. Form seems to me like decor in a restaurant. Form is easy. You can make shapely novels, everything working like a well-made watch. You can do all these little balancing acts and color schemes—like an American campus novel, meaning a novel written on campus, rather than about campus. A creative-writing novel. What is important is to write freely and passionately and with all the resources that the language provides. I’m not interested in limiting the language to the capabilities—or the accepted, obvious capabilities—of my narrators. I’m not interested in writing a realistically *stupid* novel. Some of my characters have been semiliterate, but I fix it one way or the other so that I can write absolutely flat-out in their voice. Nabokov said something like, I think like a genius, I write like a distinguished man of letters, I talk like an idiot. The first and third propositions are true of everyone. As many writers have shown, supposedly ordinary, inarticulate, uneducated people have mystical and poetical thoughts that just don’t quite make it into expression. What could be a better job for a novelist than to do it for them? They say that everyone has a novel in them but it doesn’t often get written. If you write that novel *for* them at the highest pitch of your powers, you don’t end up with a realistically stupid novel, one that begins, you know, I get up in de morning.

INTERVIEWER

What would be something really difficult for you to write?

AMIS

I did have the idea of writing—I may yet, when it falls together—a short story narrated by a two year old. But even then I think I would try to fix it so that I could write flat-out. I rather like these impositions of difficulty. In *Other People*, I used the localized third person, where everything is seen through the heroine’s point of view. She’s not only a woman, she’s also suffering from an amnesia so total that she doesn’t know what a chair is, or a sink, or a spoon. In *Money*, I had a semiliterate alcoholic. In *Time’s Arrow*, I have a kind of super-innocent narrator living in a world where time runs backwards. You’re always looking for a way to see the world as if you’ve never seen it before. As if you’d never really got used to living here on this planet. Have you heard of the Martian school of poets?

INTERVIEWER

No, I haven’t.

AMIS

It all goes back to a poem written by Craig Raine called “A Martian Sends a Postcard Home.” The poem consists of little riddles about what the Martian sees of life on Earth. Such as, at night they hide in pairs and watch films about each other with their eyelids shut. Only the young are allowed to suffer openly. Adults go to a punishment room, with water but nothing to eat. They sit and suffer the noises in silence and everyone’s pain has a different smell.

INTERVIEWER

Yikes!

AMIS

It’s a marvelous poem. As with most schools, the Martian label means everything and nothing, since I think all writers are Martians. They come and say, You haven’t been seeing this place right; it’s not like *that*, it’s like *this*. Seeing the world anew, as if it were new, is as old as writing. It’s what all painters are trying to do, to see what’s there, to see it in a way that renews it. It becomes more and more urgent as the planet gets worn flat and forest after forest is slain to print the paper for people’s impressions to be scrawled down on. It becomes harder and harder to be original, to see things with an innocent eye. Innocence is much tied up with it. As the planet gets progressively less innocent, you need a more innocent eye to see it.

INTERVIEWER

How would you respond to this quote from Paul Valéry? He says, “Hide your god, men must hide their true gods with great care.”

AMIS

Writers very seldom talk about their gods in the sense Valéry meant, because it’s mysterious even to them. They don’t know what makes them write; they don’t know in any psychoanalytical sense what makes them write. They don’t know why, when they come up against a difficulty and then go for a walk, they can come back and the difficulty is solved. They don’t know why they plant minor characters early on in a novel who turn up with a specific function later on. When things are going well, you do have the sense that what you’re writing is being fed to you in some way. Auden compared writing a poem to cleaning an old piece of slate until the letters appear. The only way you could reveal your god is perhaps under hypnosis. It’s sacred and it’s secret, even to the writer.

INTERVIEWER

Can you talk about the influence of other writers or poets? I know one of them is Saul Bellow.

AMIS

I would say they are more *inspirers* than influences. When I am stuck with a sentence that isn’t fully born, it isn’t yet there, I sometimes think, How would Dickens go at this sentence, how would Bellow or Nabokov go at this sentence? What you hope to emerge with is how *you* would go at that sentence, but you get a little shove in the back by thinking about writers you admire. I was once winding up a telephone conversation with Saul Bellow and he said, Well you go back to work now, and I said, All right, and he said, Give ’em hell. And it’s Dickens saying, Give ’em hell. Give the reader hell. Stretch the reader.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean by stretching the reader? Making things difficult for them?

AMIS

Yes, I think you throw all modesty and caution aside and say that the reader is you. Inevitably, you are writing the sort of stuff that you would like to read, that would give you the most pleasure to read. Looking back on your work, if it’s more than ten years old or five years old, it’s usually pretty painful.

INTERVIEWER

You’ve moved on.

AMIS

You've moved on. But even when you read the page with the half-averted eyes, you'll see something and you'll think, That paragraph is still alive. In the same kind of way you might think about a younger self of yours that whatever you were up to, you had vigor.

INTERVIEWER

Would you say there's a certain continuity in a writer's body of work, which may zig or zag, but actually follows a sequence over the long term.

AMIS

I think that novels are about the author's voice, and this perhaps is why I haven't got much time for the novel that dutifully apes the voice of the bricklayer or even the etymologist or whatever it might be. What gives the voice its own timbre and its own resonance is what interests me, and that is always there, right from the start. It has to do with what is inimitable about the writer. This tends to get confused with what is parodiable about a writer.

INTERVIEWER

The writer's voice is his style?

AMIS

It's all he's got. It's not the flashy twist, the abrupt climax, or the seamless sequence of events that characterizes a writer and makes him unique. It's a tone, it's a way of looking at things. It's a rhythm, it's what in poetry is called a sprung rhythm. Instead of having a stress every other beat, it has stress after stress after stress. One's a little worried about having one's logo on every sentence. What's that phrase about a painting consisting entirely of signatures? That obviously is something to be avoided, but it would never inhibit me. I never think, Let's write a piece of prose that is unmistakably mine. Really, it's an internal process, a tuning-fork process. You say the sentence or you write the sentence again and again until the tuning fork is still, until it satisfies you.

INTERVIEWER

Do you say the sentence aloud when you're writing?

AMIS

No, entirely in the mind. Oh, you might have a few stabs at it and then when you read it through, something jars, something . . . the rhythm doesn't feel right, one word is suspect, and you may then recast the sentence entirely, until it's got no elbows left, if you know what I mean, until it looks completely comfortable. What each writer will find comfortable will vary with each writer. Until it suits you, and then you needn't do anything more to it.

INTERVIEWER

Will you go straight through a whole first draft, beginning, middle, and end?

AMIS

On the first draft. Then sequence comes into it, and you transfer from what I think of as the more painterly hand-eye medium of longhand. If I showed you a notebook of mine, it would have lots of squiggles and transpositions and lots of light crossings-out so that you can see what the original was. You move from that into the typewritten, which immediately looks more convincing and more immovable. By the way, it's all nonsense about how wonderful computers are because you can shift things around. Nothing compares with the fluidity of longhand. You shift things around without shifting them around—in that you merely indicate a possibility while your original thought is still there. The trouble with a computer is that what you come out with has no memory, no provenance, no history—the little cursor, or whatever it's called, that wobbles around the middle of the screen falsely gives you the impression that you're thinking. Even when you're not.

INTERVIEWER

Do you get someone to type the final version?

AMIS

No, no. When I finish a novel, I do think that whether or not I should get a prize for writing the book, I should certainly get a prize for typing it. The Booker Prize is for typing. Even going from second draft to final draft, hardly a page survives without being totally rewritten. You know that the very act of retyping will involve you in thirty or forty little improvements per page. If you don't retype, you are denying that page those improvements.

INTERVIEWER

There's more momentum in the typing stage.

AMIS

Absolutely. It begins to look like a book rather than a collection of doodles.

INTERVIEWER

What's a good day of writing? How many hours, how many pages?

AMIS

Everyone assumes I'm a systematic and nose-to-the-grindstone kind of person. But to me it seems like a part-time job, really, in that writing from eleven to one continuously is a very good day's work. Then you can read and play tennis or snooker. Two hours. I think most writers would be very happy with two hours of concentrated work. Towards the end of a book, as you get more confident, and also decidedly more hysterical about getting this thing away from you, then you can do six or seven hours. But that means you are working on hysterical energy.

I want to clean my desk again (not that it ever is clean); I want this five years' worth of preoccupation off my desk. Because I started writing when I was relatively young, every novel I've written contains everything I know, so that by the time I'm finished I'm completely out of gas. I'm a moron when I finish a novel. It's all in *there* and there's nothing left in *here*.

INTERVIEWER

You said that after *London Fields* you felt a supervoid.

AMIS

I felt like a clinical moron. My IQ was about sixty-five. For weeks I shambled about, unable to do my own shoelaces. Also faintly happy and proud.

INTERVIEWER

In your work, do you feel more strongly affected by visual stimuli or aural stimuli or something else?

AMIS

Through the ear, probably. My mind, like everyone else's mind, is full of jabbering voices. Any phrase that sticks in my mind, I tend to think is resonant and I will use it. Visual stimuli are not so naturally processed by me. For visual description I sort of have to roll my sleeves up.

INTERVIEWER

You write a fair amount of journalism.

AMIS

Journalism, particularly book reviewing, brings with it another magnitude of difficulty. Fiction writing is basically what I want to do when I get up in the morning. If I haven't done any all day, then I feel dissatisfied. If I wake up knowing that I have some journalism to write, then it's with a heavy tread that I go to the bathroom—without relish, for many and obvious reasons. You're no longer in complete control.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think it's a good training ground?

AMIS

I think you have a duty to contribute, to go on contributing to what Gore Vidal calls “book chat.” For certain self-interested reasons, you want to keep standards up so that when your next book comes out, it’s more likely that people will get the hang of it. I have no admiration for writers who think at a certain point they can wash their hands of book chat. You should be part of the ongoing debate.

INTERVIEWER

How much of your fiction comes from fact?

AMIS

Tom Wolfe wrote that piece—in *Harper’s*, was it?—where he said that writers are neglecting the real world; that it’s all out there and it’s interesting and novelists should be writing about it. He suggested a ratio of seventy percent research, thirty percent inspiration. But the trouble is that the real world probably isn’t going to fit into the novel. In a sense, it’s better to do the research in your mind. You need detail, you need pegs, but you don’t want too much truth, you don’t want too much fact. I would reverse the ratio—thirty percent research, seventy percent inspiration. Perhaps even 30 percent research is too much. You want a few glimmers from the real world but then you need to run it through your psyche, to reimagine it. Don’t transcribe, reimagine. Mere fact has no chance of being formally perfect. It will get in the way, it will be all elbows. This reminds me of something I once said about the nonfiction novel—*In Cold Blood*, *The Executioner’s Song*, and so on. There is a great deal of artistry in that form. The first couple of hundred pages in *The Executioner’s Song*, where Mailer is reimagining the locale and the characters, are wonderfully artistic. But the trouble with the nonfiction fiction is that the facts are there. The murder is there. That’s what you’re given. And that makes the nonfiction fiction artistically very limited. The larger act of transformation can’t take place because you’re stymied by the truth.

INTERVIEWER

Can we talk about how your characters develop?

AMIS

I’m very fond of quoting these two remarks. E. M. Forster said he used to line up his characters, as it were, at the starting line of the novel, and say to them, Right. No larks. Nabokov used to say that his characters cringed as he walked past with his switch, and that he’d seen whole avenues of imagined trees lose their leaves in terror as he approached. I don’t think I’m really like that. I think character is destiny within the novel as well as outside the novel . . . that characters you invent will contribute vitally to the kind of novel you’re going to write. I feel that if they are alive in your mind, they’re going to have ideas of their own and take you places you wouldn’t perhaps have gone. In *London Fields*, certainly, the dynamic character in my mind was the girl. Rather as the narrator, Sam, keeps appealing to her to spice up a scene or to give it a bit of form, she was doing that for *me*. She was vigorous enough, and shifty enough, for me to appeal to her to help me out. Fix it, get me to the next stage. I think I rather resist the idea of characters being pawns in a formal game. I’m almost daring them to strike out in a way that might surprise me.

INTERVIEWER

So you give them license.

AMIS

A bit of license, yes. But *I’m* the boss. I’m the boss but they’re on the team. They’re “my people,” in the sense that a politician might have his people—his in-depth backup. I’m always willing to hear their ideas, although of course I retain the right of absolute veto; I slap them down but I want to hear what they’ve got to say.

INTERVIEWER

How will the characters present themselves?

AMIS

I think they have to have a physical hook, a physical plinth of some kind, and they will have a human model. But you don’t want to know the model too well. Better to base a

character on someone you've known for ten minutes than someone you've known for ten years, because you want them to be plastic, to be malleable.

INTERVIEWER

It seems the source of a lot of what you are talking about is intuition.

AMIS

Well, you become a grizzled old pro, too, in that the craft side of it gets easier and more natural. You know more what you're about, you know more what you don't have to say. You get your characters around town more economically, you get them in and out of places without so much fuss. You learn more about modulation. After a scene dominated by dialogue, you don't want much dialogue in the next scene. It becomes kind of rule of thumb. So that if you are going to break that rule, then you have to have a good reason for it. But, otherwise, you trust entirely to instinct. It's all you've got. Writer's block, disintegration of the writer, that's all to do with failing confidence.

INTERVIEWER

How often do you write?

AMIS

Every weekday. I have an office where I work. I leave the house and I'm absent for the average working day. I drive my powerful Audi three quarters of a mile across London to my flat. And there, unless I've got something else I have to do, I will sit down and write fiction for as long as I can. As I said earlier, it never feels remotely like a full day's work, although it can be. A lot of the time seems to be spent making coffee or trolling around, or throwing darts, or playing pinball, or picking your nose, trimming your fingernails, or staring at the ceiling.

You know that foreign correspondent's ruse; in the days when you had your profession on the passport, you put writer; and then when you were in some trouble spot, in order to conceal your identity you simply changed the *r* in *writer* to an *a* and became a *waiter*. I always thought there was a great truth there. Writing is waiting, for me certainly. It wouldn't bother me a bit if I didn't write one word in the morning. I'd just think, you know, not yet. The job seems to be one of making yourself receptive to whatever's on the rise that day. I was quite surprised to read how much dread Father felt as he approached the typewriter in the morning.

INTERVIEWER

Yes, he really sidled up to it.

AMIS

I seldom have that kind of squeamishness. Any smoker will sympathize when I say that after your first cup of coffee you have a sobbing, pleading feeling in the lungs as they cry out for their first cigarette of the day, and my desire to write is rather like that. It's rather physical.

INTERVIEWER

The physical activity balances the mental purpose.

AMIS

All under the general heading of a game.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any superstitions about writing?

AMIS

It's amazing—I do sometimes feel tempted by computers until I realize what an amazing pleasure a new Biro is.

INTERVIEWER

A new Biro?

AMIS

A Biro, you know—a ballpoint. The pleasure you get from a new Biro that works. So you have the childish pleasure of paper and pen.

INTERVIEWER

New supplies.

AMIS

New supplies. Superstitions . . . I think someone must have told me at some point that I write a lot better if I'm smoking. I'm sure if I stopped smoking, I would start writing sentences like, It was bitterly cold. Or, It was bakingly hot.

INTERVIEWER

Do you need complete isolation to write or is it more portable than that?

AMIS

I can write in the midst of—not very conveniently—but I can make progress in the midst of the usual family clamor. But it has to be said, perhaps with some regret, that the first thing that distinguishes a writer is that he is most alive when alone, most fully alive when alone. A tolerance for solitude isn't anywhere near the full description of what really goes on. The most interesting things happen to you when you are alone.

INTERVIEWER

You make yourself laugh or cry . . . ?

AMIS

Yes . . . crazy scientist's laughter comes from the study—the laughter scientists use to signify life created out of a grimy test tube.

INTERVIEWER

Out of a Biro.

AMIS

Yes. A good deal of that. When I worked on my first book at home, my bedroom was above my father's study, and I would often hear, not crazy scientist's laughter, but the sort of laughter where the shoulders are shaking, coming from below. And I continue that tradition. I do find that not only the comic scenes make you laugh but anything that works well. Really, laughter is the successful serendipity of the whole business.

INTERVIEWER

How important is the ego, self-confidence?

AMIS

Novelists have two ways of talking about themselves. One in which they do a very good job of pretending to be reasonably modest individuals with fairly realistic opinions of their own powers and not atrociously ungenerous in their assessments of their contemporaries. The second train of thought is that of the inner egomaniac; your immediate contemporaries are just blind worms in a ditch, slithering pointlessly around, getting nowhere. You bestride the whole generation with your formidability. The only thing your contemporaries are doing—even the most eminent of them—is devaluing literary eminence. Basically they're just stinking up the place. You open the book pages and you can't understand why it isn't all about you. Or, indeed, why the whole *paper* isn't all about you. I think without this kind of feeling you couldn't operate at all. The ego has to be roughly this size. I'm not sure it's true, but I was told by a poet friend that even William Golding can come into a literary party at six-thirty and do a good imitation of a self-effacing man of letters, but at nine o'clock the whole room may be brought to silence by his cry of *I'm a genius!* Just give him a bullhorn. They may have their little smiles and demurrals and seem twinkly and manageable characters but really . . . Is there anything you'd like to add? Yes. *I'm a genius!* End of interview.

There's also the flip side, of course—terrific vulnerability, crying jags, the seeking of the

fetal position after a bad review and all that kind of stuff. One of the perks of being a writer –son of a writer is that I don't think I've had much of that myself—a *huge* self-love. Or maybe I see it clearly because writing has never seemed to me to be an unusual way of making a living or spending your time. Whereas, friends of mine, Julian Barnes, the son of schoolteachers, Ian McEwan, the son of a military man, they must be drunk with power when they sit down at their typewriters, and think; I earn a living because what I think has universal interest, or semiuniversal interest, anyway, enough interest to pay the rent. It must be gratifying in extraordinary ways. It would take a lot of getting over, it seems to me. I've never had that intoxicating pleasure, but perhaps I haven't suffered either. It just seemed to me a very natural way of proceeding with my life, and I haven't felt singled out at all. To me, it's all about perceptions, perceptions about life or human nature or the way something looks or the way something sounds. Two or three of them on a page in a notebook, that's what it's really all about. Getting enough of them to enliven every page of a novel, like light. I mean, to call them *felicities* is wrong. You have to have a clumsier formulation, something like droplets of originality, things that are essentially your own, and are you. If I die tomorrow, well, at least my children, who are approaching as we speak, at least they will have a very good idea of what I was like, of what my mind was like, because they will be able to read my books. So maybe there is an immortalizing principle at work even if it's just for your children. Even if they've forgotten you physically, they could never say that they didn't know what their father was like.

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