

Amis on Amis

(Filed: 12/11/2001)

Martin Amis, who is giving a Last Word Lecture tomorrow on his father Kingsley, tells Claudia FitzHerbert how he has come to understand why their attitudes to women, politics and writing were so different

CLAUDIA FITZHERBERT Your father supported the Americans in Vietnam, loathed the Russians, described you as "a lefty of the crappiest sort". As you get older, are you more or less sympathetic to your father's certainties?



Martin Amis: 'I think I am, like Ian McEwan, one of the feminist writers of my generation. And I'm on the point of declaring myself an outright gynocrat'

Martin Amis: Less. I have recently finished a book, a study of Bolshevism couched as a political memoir which is really an investigation into political faith. Kingsley had political faith as a young man, he was a Communist for much longer than he had reason to be - until 1956. Orwell says that in the 1940s when you said "someone else has joined", you didn't need to say what they were joining. Kingsley wrote about his communism in an essay, *Why Lucky Jim Turned Right*, which is a good account of how certain political beliefs are emotionally so desired that they become encysted in the mind, and you can't sort of get at them, no oxygen can get there, and that's what happened to him. But Kingsley, once that political faith collapsed, more or less found another one, on the Right.

In your memoir *Experience*, you described Kingsley as "mildly anti-Semitic". What was his line on Israel?

I think we agreed on Israel - that it earned your sympathy by being at least a partial democracy surrounded by non-democracies who wanted it driven into the sea, and the psychological effects of that on Israel helped account for regrettable moves made by Israel.

And have your views changed?

No. I used to say to him he was the bloody fool always changing his views. I've been very steady really. Kingsley's anti-Semitism: it was never in public, or his writing; I can only really think of a few occasions, with just us in the room. The incidents coincided with little strokes when you could see he was diminished and unhappy in his skin. And then he'd rally . . . But you expect an artist to get rid of all that inherited stuff. You don't want to be carrying that around if you're a 70-year-old novelist and poet.

Your very affectionate portrait of your father emphasised his fragility and neurosis - his tearfulness and inability to be alone - yet his writing is driven by gleeful attachment to commonly held views and feelings. Your work might be thought to issue from a much more edgy personality than his, but your memoirs suggest the reverse. Is this accurate?

Kingsley certainly saw me as more firmly rooted than he was. More independent. He feared madness. He had to get up whatever time he woke, whereas I adore lying in and have to drag myself out of bed at 10 or 10.30. He didn't want to be alone with his thoughts at a vulnerable moment such as the early morning, whereas I seem to be perfectly happy with my thoughts.

Do you see yourself as a non-believer?

As a political non-believer, yes.





Father and son: Kingsley Amis with a Martin Amis at the 1991 Booker Prize Awards

Was your religious scepticism shaken by his death?

Around that time I recategorised myself as an agnostic rather than an atheist, but I thought that was no more than logical. Until our understanding of the universe is more complete it seems to me crabbed to call yourself an atheist. Like coming to a conclusion before the evidence is in. Kingsley's line on God was very productive, but utterly illogical. When [the Russian poet] Yevtushenko asked if he was an atheist, he said "Yes, but it's more that I hate Him".

Are you still arguing with your father in the political memoir?

The impulse was to write about Stalin, but I did also want to work out some of my differences with Kingsley. And certain things closed in while I was writing it. My sister died, at the age of 46, after a long low-level depression and a sudden catastrophic illness. The book has a personal opening, and ends with a letter to Kingsley, with Stalin in the middle. There's a bit about my sister. Stalin says somewhere that the death of one person is a tragedy, and the death of a million is a statistic. I wanted to rebut that. I wanted to absorb my sister's death into the book to show that the tragedy of one death is not diminished when placed among the deaths of 20 million.

Was he a different sort of father to each of you?

Kingsley's relationship with all his children was based on humour and his duty to be cheerful and jolly one another along. But my sister made extraordinary demands on him. She was an alcoholic and he would go to her. I used to be amazed - he'd go off on the train to the general admissions ward of whatever provincial hospital. He never complained. Alcoholics, until they're "cured", are sent here to test you to your limits, and she did test him for a while, and he stood up to it. Then the relationship got easier and she devoted herself just to making him more comfortable.

Would your father have been a happier man if he'd kicked the drink?

No, I think he'd have been a much unhappier man.

Your father's take on women was central to his life and his particular kind of wit. Did you sometimes find yourself sharing it?

I don't think his critique of women is without intelligence, or wit or truth. But it's so counterbalanced by male weaknesses. I don't buy this idea that we're all pretty much the same. I think that women have certain marked strengths and weaknesses and so do men. Kingsley was a romantic who, as he came to see it, made one terrible mistake in leaving my mother, and [suffered for it in his second marriage](#). [His novels] *Jake's Thing* and *Stanley* [and the Women] were expressions of romantic disappointment.

In Experience you describe a conversation with Kingsley when he admits some of the "sex-therapy stuff" in Jake's Thing is drawn from life. He did it to show willing, he explains, and you point out that the novel doesn't exactly show willing. Can you imagine avoiding the truth in a work of art for the sake of an easy life?

I don't know that it ever comes down to a choice of that kind. You write what you have to write. Certainly there were things I left out of *Experience*. It was non-chronological, which meant that I could leave things out. But that wasn't fiction. Fiction takes the temperature more deeply than a memoir.

In your books the women have a kind of eerie dangerous quality - an ethos of violence. Do you think that, in his, your father took a more human view of women, whether as sweethearts or monsters?

Yeah, but that's because we write in different genres. He was much more of a social realist. My world is more cartoonish than his.

And your women are more cartoonish than your men?

Oh I don't think they are. I think I am - like Ian McEwan - one of the feminist writers of my generation. And I'm on the point of declaring myself an outright gynocrat. I just think men have shown that they're no fucking good.

What do you think stopped your father seeing what you were up to as a writer?

Partly a generation thing. And he wasn't a great admirer of prose. After Anthony Powell, he really struggled to think of anyone; the name of Dick Francis would heave into view before you knew it. There were bits of my novels which I know he would have liked very much, but really his whole attitude is expressed in his reaction to [my novel] *Money*: he read the first chapter, and liked it, but as soon as the "Martin Amis" character appeared, he threw the book across the room. Because that came under the heading of bugging the reader about.

Which of you will be more read in 100 years' time?

The evidence isn't all in yet. I've got a lot to write still. But I would hope 50/50. I'd like him to be read.

- Martin Amis is giving a Last Word Lecture about Kingsley Amis tomorrow at the Royal Geographic Society. Telegraph readers can buy tickets at the reduced price of £15, subject to availability. Call 020 7792 9512

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- ▶ 11 March 1996: [\[UK News\] Biographer and son clash over diary on Amis](#)
- ▶ 23 October 1995: [\[Features\] Cantankerous, irascible and rude - we'll miss the old devil, say Sir Kingsley's friends](#)

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