



## Who is the greatest of them all?

When the Guardian referred to Martin Amis as 'Britain's greatest living author' last week, one reader was so outraged she threatened to emigrate - or worse. So if not Amis, who? Stephen Moss assesses the field.

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**Stephen Moss**  
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#### Guardian

When the Guardian last week revealed that Martin Amis was to become professor of creative writing at Manchester University, it lapsed into a dangerous piece of journalistic shorthand: "Amis, who is often described as Britain's greatest living author . . ."

Is he? By whom? Using what criteria? One agitated reader was moved to write to the paper - and threatened the ultimate sanction: "If the media refer to Martin Amis as 'Britain's greatest living author' once more," wrote Kathy Love from south London, "I shall kill myself. The fact that such a misconception exists at all is enough to make most people with a passion for books want to emigrate to Uruguay immediately. Please save my life and don't do it again."

I tracked her down to an internet cafe. "I have never enjoyed a Martin Amis book," she e-wailed. "Most of them I have flung across the room unfinished. I hate his self-conscious literary style, his pathetic posturing. More importantly, he has nothing to say. Greatness in a writer can only be awarded posthumously. Let them snuff it first, I say. Then we'll decide." If pressed, she reckons Julian Barnes, Doris Lessing, David Lodge and Ian McEwan will have the greatest claims to posterity's regard.

Ms Love's hate prompted us to ask whether Amis really is Britain's GLA. And if not, who is? Helpfully, The Book Magazine polled its readers last year, and the results were illuminating. McEwan, Salman Rushdie, Harold Pinter, AS Byatt, Doris Lessing, Alan Bennett, Iain Banks, David Mitchell, Ian Rankin, Pat Barker, Alasdair Gray, Philip Pullman, Nick Hornby and, yes, Martin Amis all scored well. Muriel Spark also made the top 20, even though she had died two months previously. But the winner by a landslide was JK Rowling, with almost three times as many votes as her closest challenger, Terry Pratchett. The wisdom of crowds.

Last week, the Arts Council started chasing the same hare. "How do we determine literary greatness?" asked the poet laureate Andrew Motion on its website. "Book sales or literary merit? Entertainment or enlightenment? Poet? Novelist? Biographer? Short-story writer? Essayist? Playwright?" Motion, chairman of the judging panel for next month's David Cohen prize for literature, was trying to kickstart a debate on who was "the greatest living writer in the British Isles".

So far the engine has refused to spark into life. The suggestions are few, and one or two may be facetious: Amis, of course; the poet Tom Raworth; the novelist Lesley Glaister; the footballing penseur Wayne Rooney (why not Coleen?). One early respondent attempts to kill the debate at birth: "'Best' is a game for six-year-olds and consumers with the minds of six-year-olds. The convenors of this daft vote should grow up and get a life." A fair point, echoed by some of those I talked to, and especially by female critics who see this desire to establish a pecking order among writers as a male phenomenon. Men, seeking absolutes, are keener to carve a literary Mount Rushmore, to pay homage to idols. Men are natural fans; women perhaps better readers.

What makes a writer great? The American critic Harold Bloom, who was bold enough to write a book listing the western world's canonical works, refers to a great author's "sublimity" and "representative nature", by which I

assume he implies some transcendent, quasi-religious quality. His talis-folk include Shakespeare (the "centre of the canon" and "the largest writer we will ever know"), Dante, Chaucer, Cervantes, Milton, Goethe, Dickens, Tolstoy, Ibsen, Freud, Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Kafka, Borges and Beckett. No one since Beckett, note - this being, according to Bloom, the "Chaotic Age" in which the canon has been usurped by "professors of hip-hop, clones of Gallic-Germanic theory, ideologues of gender and of various sexual persuasions, and multiculturalists unlimited . . ."

The key facet that links all these great writers, according to Bloom, is "strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange." His view is almost Darwinian: a new great writer must rewrite, replace the old. "Contemporary writers", he says, "do not like to be told that they must compete with Shakespeare and Dante, and yet that struggle was Joyce's provocation to greatness, to an eminence shared only by Beckett, Proust and Kafka among modern western authors."

That is some company to keep, and whatever you think of Amis's work, he would at least see himself obeying Bloom's diktat - trying to compete, looking down the barrel of the canon. If anything, he tries too hard. Feminist literary critics, who reciprocate Bloom's distaste, dismiss his collection of dead white males, his idealisation of the canon, and his view of writing as a competitive enterprise. Women critics often admire the many-sidedness of literature - shafts of illumination coming from all directions - and oppose Bloom's patrician view with a more democratic notion of literary value.

In taking soundings on what defines greatness and who, if anyone, among living British authors can be called great, I was confronted by several schools of thought. One group, generally those of advanced years, thought there were no great writers now; it has been downhill since around the time of Coleridge, and literature was now more or less defunct. Another saw energy, buoyancy, but of a sort that would probably give Bloom a fit - performance poetry, street theatre, rap artists, pop lyricists, the resurgence of a spoken tradition. A third group is pragmatic, incremental, finding quality where it can, eager to praise, distrustful of grandiosity.

In attempting to identify Britain's GLA, a surprising number of pundits automatically think of novelists. But does "author" signify only the writing of a novel? "The play's the thing," as the Largest-Writer-We-Will-Ever-Know wrote. We are a nation of poets and playwrights; the novel is the Johnny-come-lately of literature, the invention of the leisured 18th century, a weapon of social struggle in the 19th, mainly a machine for making money since. Two of our very greatest writers - Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard - deal in plays, though their prose sparkles too.

Literature is oddly difficult to canonise, more subject to changing tastes than other art forms. In music, greatness is transparent; genius announces itself. In literature, perhaps less so. AS Byatt relates how the eyes of her generation were largely closed to the genius of Penelope Fitzgerald. William Golding, a giant of the middle years of the last century, is now, with the exception of the school text *Lord of the Flies*, little read. I have, in the past couple of weeks, been seeking a copy of Kingsley Amis's *Ending Up*. Out of print, like much of his work. Literary reputations are shifting and uncertain.

Trying to establish Britain's GLA, or even a leading group of contenders, is a hazardous undertaking. But it is at worst harmless fun, and at best might provoke us to consider what constitutes great writing, whether a canon has any validity, and who determines what work survives. My haphazard survey of lovers and leverers of literature threw up many names - some valid, others vapid. But a clear top four emerges: Pinter, Stoppard, Lessing and VS Naipaul. Writers with a large body of work stretching back half a century, each of whom has changed the literary weather. And the winner is, opening the envelope . . . don't be silly: that really is up to posterity.