



## The best according to...

Interviews by **Stephen Moss**

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**Guardian**

### **Andrew Motion**

Poet laureate

Choosing the greatest living writer is a harmless parlour game, but it might prove more than that if it provokes people into reading whoever gets the call. What makes a great writer? Philosophical depth, quality of writing, range, ability to move between registers, and the power to influence other writers and the age in which we live.

Amis is a wonderful writer and incredibly influential. Whatever people feel about his work, they must surely be impressed by its ambition and concentration. But in terms of calling him a "great" writer, let's look again in 20 years. It would be invidious for me to choose one name, but Harold Pinter, VS Naipaul, Doris Lessing, Michael Longley, John Berger and Tom Stoppard would all be in the frame.

### **AS Byatt**

Novelist

Greatness lies in either (or both) saying something that nobody has said before, or saying it in a way that no one has said it. You need to be able to do something with the English language that no one else does. A great writer tells you something that appears to you to be new, but then you realise that you always knew it. Great writing should make you rethink the world, not reflect current reality.

Amis writes wonderful sentences, but he writes too many wonderful sentences one after another. I met a taxi driver the other day who thought that. Kazuo Ishiguro is more important if you look at that generation, and Lawrence Norfolk has the makings of greatness - for him, a book must be a whole universe. But in truth it is far too early really to be making these pronouncements. In the 60s, I would have confidently said William Golding, Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark were the major writers, but now I hear it argued that Penelope Fitzgerald was the greatest writer of her generation, and I am coming round to thinking that was true. Yet we didn't think it at the time. She was very quiet, so we didn't see how important she was.

### **Natasha Walter**

Critic

It is not ridiculous to talk of Amis as a great writer. Not all his books are great books, but he is a fine writer and ambitious in what he does, and he has always liked to experiment. Some of that experimentation has produced duds, but *Money* and his latest book, *House of Meetings*, are real achievements. I don't know how useful it is to put writers in competition by asking who is Britain's greatest writer. When people do it, they usually look for a big male writer - someone such as Amis, Salman Rushdie or Ian McEwan. But why not Doris Lessing? Again, not all her books are great books but some, such as *The Golden Notebook*, are and will always be read. Or Zadie Smith? She is young, but what she has already achieved is extraordinary.

Traditionally, women have often been sidelined in the competitive talk about greatness because their canvas has tended to be smaller. They have written more domestic novels and don't take on the big themes so often. But no roll call of great dead British writers would be complete without Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf and Charlotte Brontë, for starters. Even now, women tend not to talk themselves up in the way some male writers do. Smith and Sarah Waters, for instance - two superb contemporary writers - always run themselves down in interviews. Men tend to be much more confident about what they achieve. However many bad reviews Rushdie gets, you feel he would never lose the sense of his own greatness.

Of course, great writing can communicate moral truths, and that is still true for writers working today. Smith's *On*

Beauty expresses what I feel are real moral truths about the way we perceive beauty and what kind of love lasts. But writers are not seers. They are not going to get everything morally right because they can make superb fiction. Look at Amis - at his under-researched, flimsy, contentious polemics, which don't have anything like the power of his imagined universes. Great writers can't sort everything out for you, but if they can illuminate the world, even a small patch of it, even temporarily, they have done a precious thing. That is what we should hold on to.

### **Al Alvarez**

Critic

Greatness has to do with range - and with character. You have to feel a writer is talking with some kind of authority about how to live your life. There has to be what Keats called "negative capability", by which he meant an ability to move into the heads of all his characters so that you don't feel he is telling it just from one point of view. There has to be a dispassionate understanding of how the world works, and this is very rare.

Amis is a classy writer. He is very much a stylist, interested in using the language stylishly and sharply. But does he have this range? I don't know. Great is a very big word. I don't know that I would apply it to any living British writers. One of the undoubtedly great writers of the past 50 years is the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert. He had that kind of range and authority. Perhaps it is something that was more possible to achieve living under repression in the eastern bloc.

There has to be some kind of moral force in great writing - a non-egotistical desire to get it right - and an inward quality that shows in the rhythm of the prose. You feel that with JM Coetzee and Philip Roth.

### **John Crace**

Book digester

Amis was very good in the 80s, but he has been writing the same book ever since. He has got stuck, and has more or less admitted that. When he said that he was going back to university, as a professor at Manchester, to learn from his students, that was the first bit of self-awareness we have seen from him for a while. So I would not plump for Amis, or any of your McEwans or Ishiguros. They are quite patchy. I would be tempted to say John le Carré, but he has gone off too. If you could edit out some of the rubbish, I would still put Le Carré up there. JG Ballard has written some good books and fewer shit ones than some other people. And Jonathan Coe has written two of the books I have really loved in the past 20 years - *What A Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep*.

### **Michael Billington**

Theatre critic

One name comes to mind immediately - Harold Pinter. But playwrights are often overlooked because plays do not have to be literary to be good. Indeed, if they are over-literary, they will often fail.

Determining the "greatest living author" must have something to do with age, experience and longevity, and the ability to work in mixed forms with the same precision. Michael Frayn is a name I would lob in. He has produced novels, plays and philosophical essays, and got better with the years. Amis must be there or thereabouts. Julian Barnes writes rich, elegant prose.

What about non-fiction? Could the greatest living author be a biographer - someone like Peter Ackroyd or Michael Holroyd? Or the journalist and travel writer Colin Thubron? But in the end I come back to the theatre. Tom Stoppard is hard to gauge, because his plays have such surface dazzle that it doesn't always translate unless you have a genius actor. But his best work - *Arcadia* and *The Real Thing* - will survive. Alan Ayckbourn is underestimated because he writes comedies, but half a dozen of his plays will survive. And then there is Pinter. His 60s plays now come up constantly. There are plays that in the instant look very good, yet do not revive well. But his work unquestionably stands the test of time, and it is not fantastic or absurd to compare him not just with Beckett but with Ibsen and Chekhov. Plays for all time.

### **Philip Hensher**

Novelist and critic

A great writer would be the one who used the English language for the most telling purposes - not just a manipulator of style or a brilliant polemicist, but someone who has something to say and the means of saying it. In my view, there is no one who comes near VS Naipaul. There are a lot of wonderful writers in Britain, but he has reached such a pitch of authority that even if you disagree with what he is saying, you have to acknowledge his

intellect and astonishing mastery of style.

### **Colin Dexter**

Novelist and creator of Inspector Morse

The 20th century was singularly short of great writers. Rudyard Kipling and Thomas Hardy are great writers; Joseph Conrad, too. But it is difficult for me to name any contemporary writers I consider great. Amis is not even in the top 50 of great writers. He writes awfully well, but so do a lot of people.

Memorability is the touchstone of greatness for me, and great books are friends. I want to read them and re-read them; I want to take them with me. AE Housman, Hardy and Philip Larkin - three lugubrious old souls - are my greatest friends. Housman especially has meant more to me than anybody else, more even than Homer.

The 1950s was rich in poetry with WH Auden, Larkin, Ted Hughes and John Betjeman; Beryl Bainbridge writes beautifully; and this has been a rich period in drama with Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard. But I am not sure I would call even those two worthy gentlemen G-R-E-A-T.

### **Tim Godfray**

Chief executive, Booksellers Association

I would choose JK Rowling as Britain's greatest living author. There are not many people who have not heard of her, and she has encouraged so many children to read. Popularity has to be a factor. Somebody who brings books to so many people must surely be a contender. I believe Harry Potter will still be read in 50 years.

### **Nicholas Lezard**

Critic

Amis is great, whether you like it or not, though he does get up people's noses. Harold Pinter and Ian McEwan are the main competition. I have no problem with labelling contemporaries great - as critics we should have the confidence to do it. If I had been around at the same time as James Joyce, I would like to believe I would have seen his greatness. Amis isn't Joyce; his work is not flawless. But his prose has bravado, which is why it produces such intense reactions.

### **JG Ballard**

Novelist

This is one of those questions that makes one suspect we are in the trough of the literary wave. It is not a great time for writing in the English language. The last literary classic was *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, and that was published in the early 60s. That is the only novel in English that I can imagine surviving until the middle of this century.

It is mysterious why that is. We have lived through some incredibly stirring times, but where are the great writers? When I came to Britain in 1946, George Orwell was about to publish *1984*, and Graham Greene, Aldous Huxley and Evelyn Waugh were all producing important work. We have talented writers such as Amis and Will Self, but I don't see anyone of the stature of these postwar writers.

We no longer live in a literary culture and have not for some while. The American novel is a huge self-indulgent bore, playwrights are flattered and self-indulged, and most of the poets have never produced a memorable line. The last book to influence the English-speaking world in a serious way was *1984*. No book since then has changed the world. Literary culture was based on certain notions about social reality. But we are not interested in that any more - everything is up for grabs. The most important thing now is a celebrity chav called Jade Goody.

### **Maya Jaggi**

Critic

I have a problem with the idea that there is one "greatest living British author". It's a pompous as well as a contentious idea. I love the work of James Kelman, but he is only one of my great writers, offering one perspective among many. Also, when we say "greatest writer", we tend to mean from that country. It is a useful tagline, a tease. So Orhan Pamuk is always described as "Turkey's greatest writer", but how many other Turkish writers do we know? Writers sit very uneasily under national rubrics. They don't like it and why should they? They're not trying to represent a country.

### **Joel Rickett**

**Editor of the Bookseller**

Greatness is difficult to quantify. We have just interviewed Jeffrey Archer, and he compares himself to Jane Austen. Amis has been inconsistent in recent years, but do you take people who have just produced a stunning novel or look at the totality of their careers? My top five would be Ian McEwan, David Mitchell, Kazuo Ishiguro, Seamus Heaney [discounted because, though born in Northern Ireland, he insists his "passport's green"] and Philip Pullman. But later generations might find other writers from our age - people who were uncomfortable on the media stage, never popped up on the Today programme, didn't want to become public figures. In our loud, frenetic, media-driven culture, we sometimes confuse noisiness with greatness.

**Amanda Ross**

Creator of the Richard & Judy book club, known as 'the most powerful woman in publishing'

I can't say whether Amis is a great writer because I have never read one of his books. I don't think his publisher has ever submitted one. The name on the cover doesn't matter much to us. Just because a writer has written one good novel does not mean that every book is going to be gold. We treat every book on its merits, and that is how we come up with surprises. A lot of the pleasure I get from doing this job comes from first-time novelists.

We don't like to label anything "literary". In fact, I really hate that word. For our readers, if we said a book was literary, it might put them off. To the public, literary means inaccessible, or full of classical references, or with long passages in French. So we just say they are fantastic books. I like to think that most of the books we choose on the show are great pieces of writing. Julian Barnes and William Boyd are the most famous writers we have featured, and one I really admire is David Mitchell. He's such a strong self-critic that I don't think he could write a bad novel.

**Ian McMillan**

Poet and presenter of Radio 3's The Verb

What constitutes a great writer is longevity. Being a writer is not like being a rugby player. You have to keep at it - perhaps for up to 50 years. It is not enough to write one great novel or a fantastic poem. It is the body of work over time that counts. Great writers have a capacity to be startling, and to continually reinvent themselves. I've just been reading John Cheever, a great writer who showed no diminution over a long career.

A measure of greatness is will we still be talking about him in 30 years? With greatness, you have to take the long view. WH Auden has been dead for 30 years, and here we are celebrating his life and work. Of living writers, I consider [the Scottish poet] Edwin Morgan a great writer. And there are many other younger poets who are writing well - Don Paterson, Sean O'Brien, Simon Armitage.

I don't accept that the culture is becoming less literary. It is changing. Lyrics are starting to mean more in music; and rap, performance poetry and street poetry are all becoming more influential. The spoken tradition is as important as the written culture. I am attracted to the idea of a broad church in literature - one that can include Goldie Lookin Chain as well as Auden.

**Hazel Broadfoot**

Bookseller

Amis is very gender specific. He would not get many women's votes as greatest British writer. Some biographers must be contenders - Jenny Uglow and Claire Tomalin, for instance - and I have never seen a bad review for the historian Antony Beevor.

But can't we stake a claim for Vikram Seth? He lives here, after all. A Suitable Boy has to be one of the best novels written in English in the 20th century, and his range is extraordinary - poetry, biography, memoir. He would be my choice.

**Louise Doughty**

Novelist and critic

The title of "Britain's greatest living author" is a deeply silly moniker to give to anyone, and probably the kiss of death. Amis was lionised in the 80s, but that made it inevitable that people would turn on him - remember all that absurd stuff about his teeth. Getting the crown should strike fear into the heart of any author.

I prefer to think about great books rather than great writers. Great authors can sometimes write awful novels. Ian McEwan has written some great books - Enduring Love, The Child in Time, Atonement - but Amsterdam, the

novel he won the Booker for, was pants. The need to identify "great writers" is a boy thing. For years people said the only great novelists we had were McEwan, Julian Barnes, Amis and Salman Rushdie, but what about Helen Dunmore and Hilary Mantel? When people say they like women writers, there is no attempt to anoint them.

In the end it is not for us to identify the great writers. We don't have any sense of perspective. Kafka published virtually nothing in his lifetime, while Pearl S Buck won the Nobel prize for literature. It's a great mistake for any author to get obsessed with whether they are a great writer. Just concentrate on the writing. Sometimes when I get emails from writers, I have a sense they think they are writing them with posterity looking over their shoulder, when the sad reality for most of us is that we are destined to sink into obscurity.

**What do you think?** Who is the greatest living British writer? Vote and blog at [guardian.co.uk/books](http://guardian.co.uk/books)

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