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'Even the praise is bad for you'

Martin Amis's new novel *Yellow Dog* is the most eagerly awaited book of the year, dividing the literary world even before its publication. On the eve of its serialisation in the *Guardian*, the writer tells Emma Brockes about his style, his critics and why his daughters are so special

Emma Brockes
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The following apology was printed in the *Guardian's* Corrections and Clarification column, Thursday September 4 2003.

The novelist mentioned below should be Kazuo Ishiguro, not Ishiguru. Apologies.

"Dadda." Clio Amis, three-year-old daughter of Martin, reaches for her father from the summit of her mother's hip. Amis's mind is elsewhere. His photo is being taken while his other small child, Fernanda, bobs in and out, and his wife Isabel answers a question about the sofa (it is hell-red velvet, she covered it herself). Casually, and after some delay, Amis turns to Clio and is met by a look of such fierce devotion, blowing off the child in nuclear waves, that he bursts into laughter. "Do you see that?" says Amis. "Daughters! You don't even have to do anything. You seem to have some primal power just by being you."

Being Amis, one imagines, means being rather more in touch with one's primal power than most. While the Mick Jagger pout of his early years has been forced into sardonic retreat, and the knocks have engendered a certain ruefulness, nothing breaks the surface of his languid charm. "People talk about the big ego of the writer as if it's fun having a big ego," he complains, languidly, charmingly. "It's not fun. It's corrosive, the constant..." he hesitates, "the constant status anxiety." But even a man of his well-staked confidence is occasionally floored by the intensity of his children's love. After the girls have gone, he says, "You seem, as a father, to have a value that you never had to your sons. Boys are always ridiculing you, affectionately, keeping dad in his place. But girls..."

The mantle of Britain's Greatest Living Novelist settled on Amis young and has grated and gratified ever since. McEwan has won more awards; Rushdie more notoriety, Ishiguro greater success in Hollywood. Murdoch was arguably brainier, Spark funnier. But it is with Amis that the press and the reading public have chosen to enact "keeping dad in his place". And dad is just about mellow enough to give a good show of not caring. In fact, bar the occasional stutter, dad is looking pretty damn chilled right now, in the living room of his north London home, where his books but not his records are in alphabetical order. "Nor," he assures me, "are my colognes." It is as well that he is relaxed, for two weeks after the interview Amis will cop another massive slagging, this time from Tibor Fischer, writing in the *Daily Telegraph*. Fischer calls his new book "terrible" and compares the experience of reading it to "your favourite uncle being caught in a school playground, masturbating".

Elements of *Yellow Dog* are ridiculous. It involves a tabloid hack, a mad cockney, a spoof royal family with a manservant called Love ("coming, Love!" chimes the King, a joke that goes back to the Captain Darling gag in *Blackadder*) and a man who, after receiving a blow to the head, defaults to a pre-middle-class version of himself. It is about death and violence and impotence, and, above all, what Amis calls "the male insecurity problem", a regular theme of his, mixed in with a bit of post-September 11 blather about the end of the world.

You can spot the sentences that did for Fischer. "The contrails of the more distant aeroplanes were like

incandescent spermatozoa, sent out to fertilize the universe," labours Amis at one point. But there are flashes of brilliance, too; bad sex is "like someone doggedly trying to shoulder his way through a locked door". The husband of a distinguished woman exists purely for "the radiation of quietly relentless approval". A man climbs out of his car as "a boobjob of a raindrop gutflopped on his baldspot".

I wonder how Amis thinks he has changed since writing *The Rachel Papers*, 30 years ago. Inevitably there have been reversals. In that first novel, he wrote an impassioned speech about how pathetic fallacy belonged to the cheap, literary reductionism of adolescence. Now pathetic fallacy seems to be everywhere in his books; the sinister weather element in *London Fields*, a symbol of pre-millennial tension, and in *Yellow Dog*, a rogue comet that threatens to extinguish the planet. (I ask Amis if he saw the disaster movie *Deep Impact* on television the night before and he says, "Um, yuh, I thoroughly enjoyed it. Just the sort of blankness of it, I mean, what do you say? A 5,000 light-year snooker shot and it's going to hit you.")

On the subject of style, he says, "I thought it was thinning out. But I don't think that any more. There's more plot in this book. There's more drive. You don't want great curlicues when you're pushing forward, hard. You get slightly less musical, the prose does, but the craft bit gets... you make lots of decisions very quickly, are much more confident in the craft. It's swings and roundabouts. Many writers go off in a certain direction at about this point; my father did. His prose changed. There can be a turning against the reader and that's the difference between *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*; Joyce doesn't give a shit about the reader any more. And late Henry James is an awful slog. It's a disaffection that you must fight."

When Amis pictures his own readers, it's himself he sees, at a younger age, which he admits is "kind of a wank". (Wank is a big word with him, as in "wank pit", the natural habitat of the loser male). "I want to be to my readers what I felt when I first picked up a book by Bellow or by Nabokov, where you think, this one's speaking to me. Every now and then at a book signing your eyes meet with a reader and they have a stoned look and you know that they've had a great time with you, and it's very moving and nice. It's like an antidote to the other stuff. You feel support, affection."

The "other stuff", to which Fischer's contribution is merely the latest in a long, and devastating line, has plagued Amis more than his contemporaries because he is perceived, I think, to have enjoyed that most-loathed thing in this country, an easy ride. The advantages of having Kingsley as a father were many - theirs was a literary as well as a filial relationship - but Amis is aware that his own achievements are belittled, somewhat, by the shortness of the distance he has travelled. "My writer friends have all come out of comparatively nowhere," he says, almost meekly. "That must be very gratifying."

Amis doesn't read the critics. "Well, I got a terrific pasting here last time. I felt beaten up. But it didn't really get inside my head. If you do read them, you're having an argument all night long, in your head, and that's just the area of you that you don't want violated. Even the praise is bad for you."

It is? "Yes."

Why? "You get smug." He laughs a little smugly. "Pleased with yourself. Um. And, you know, it occupies not so vital a bit of your brain, but it strokes you. I mean, if a writer I admired had written a nice thing, then I would read it. But better not to."

How competitive is he with his peers? "I still feel the odd twinge of invidious feeling. But the moment it disappeared was when I was coming back from Germany and the first thing I saw was a headline in the [London] *Evening Standard* - "McEwan wins Booker Prize" - and I thought, fuck. But then I felt great for two days, a real high. The automatic reaction was, fuck, but it's the realisation that you're trying to do such different things, you're not all trying to write the same novel. Great relief."

Amis's father could be a harsh critic of his work. "He did worship his father," says Jonathan Wordsworth, Amis's tutor at Oxford, "who was a very horrid person. The only time I remember being in Martin's company that was painful, was when he insisted that I come and have lunch and meet his father and his father was being brutally insensitive about Vietnam. I think Martin was probably acutely embarrassed. He seemed really to go out of his way to be tiresome and Martin very much wanted one to see through it and to see that he was a good father. That wasn't a good lunch at all."

"It was like a blow to the solar plexus the first time he said, of my second novel, 'I couldn't get on with it,' says Amis. "And he sent my novel *Money* twirling through the air the moment I appeared as a minor character in it, because that's bugging the reader about. But I didn't brood on it. Anyway my father had such terrible taste in fiction. The only contemporary novelist that gave him any pleasure was Anthony Powell, then next would be Dick Francis. I remember him saying proudly, 'I'm never going to read another novel that doesn't begin with the words, 'A shot rang out.' This was someone who hated Nabokov, who hated Bellow. Oh yeah, he hated them."

He thought they were poncy? "Yeah, poncy. Nabokov for bugging the reader about and Bellow for just babbling. They rubbed him up the wrong way. I was pretty bound to rub him up the wrong way, the next generation.

"And he once said, very honestly and generously, 'The younger writer is telling the older writer, it's not like that any more. It's like this now.' It's true. You worry about your ability to go on seeing what the absolute instant, the next minute is going to be like."

Is he starting to feel that insecurity, at 54? "I certainly don't feel it yet. And I think it's a very transparent kind of culture, it doesn't hide itself away. And I have all these... young relations, who may be discreet about their own doings, but are very willing to tell you what other people are up to. Philip Roth said, 'When a writer is born into a family, that is the end of that family.' I'm very much contra that."

Amis's child-rearing has about it the symmetry of that board game in which you roll the dice and are handed either two pink pegs, or two blue ones, depending on the square you land on. His blue pegs, teenagers Louis and Jacob, are from his first marriage to Antonia Phillips. His pink ones, Clio and Fernanda, are toddlers from his second marriage, to Isabel Fonseca - "The boys were active in choosing their names. If it was a boy they wanted it to be called Slash after, is it Guns and Roses?" - and he has a daughter Delilah, 26, whom he didn't know about until five years ago. "My daughter Delilah, my grown-up daughter who's coming tonight, showed me an example of text messaging. Once you get going, it's really easy."

Bits of *Yellow Dog* are written in text messaging shorthand, with slightly dad-like, behind the curve enthusiasm, and also in emails, which are referred to by one try-hard character as "e's". Amis turned for help with his cockney speech patterns to the memoirs of Mad Frankie Fraser: "I took from him charming little locutions like, 'and otherwise' for 'etcetera'. Eg, 'They had tables for cards and otherwise.'"

But it doesn't do to do too much research. "You don't want to read too much," he says, "but to feel your way into it." Although sitting there channelling a "feeling" entails the constant risk that nothing will happen.

This is something, he says, no writer can escape, the fear of surrounding himself with dead prose, with lifeless images. "My father had terrible anxiety at breakfast every day, before going in to write. He'd take himself by the hand and say," - here, Amis grasps his own hand and adopting a sing-song voice, enacts the moment that it all boils down to, the space behind the ego. "Now what is it?" he asks himself, softly, and in a whisper replies, "Well, it's that bit near the beginning."