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Martin Amis

Author of* Yellow Dog *talks with Robert Birnbaum

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If there were a writer of whom it could be said, "No introduction is necessary," Martin Amis would be the one. His publisher seems to think so as the dust-jacket biography on *Yellow Dog*, his recent, latest novel reads, "Martin Amis's most recent book was *Koba the Dread*. He lives in London." Martin Amis, is, of course, the son of writer Kingsley Amis and attended Oxford University, where after graduation he wrote for the *New Statesman*. During his seven-year tenure at that publication, he became its literary editor. It was at the *New Statesman* that his long friendship with fellow Oxonian Christopher Hitchens was firmed up. Amis' works of fiction beginning with *The Rachel Papers* in 1973 are *Dead Babies, Success, Other People, Money, Einstein's Monsters, London Fields, Time's Arrow, The Information, Night Train* and *Heavy Water*. His non-fiction includes *Invasions of the Space Invaders, The Moronic Inferno, Visiting Mrs. Nabokov, Experience, The War against Cliché* and *Koba the Dread*.

Yellow Dog follows a brutal attack on actor-writer Xan Meo and its aftermath, which presents his wife, Russia, and daughters with a traumatized and troublesome father and husband. Add tabloid hack writer Clint Smoker to a cast of characters that includes Henry IX, the King of England and his Chinese mistress, various hit men and pornographers, Xan's first wife Pearl, a corpse knocking around in the hold of a jet liner—and well, you get a picture of a novel of some narrative complexity. It is with this odd crew that Amis unleashes his withering humor and derisive critique of 21st century English society. In any case, as he offers below, Amis believes *Yellow Dog* to be one of his two or three best works.

This is my fourth conversation with Martin Amis beginning with the publication of *Time's Arrow*, later with *The Information* and *Experience*. I expect Part Five will resume sometime in 2006.

Robert Birnbaum: I heard you speaking a few weeks ago on a radio program in honor of the 50th anniversary of Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* with James Wood — I can't remember if there was someone else also?

Martin Amis: No, it was just us.

RB: You said something to effect that Saul Bellow was the greatest author ever?

MA: The greatest American author ever, in my view.

RB: What does that mean to say that someone is the greatest author of any category?

MA: I have written a piece about it in this month's *Atlantic* [Dec. 2003, unavailable online at the request of the author], and I do go into the matter that value judgment cannot be demonstrated or proven. But I still feel you can make an educated guess about literary futures. It all comes down, I think, to weight of voice. His sentences seem to weigh more than anyone else's. He is like a force of nature. There is a nice part in a short story about when there is a storm in Chicago. And the main character and his father have this terrible mission to go and bum some money off a couple of do-gooders and they have a terrible journey through the storm. He says, "When we emerged from the subway the storm was still having it all its own way in the street." I always thought that one force of nature was recognizing another. He breaks all the rules—

RB: What rules?

MA: Well, the rules about universality in fiction. One of the supposed limitations of autobiographical fiction is that unless the characters are works of the imagination, creations of the imagination, they will lose universality. They will be locked into the particular. Now the people in Bellow's fiction are real people, yet the intensity of the gaze that he bathes them in, somehow through the particular, opens up into the universal. I don't know of another writer who does it that way round… I think it is fair to say that many a novelist will use someone they know as model, and perhaps this is more the Philip Roth method. You take someone's appearance and then give them someone else's character and you can put a fictional character together that way and I have done it myself, many a time. But with Bellow it's a specificity that excludes all else. And he is taking a reading of people he has met and encountered of such depth that any addition, any fabrication would skew it. He is staring absolutely unflinchingly at entities that he has encountered.

RB: You have written recently—within the context of the ruckus that erupts around the publication of your books—something like, posterity was what writers were really creating for. Did I get that right?

MA: Yeah, the phrase was "that prizes as sales and sashes and rosettes…

RB: [laughs]

MA: "…are just show biz. And the real action starts with the obituaries." It's a symmetrical thing too. Because I think it keeps you honest. You are not going to be around for that, by definition.

RB: Well, if you have friends at the *New York Times* you already know what your obituary is going to say.

MA: [both laugh] The obituary is only the beginning. My father always used to say he didn't care about posterity, "It'll be of no fucking use to me because I won't be here." But I think he did [care], really.

RB: And you do.

MA: Yes. I think all writing answers the very human desire—not for immortality but for some extension of your mortal span. I think that is a powerful motive for having children too. That the story doesn't end with your death, somehow. That story line like the family line continues. And it's an intoxicating thought that your words and your way of seeing things will go on after your death.

I think all writing answers the very human desire—not for immortality but for some extension of your mortal span.

RB: It does create a cottage industry of people sitting around writing and speaking at length about who, in fact, will be recognized or consider giants many years hence.

MA: Yeah, but you can't fix it, though. No amount of politicking and ass kissing is going to get you that.

RB: The bickering and politicking or honest conversation does go on in real time and occupies a fair amount of space. Whatever its value, entertainment or education, it can be distracting. At any rate, do we care about readers?

MA: Yes.

RB: Who don't give a shit about posterity in the same way your father characterized it.

MA: Well no, but the readers of the future will be determining this.

RB: And living readers?

MA: Oh yes, passionately. But it's their chance to make the judgment. No longer will it be the pundits, the opinion formers. They will sink into the shadows. The eternal, universal reader will decide.

RB: It's a noble thought that writing will not be mediated and that

cultural arbiters, though they must a make a living…

MA: It's nice to do without them.

RB: Still I wonder—setting aside the issue of an elite —do smart, serious readers care about posterity, about the future ranking of current works they are reading? Ought they to care?

MA: Um, I don't think probably it matters. It's the continuation of this notion the reader—the good reader, the fit reader. They'll have some sense of it. But it's of no immediate concern to them. Except there is a word of mouth. My sons ask me who to read and I tell them. So we see, again, the story line continues.

RB: You, of course, enjoy traveling around the country under these conditions. You do go around talking to people who are readers and do go to bookstores and such. And you do it regularly.

MA: That's right. Yeah I have done it. I think it this my last time.

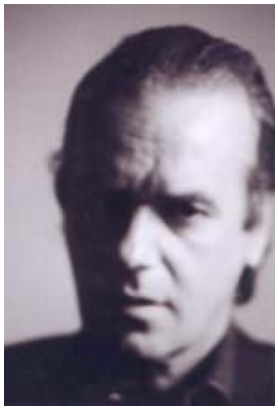
RB: [laughs]

MA: This is the last.

RB: Shall I alert the media?

MA: [both laugh] Um, that's right. Meet the author is for me, meet the reader. It's fortifying to gaze into the eyes of people who often say they have many hours of pleasure under your auspices. And it makes up for all the other shit you have to—

RB: I suppose many friendships can be termed unlikely friendships. How is that you become friendly with an older Jewish guy from Chicago?



MA: Because I went to interview him. And wrote a piece that was so friendly that his agent at that time read it out to him on the phone, and when she was done, he said—and it was a long piece—"Read it again." So even the most lauded writers, Nobel Prize winners feel, not under appreciated but perhaps not always appreciated in the right way. Anyway, then we did a TV program together when he was in London.

RB: Did you do any songs?

MA: We have him on video tape singing "I'm a Gigolo." [both laugh]

RB: I think it might be "Just a Gigolo."

MA: And then when I was in town I would see him and then it's become an absolutely regular thing, going to see him in Vermont in the summer. As I say in the original piece that when you interview an author you admire, in one sense you are hoping for hot news. In other words, you would like him to have nervous breakdown or a heart attack while you are talking to them so that you've got your scoop. But in the other sense, you are hoping for the birth of a flattering friendship. So it's proved—so I saw him last night, and I am going to see him tonight.

RB: How is it that you didn't do the introduction to the 50th anniversary Viking edition of *Augie March*. Or the Library of America edition of the three novels which includes *Augie March*? You passed it on to [Christopher] Hitchens?

MA: I have already done the Everyman [edition] of *The Adventures of Augie March*. It's in the *War Against Cliché*—I've written a long piece about *Augie March* and I have written a lot about Saul, eight or ten pieces. The one I wanted to do but couldn't because I was finishing my novel was the Introduction to the *Collected Stories* [intro by James Wood], which I think is his greatest book—the accumulation of brilliance there is greater than any one novel.

RB: Is it possible that in the twentieth century many writers' best work is in their short stories?

MA: I don't think you can say that because not all novelists write short stories. Although a pretty fair number—has Philip Roth since *Good Bye Columbus*—written a short story? I don't think so. To me the short story is a totally natural adjunct to the fiction. You are going to get little impulses that you think, "No, this isn't a novel but certainly a short story." You need it so that certain ideas just don't die and then can be developed without entraining an enormous wedge of words. Saul Bellow himself wrote that as he gets older everything he reads—he agrees with Checkov—everything he reads strikes him as not short enough.

RB: [laughs]

MA: I was doing a class with him last year on Conrad's *The Shadow Line*, one of Conrad's novellas, and we were saying, "What was this novel about?" And someone said rhetorically, (I mean you can't say what's a novel about) "What's *Augie March* about?" And Saul replied, "It's about two hundred pages too long." And when he looks back at *Augie March*, it's not that it's without interest, these long riffs, it's just that they're not as artistically controlled as he'd like.

RB: Suggesting that he learned something as he went forward?

MA: Except that *Augie March* is *Augie March*, and a big novel has a way of pushing aside these little fastidious objections. I am just

saying this is something of considerable size and therefore the longer book, the less you actually worry about artistic symmetries and so on. You just think, "Never mind about form, we are going to go with the voice." And it's a tremendous liberation.

RB: There is apparently a conventional writerly wisdom that novels are more forgiving, big sloppy puppy dogs and short stories are taut little show terriers?

MA: Well, exactly. Muriel Spark said, "Every novel is a failed short story. And every short story is a failed poem." But I think that makes a fetish of brevity. Things just—it's one of the things that Bellow embodies. You obey your instinct—easily or not at all. Let it flow.

RB: Is that taught in writing programs, do you think?

MA: Not enough. But again it is an enormous risk to go with the voice. I did it in *Money*, and when I read it through before taking it in, I was completely horrified. I had great fun writing it over three years, but when I reread it, I couldn't put my finger on it but I thought I had gone insane.

RB: That would be a sign of insanity—not being able to put your finger on it.

MA: Yeah. I just was tremendously uneasy, sick to my stomach with anxiety, reading it through. What caused that feeling was that I had taken an enormous risk and put all the eggs in one basket. Not eked out with suspense and plot and all the rest of it—high risk. So, I'd called these novels talent novels, where the talent just takes over. And Bellow himself says when he was writing *Augie March* it came in a thunderstorm and all he was doing was bringing in the buckets.

RB: You mentioned recommending books to your sons. What catches your attention and what are you reading these days?

MA: History—I read Saul all the time, and I am always dipping into *Ulysses* and other staples. But history is my passion.

RB: History of what?

MA: It has to be said, history of disaster and violence and horror.

RB: Is that where *Koba* came from?

MA: Yes. My wife sometimes says to me, "You are reading another book on Stalin? Haven't you done Stalin?" I am reading Gita Sereny *Into That Darkness* [From *Mercy Killing to Mass Murder*] and she said, "Are you going to stop this? Haven't you had enough?" and the answer is, no, and the reason is that I don't understand it. I don't understand merciless brutality.

RB: I happened to hear an interview that NPR's Terry Gross did with Philip Roth and she questioned him about a part in *The Human Stain* where the protagonist opines that life makes no sense at all. Gross wants to know, is that the character or Roth. He says, "Of course that's what I think, though I try to act and live my life otherwise." So, you think life makes sense otherwise but for your not being able to get a handle on disaster, evil and man's inhumanity to man?

MA: I think life would make pretty good sense if violence was excised from it. Violence is the great human difficulty. It's like a category mistake—

RB: You say that in *Yellow Dog*.

MA: Yeah—that we blundered into. The lesson is that actually things achieved by violence don't last. They all have to be done again. We think that violence solves things. And it never has. I mean retaliatory violence is sometimes necessary and so on. And revolutions have their own beautiful rationale. If you are oppressed there is a sword up there in the sky that you must reach for. And so on. But this tit-for-tat business that we have been doing for millennia doesn't get us an inch further. We can't seem to take that in. So a great deal about life makes perfect sense. The energy of violence commits us to a road where nothing does make sense.

I think life would make pretty good sense if violence was excised from it. Violence is the great human difficulty.

RB: And what do you recommend to your sons to read?

MA: My elder boy used to be completely dismissive of any view that didn't proclaim that George Orwell was the greatest writer of the twentieth century. He was going through his common-sensical, middle-teen years. But now he reads the Iliad and he looks back and says, "Compared to Orwell this is just magnificent." But I am steering them to my particular line, you know, Nabokov, Bellow, Joyce. And we'll see what happens.

MA: Do you pay attention to contemporary literature?

MA: Well—I think I offend people by saying this, but there is a great reluctance to read your youngers. I read some. It's usually because I am friends with a younger writer.

RB: Will Self.

MA: Yeah, Will Self. I am fascinated by what he writes. But the only way that I can justify this is as a general rule is that when you read your elders, those of a generation or two ahead of you. There is a pretty good chance that Judge Time will have had the opportunity

to do some grading for you. If you read your youngers, it's pot luck isn't? Who knows?

RB: What is the end, the teleological concern? What are you going for? What's the point of your reading?

MA: I think Dryden gave it, "What is the point of literature? It's to give instruction and delight." Certain writers will tip more toward instruction, others tip more towards delight, but it's a combination of the two. I want to be getting as much out of it as I can. I think this is very much against the spirit of the time. Certainly in England, where they don't want to be instructed or indeed, delighted much. They want a fifty-fifty, across the table kind of "you're not telling me anything I don't know, and I could tell you things."

RB: Would that be exemplified by a general snideness and cynicism in literal and cultural dialogue?

MA: I think it's much exaggerated this notion that writers are so much at each other's throats. I don't think they are.

RB: I am thinking more about the literary press?

MA: Yeah, sure.

RB: Here in the States the issue of literary snarkery has had some attention and, of course, you seem to be a regular target. The publication of one of your books seems to repeatedly put you and everything about you under the microscope.

MA: Yeah, ever since *The Information*, really. When I got too much press for a literary guy. Salman Rushdie is a far more extreme example, but once you do start getting that kind of attention, then you get rejected by the so-called literary stratum. We are only talking about a stratum of reviewers, but they are not reading for the same reason that we read. They are insulted by any idea that any writer has something to tell them, and their anti-elitist feeling is so profound, that my stuff reads like a drawl of Oxonian self-congratulation. They are saying, "Come on, come down off your bloody mountain." You know, that sort of feeling. My stuff reminds them how thick and numb and smug they are.

RB: [laughs]

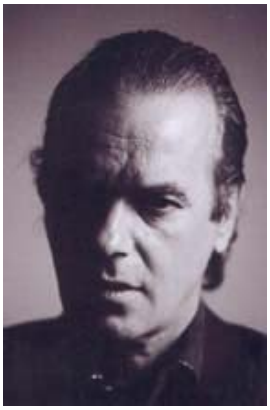
MA: And they hate it. When I read I like to think how thick and smug and numb I am. I want that pierced, you know. For them, it's fighting terms.

RB: People talk about career arc or trajectory. It seem to me not an apt or at least it's a misleading term when applied to writers.

MA: Well, life has an arc. Tragedy has an arc. It's like the mouth on a tragic mask. It starts at a certain point and you go up and then

you go down again. And comedy is the other way around. Where you start at a certain point and you go down into complication and trouble and then you come back up again. And certain things you get better at and certain things you get weaker at and just the energy level and brainpower certainly decline. I don't think there are many writers who like Saul Bellow write terrific novels in their eighties. I don't think there are any. This will change as—

RB: That's arguable. That is to say, that I have heard grand pronouncements and dismissals of Bellow, such as "he hasn't written a good book since the Fifties."



MA: Nonsense. Nonsense—yeah, because they are dying for you to fail. I think medical science will up this into the eighties more commonly. But it is a painful truth.

RB: Alan Lightman who—

MA: The *Einstein's Dreams* man, yeah.

RB: —started out as a scientist and has become a novelist having written five novels. When I talked with him recently, he brought up the notion of being served by your youth as a scientist. And that a loss of a kind of mental agility as one aged was detrimental to being a productive scientist. But as a writer and artist, he felt that you got better as you got older.

MA: It's certainly true of painting and largely because that's the shape of it. It takes twenty years to learn how to paint. Whereas you just start writing with a pad and a pencil and you are away. Philosophers are finished by the time they are twenty-five, you know. It's all over for them. Technically, your brain does start to rot in your thirties, and for that real sharpness, avant-garde sharpness, you do need a brain that is still, growing, perhaps. So one has to bow to *Anno Domini*, but just not yet.

RB: In addition to what you just said, how do you feel about it? Do people still talk about you as an 'enfant terrible'?

MA: Yeah, it's embarrassing. The bad boy of English letters…it's about time…

RB: The Mick Jagger of English Literature, is that still bandied about?

MA: Yeah, why don't they call him the Martin Amis of the rock world?

RB: Exactly. Why don't they call you the Eminem of Brit Lit?

MA: Yeah, why don't they at least call me the bad man?

RB: [laughs]

MA: They think that subliminally I was born in 1922, when my father was born. I nevertheless wrote *Lucky Jim* when I was seven and I am now in my eighties and yet I am only 54. So I am going to be around for another twenty years at least. And it's unbearable in some subconscious way. I do occupy an odd place because of my father. It was never a trouble to me when I was starting out as people assumed it must have been. I think I am paying for it now.

RB: How much do you think about growing older?

MA: Oh, every moment.

RB: [laughs] No, not every moment?

MA: To the exclusion of all else. But no, one thing it isn't, is boring. It's fascinating and tragic and the great limitation of art and writing is that it doesn't prepare you for these things. You'd think it would, but with something like this, you can only experience it fresh. And that's encouraging in a way. You'll have a lot to say about it that no one else has said. It's whole new subject coming in.

RB: So let's talk about Yellow Dog, your novel for which you are here, ostensibly to talk about. You are a student of things American, did you ever concern yourself that the phrase "yellow dog" in the US has a political connotation.

MA: It's a Southern Democrat.

RB: Right.

MA: No. I think it has other applications too.

RB: I've told many people that though you have met my dog Rosie, it was not connected to her.

MA: [laughs politely]

RB: What to say about it? There have been many reviews, much review attention. Are you happy with it?

MA: With what? The reviews?

RB: No, the book.

MA: Yeah. I think it is among my best two or three books.

RB: Wow.

Certain writers will tip more toward instruction, others tip more towards delight, but it's a combination of the two. I want to be getting as much out of it as I can. I think this is very much against the spirit of the time.

MA: I mean, I am a critic as well as a novelist and that's just my

feeling. You can be wrong about your own stuff.

RB: I wasn't challenging you. Someone recently was asked in *New York Magazine* what he would do to advise you in light of the attention that you garner. Was it Hitchens who said that you should publish under another name [laughs]?

MA: Yeah, Martin Davis.

RB: Why hasn't Hitchens been asked to review the book? He did speak well of it in that same *New York* magazine tidbit.

MA: Well, he should't. Too close friends—

RB: That never happens? Well, perhaps not in honorable venues.

MA: He reviewed *Koba* a lot. He wrote three pieces about that. No, I wouldn't review a book by him. You don't expect that. I think it is quite right to be careful and New York Timesish about that.

RB: What do you mean New York Timesish?

MA: Well, they have all sorts of rules about back scratching.

RB: If they do, they don't seem to apply to back (and front) stabbing. And I am not sure that there isn't some logrolling allowed, also. recently there was an unseemly conflict of interest around a Midge Dechter book on Donald Rumsfield.

MA: I thought they were quite vigilant or meant to be. They have rules. They can only be a third cousin after six months. That sort of thing. l think they have a code of conduct.

RB: I suppose that they do, but they don't go out of their way to prevent axe-grinding reviews.

MA: I think every editor has a weakness every now and then. I think that Charles McGrath is a principled man. More generally, I started not reading my reviews and another method is to get them sorted out by your wife or your agent. So you only read the good ones. But if you are not going to read the bad ones you shouldn’t read the good ones, either. It's actually a relief.

RB: Is that based on the notion that you might learn something from reviews and that no longer pertains in your case?

MA: I think maybe once in your life you'll learn a little thing from a review. You could write the bad review. You know what weaknesses there are. And it at no point overlaps with what is said about you. What you are getting is either stuff that's that going to make you angry or stuff that's going to make you smug. So [you] abjure it.

RB: I have become aware that English language books may have two or three editors (in the case of Janette Turner Hospital, she had

an Australian, an American and an English editor). I bring it up for a couple of reasons. I never see references to how much of your writing is translated. Is much of it?

MA: In a good fifteen languages.

RB: I wonder how that goes because I have some difficulty reading you because you certainly use some very specifically British colloquialisms and perhaps neologisms.

MA: Sure and also I don't know a foreign language, so I don't know what my translations are like. But I ask people who have French and Spanish…

RB: What does 'wanker' translate into, in French and Spanish?

MA: I wonder. [both laugh] 'Asshole' is what you would say in America.

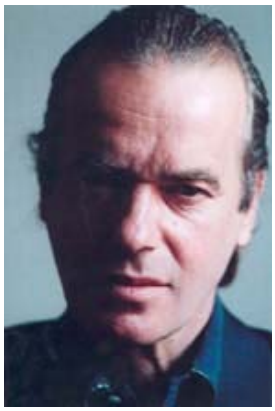
RB: No, I would translate it as 'jerk-off' [a form of asshole].

MA: Jerk-off artist is as close as you can get. But it doesn't get the derision of 'wanker'. I think for other reasons I must be difficult to translate.

RB: What are those reasons?

MA: The writing isn't clear as a mountain creek, is it? It's not that kind of writing. Some writers translate—Kafka translates beautifully, Thomas Mann is hopeless in translation. People who have German say he is bliss to read in German and yet he is very heavy in English. Kafka is transparent. Some writers are transparent, others are not. What's a translation of *Finnegan's Wake* like? Probably in French it is easier to read than in English. I am translated, but I shudder to think what enormities are perpetrated by the translators.

RB: Is there a [foreign] language that you are most popular?



MA: *Experience* was very popular in France. But I'd say Spain —I think it's to do with [my] cruel humor. It's a cruel country, Spain. You wouldn't know it now. I can remember watching donkeys being flogged on the side of the road. *Don Quixote*—Nabokov can hardly bring himself to read it, it's a such a crude and cruel, old book. It's for the man who liked to watch some poor wretch in the stocks having people throwing glass bottles at his face. People who like kicking a dog's bladder around. I think it is a cruel culture.

RB: It's a cruel culture, and yet one looks at how *Yellow Dog*

presents the British culture of "60 million superstars," that strikes me as a cruel culture.

MA: Yes it is. In a different way. A bitter culture. Coming down off empire. More and more I think countries are just like people and not very rational people. And it's all about face and humiliation and to going to war for face. And you remember your lost greatness. You mourn that and you feel traduced and humiliated. Just like a prima donna.

RB: How much time do you spend in England?

MA: I live in England.

RB: I know, but how much time do you spend there?

MA: We spend—what's changing in our lives is that we are spending more time in Uruguay. My wife is half-Uruguayan.

RB: Are you familiar with the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano?

MA: No. [Does he live] In Montevideo?

RB: I think so. A wonderful writer. Loves what most of the world calls football, if that means anything to you.

MA: Oh yes and I love football too.

RB: Is Montevideo nice?

MA: It's sort of second world. Not Mercedes and BMWs— Ciats and Scottos.

RB: Galeano was mentioned in piece that Lawrence Wechsler wrote in the *New Yorker* [later becoming the book, *A Miracle, A Universe*] and he was asked why he lived in Montevideo since he is half-Argentine. Galeano, who is a leftist in the Latin American political spectrum, said, "If I killed in Montevideo people would know it was my enemies, but if I was killed in Buenos Aires people wouldn't know if it was my friends or my enemies."

MA: It's a civil society now with strong traditions, and I have never seen any unpleasantness in the six or seven months that I have spent down there. But I did talk to an Uruguayan novelist and she said Uruguay can't support any writers because the population is small and shrinking. It's the size of England and Scotland and has a population of three million and falling. There is nothing there and all the beef industry is gone and it’s got some wine and that's about it.

RB: No tourism?

MA: The Argies come and have their holidays there, on the cheap. But it suits us and it feels—I don't know, your heart lifts when you go there.

RB: And when you touch down at Heathrow?

MA: Horror, yeah.

RB: [laughs]

MA; Coming in through the mist from the train. And you realize that most of the time that you are in London that you are in a state of mild depression. When you go there, you realize that. [pause] Low level, daily depression.

RB: I am running through *Yellow Dog*'s characters and —

MA: There's the king.

RB: Yes, I remember the characters —he is blissfully disconnected from almost everything.

MA: Yeah.

RB: I am trying to recall if there are any characters that showed any vitality or signs of life or joie de vivre— anything? Maybe Pearl, the malicious ex-wife…

MA: Yeah she has a bit. Xan and Russia too, they have a sound and even enviable marriage. But it gets threatened by a very extreme situation—when she is told to regard her husband and marriage as a completely new relationship. What a horrifying thought that is.

RB: Nostalgia would not be the right word, but were reminiscences of the birth of your children at play as you completed *Yellow Dog*?

MA: Yeah, a lot of the book and certainly a lot of Xan Meo's turmoil is frustrated feelings about protection. And I started this book four or five years ago, put it aside to write the two memoirs, and then resumed on September 12, 2001. Not very good timing. Once the shock had worn off and so on, I do think that the agony of this is that your feelings, your protective feelings are made even more moot and contingent. You never could protect your children, but it's another great injection of arbitrariness and randomness and madness and nihilism. And that was the feeling I ended on. It turned out to be very important to me that there is a sort of hopelessness about that project— about protecting them. It's always getting more hopeless. There must have been a time when you could [protect them], but you can't in the modern world.

RB: Yeah, I am sure there was.

MA: When they never went out of your sight—

RB: Or at least many of these atrocities and abuses went unreported.

MA: Hmm, yeah, now it's all in your face.

RB: Abuse, serial murder, sexual predation—

MA: Yeah, stolen off the streets.

RB: Your purchase of milk is a reminder of missing children.

MA: We don't have that in England, but it's a very striking thing.

RB: Are the problems we are talking about all manifested in England as well?

MA: Oh yeah. The only difference is that the self-respecting American serial murderer prides himself on his mobility, and England isn't such a mobile society. These shits in their vans with their weapons in the back and the chloroform--the culture of the serial murderer is more developed here.

RB: George Orwell and *Yellow Dog* aside, what will England be like in twenty years?

MA: It's a more contradictory culture than here. Here you have rampant individualism, and we have it in England too, but the opposing force is egalitarianism. And fraternity yes, liberty certainly, but equality has never been an American idea. Freedom, not equality.

RB: We have lots of space to act out our cultural quirks—hence we have conclaves of serious Second Amendment individualists in Montana and other remote regions.

MA: Yes you have. We are all crushed together. Our countryside is just bollocks. A friend of mine wrote a poem called "Bollockshire" about the English countryside. It's so cute and fake. We have no wilds left.

RB: What is the Lake country like? I gather from reading Alain de Botton there are lots of Japanese tourists there.

MA: Yeah, infested with—lots of tourists and "ye olde" bullshit. In England you have individualism running up against egalitarianism, totally contradictory ideas. And it's in that mess that the future of England lies.

RB: So have you built your house in Montevideo?

MA: Yeah, we are going to hunker down over there.

RB: It's not even a skip and jump to Buenos Aires, one of the mythical, great cities of the world?

MA: Yeah, it's a forty-minute flight.

RB: The Argentines seem to be in perpetual tough shit.

MA: Argentina is recovering. Although we went through one day when there was a national strike and just before the [economic] collapse. And Brazil is very volatile and, by the way, there is a huge area of Paraguay and Brazil of Al Queda down there. Whole province of Al Queda.

RB: Ungovernable.

MA: Ungovernable, no go. Meaning no one goes there. But Uruguay is this little jewel of civility even though they suffered when their giant neighbors groan, they groan too. But lots of voluntary stuff, very American like and a unitarian feeling. We got through fine. And unless there is a cataclysm, unless the emigration goes on until there is no one left, it's heaven for us.

…they are not reading for the same reason that we read. They are insulted by any idea that any writer has something to tell them.

RB: How far ahead are you charting your course?

MA: You mean writing? I have sort started what I think will be an autobiographical novel. I left myself alone for thirty odd years. My first novel was autobiographical because what else is there when you are in your early twenties?

RB: Some would argue they all are.

MA: Well, they all are— bits of you. And it's by now, for me, a big subject. It's gone on long enough there is plenty there. Enough deaths and births.

RB: Do you recall your thoughts as a young man about what reaching fifty might be like?

MA: I always thought I was going to kill myself on the day before my twentieth birthday.

RB: [laughs] On purpose or by some fated thing or accidental thing?

MA: On purpose. And then you think well, twenty-ninth birthday and then thirty-ninth, all ridiculous little deadlines. I was talking to Christopher Hitchens the other day, and he said, "This is just gravy because I never thought I would l live this long." But I don't feel that really. I feel you owe it to your children to stick around a bit longer than that. Although I am still a smoker—getting surrounded and nagged by all my family.

RB: It must be hard on you. I am not struck by your willingness to take advice.

MA: Hitchens says I don't want to be a non-smoker. Even my

four-year-old says, [in child's voice] "You said you were going to give up when you finished your book. [raises his voice] And you didn't!"

RB: [both laugh] I read an Australian writer this week whose name escapes me but he was lambasting writers for their lack of political engagement. I remember you wrote a piece in the *Guardian* before the Iraq war called the "Palace of the End," and I thought there was another piece. Is it your sense that writers are failing their responsibilities?

MA: I think in America people have looked with interest to see what writers are saying about what goes on. In England the tradition is that a writer's view on politics is of rather less interest than the man in the street.

RB: [laughs]

MA: They do. "You don't stick your oar in. Keep on what you're good at," you know. It's like the exchange between Saul Bellow and Milton Friedman where Saul said something about economics and Friedman said, "When I have a question about literature, I'll come to you." And Saul says, "But you never will have question about literature." [both laugh] There should be more inter-penetration. The politicians should read more fiction and we should write more about politics. I wrote about September 11th and I wrote about Iraq. And the piece was printed in many European papers and was taken seriously, but in England it is considered pretentious.

RB: I am riding a high horse recently because Susan Sontag won a German Peace Prize and gave a compelling Sontagian acceptance speech, and there was no coverage here of the award or her speech.

MA: But she has made a lot of enemies I suppose. She has taken a lot of hits in the culture wars.

RB: Normally, that translates to more attention.

MA: You'd think. But my sense is that America has had much more respect for its writers because they had to define what America was. America wasn't sure what it was.

RB: Still doesn't.

MA: Still doesn't, and looked to its writers to say, "Are we just a bunch of Italians and Greeks and Jews? Or are we a nation with a soul and a heart?" But England has never worried about what it was. Its identity goes so far back. And it doesn't look to anyone to tell it what it is, so they prefer that the writers just shut up.

Robert Birnbaum was double promoted in the 4th grade, was on the swim team in high school and was a philosophy major at university. He has been a night club manager, a short order cook, an Earth Shoe salesman, a secretary in a neurosurgical ward, a public school teacher, an advertising salesman and, of course, a taxi driver. He has been an adherent of a certain kind of antediluvian journalism that eschews publicist's lunches, industrial cocktail parties or shop openings as either the text or the source of stories. Most of the time. For the better part of two decades Birnbaum was the publisher of a now-defunct hip and smart downtown magazine in Boston. Since the early '90s he has interviewed over 500 hundred writers — from Martin Amis and Isabel Allende to Marianne Wiggins and Howard Zinn — and read over 1000 books. He continues to tilt at windmills while he tries to be a good father to his son, Cuba Maxwell, and a congenial companion to his blonde Labrador, Rosie.
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