

## Lunch with the FT: Martin Amis

Print

By Lionel Barber

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Martin Amis greets me with an uncertain handshake and a furrowed brow. He is smaller and greyer than I had imagined. Is this slight figure in a waistcoat the imperious author of a dozen novels whose trademark is sledgehammer prose?

For several minutes Amis does not utter a word. He stares at the menu at Odette's, a restaurant in celebrity-packed Primrose Hill. The silence is awkward, perhaps calculated (I arrived seven minutes late). Finally, England's one-time *enfant terrible* speaks: "The menu is very pig-oriented." The voice is deep and gravelled; the accent a languid Oxford drawl. Amis orders his main course (roast quail), a glass of Chardonnay and, reluctantly, a green salad; then he excuses himself to smoke a roll-up outside. I place my order (a veloute of sweet corn, and organic salmon) and another glass of Chardonnay.

When Amis returns, I ask him about his running public feud with Terry Eagleton, the Marxist English literary professor. Eagleton has accused Amis of Islamophobia, castigating him for advocating strip-searches of young British Muslims and raising the threat of repatriation to Pakistan.

"I never wrote it and I never said it," snaps Amis. He does however admit to favouring ethnic profiling at airports after an incident at Carrasco airport in Montevideo, Uruguay. Amis claims a security guard searched his then six-year-old daughter and "f\*\*\*-f\*\*\*\*d" her fluffy toy duck.

The novelist and his family have since returned home after two and a half years in Uruguay, the birthplace of his second wife, Isabel Fonseca. Plainly, the fluffy duck episode still pains him, much more than his spat with Eagleton, an academic colleague at the University of Manchester, where Amis has just begun teaching a popular course in creative writing.

"This is very minor stuff. He is a marooned ideologue who can't get out of bed in the morning without guidance from God and Karl Marx. This makes him very unstaunch in the struggle against Islamism because part of him is a believer."

Amis employs a linguistic defence: "I said quite clearly I am not an Islamophobe. What I am is anti-Islamist. Islamistophobe would be the right word, except that it's not the right word because a phobia tends to be an irrational fear and it's not irrational to fear people who want to kill you. So I'm anti-Islamist."

I joke that the Amis-Eagleton feud is the equivalent of Manchester United versus Manchester City. Amis declines the opening. A tall, blonde Russian waitress arrives with the Chardonnay. I note that my last Lunch with the FT – with an Irish politician in Washington DC – turned into an epic drinking session. For the first time, Amis smiles.

It is time to switch to highbrow. I want to explore the relationship between Amis and his father, Kingsley, the distinguished comic novelist. What was it like trying to write great prose, knowing that every word was likely to be scrutinised?

"I never felt any kind of particular pressure. He wasn't an invigilator. It was nice having a kind of a lazy father, a very soft, sweet father. But lazy, jealous of his time..."

But while Kingsley liked his son's (award-winning) first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, he did not think much of his second, *Dead Babies*. "That was a physical shock, like a blow," he confesses, before switching the subject to his new creative writing course at Manchester.

What has drawn Amis to teaching? He picks at his quail and admits to "a bit of paternal influence"

(Kingsley taught English at Swansea University for 12 years). But the other two attractions are “a vulgar curiosity about youth” and being forced to read great books.

In Amis’s literary pantheon there is no place for younger writers, with the exception of his buddies Zadie Smith and Will Self. “There’s something humiliating about reading younger writers. You’re more likely to be on to something if you’re reading V.S. Pritchett, Saul Bellow ... But any young squirt, you’re not going to read except out of a kind of sociological curiosity.”

For Amis, the authors that really matter are Saul Bellow and Nabokov, followed by, among others, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Jane Austen. The novel he most admires is Nabokov’s *Lolita*. “I must know it as well as I know any book. But it’s always different ... You’ve got to read it every decade of your life because you are a different person.”

Amis’s elder daughter is 10, but he still finds the novel enchanting, particularly the last 100 pages whose pace he previously thought tailed off. At about page 220, when Lolita leaves Humbert, there’s a huge influx of energy, he says.

“Nabokov might have ended the novel around there, instead of having those three years trying to find her and finding her. That marvellous scene where Humbert goes to see her and her beauty’s all gone, she’s pregnant ... I cried quite a lot towards the end. It’s morally very complicated and very unreassuring.”

Morally complicated, unreassuring: that’s Amis in a nutshell. His novels are savagely comic and unsentimental; his literary criticism uncompromising; his choice of vocabulary rich to the point of self-indulgent. (Over lunch, “jocose”, “palpating” and “adulterous assignation” trip off the Amis tongue, leavened by a stream of four-letter words.) The result is usually enlightening, invariably entertaining.

Feeling outgunned on English literature, I mention that I studied German at Oxford, his alma mater. Amis is intrigued and asks me if I have read Kafka in German. When I reply in the affirmative he embarks on his own aphoristic literary tour.

The shorter Kafka works best. The dream logic in *The Castle* is staggering but “nothing odd works long”. The other literary rule: “Tell a dream, lose a reader.” Joyce’s *Ulysses* is a noble, beautiful book. And borrowing from Nabokov, *Finnegans Wake* is a snore in the next room.

According to Amis, the relationship between writer and reader is a love affair. Sometimes the writer falls out of love with the reader. It happened to Henry James, it happened to Joyce. But if it really is a love affair, then why is Amis so keen on impressing the reader (and me?) with his command of the English language?

“I am not a great user of obscure words,” he replies, with a straight face. But he admits to writing prose which is “packed”, “slightly goading” and “sort of in-your-face”. I want to ask Amis about male friendship, but he excuses himself for a second cigarette break, leaving his green salad untouched.

Male friendships are a vital part of Amis’s world. His closest pal is perhaps Christopher Hitchens, the US-based author and polemicist. Their friendship goes back more than 30 years to when both worked at the *New Statesman* magazine.

Amis cites his father’s friendship with Philip Larkin, the poet. Except between man and wife, there are fewer limits to candour and intimacy between male friends than between men and women, where sex has a habit of intruding on friendship. “Sadly I reached the conclusion that Larkin didn’t really reciprocate this love.”

I suggest Larkin was a bit of a cold fish. “Yeah, and an envious bugger,” replies Amis, noting that Larkin was jealous of Kingsley’s ability as a novelist, his metropolitan life, and mainly his women. “Larkin was a sexual sloth who hated spending money on women, though there were many poets who splashed their way through women, like today’s footballers.”

Our conversation turns to “The Hitch” and life in London in the late 1970s, the subject of a novel which Amis is working on. “What we talked about was women and it was all very carnal, in incredible detail about encounters, but serious ... And very clear about feelings that were not to be trifled with, and quite moral, given it was low-bohemia promiscuity, but certainly not heartless. Dirty but not heartless.”

I nod in mock comprehension. My peppermint tea arrives, alongside an espresso for Amis. It is time, again, to move away from boys’ talk to politics. Next year Amis will publish a compilation of his writing on

the 9/11 terrorist attacks, *The Second Plane*. "If September 11 had to happen, I am very pleased it happened in my lifetime because it's just endlessly riveting and couldn't be weirder."

The crisis of Islam, he argues, is a crisis of masculinity. He speaks of "centuries of humiliation", first by the west, latterly by Israel. "How do you get back God's favour? You come to a T-junction: one says, less religion; the other says, more religion and you turn to the right. Absolutely desperate."

The west must speak out. "When we declare we are morally superior to the Taliban, we're declaring ourselves morally superior to the 15th century." Still, it is no mystery why moderate Muslims are reluctant to follow suit. "They (the extremists) have the monopoly of violence, of intimidation." Slowly, the Amis invective gives way to sober reflection. He confesses to feeling guilty about being absent from England during the July 7 bombings. One of his sons had a holiday job which, if extended, would have seen him at Edgware Road tube station at the time of the bomb.

Shortly afterwards, a journalist came to visit Amis in Long Island. He had been on a transatlantic flight where passengers were not allowed to carry a book. Amis exploded in anger at this "hideous symbol of humourless literalism". He spoke about having to make the Muslim community suffer.

Now he regrets those words – a rare retreat for the macho wordsmith. Maybe Amis, 58, is mellowing. Odette's, he reveals, was where he and Kingsley lunched together in his father's final years. He looks at his watch: "How are we doing?"

As an opening chapter, pretty good, I say to myself.

*Lionel Barber is the editor of the Financial Times*

#### **Odette's, Regents Park Road, London NW1**

1 x velouté of sweet corn with pickled mushrooms and salted corn  
1 x pan-fried organic salmon with braised lentils and caramelised baby onions  
1 x roast breast of quail, confit leg with celeriac salad, jelly consommé, summer truffles  
1 x green salad  
2 x glasses Chardonnay Bouscade  
1 x fruit juice  
1 x mineral water  
1 x espresso coffee  
1 x peppermint tea

**Total: £66.94**

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