The Telegraph

Martin Amis: intoxicating, free – the novelist life

Last week's Hay Festival in Mexico found Martin Amis on robust and outspoken form. In this extract from his talk, the writer discusses America in decline, the fear thOat comes with turning 60, and what it means when women like pornography. Plus he offers a sneak preview of his new novel – a biting satire of modern Britain.

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7 Comments (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/hay-festival/8825242/Martin-Amis-intoxicating-free-the-novelist-life.html#disqus_thread)

Edmundo Paz Soldán (Bolivian novelist and professor) I'd like to talk about your last novel, The Pregnant Widow. What do you have to say about the relationship between beauty and ageing?

Martin Amis That you get ugly when you get old. It's all perfectly simple. In fact I can tell you how it's going to go. Everything seems fine until you're about 40. Then something is definitely beginning to go wrong. And you look in the mirror with your old habit of thinking, "While I accept that everyone grows old and dies, it's a funny thing, but I'm an exception to that rule."

Then it becomes a full-time job trying to convince yourself that it's true. And you can actually feel your youth depart. In your mid-forties when you look in the mirror this idea that you're an exception evaporates.

Then, you think life is going to get thinner and thinner until it dwindles into nothing. But a very strange thing happens to you, a very good thing happens to you, in your early fifties, and I'm assuming – this is what novelists do, they assume their case is typical: a poet can't be typical about anything, but a novelist is an everyman, and an innocent and literary being – but you assume that how you feel is how everyone feels, and it's like discovering another continent on the globe.

Martin Amis admits fear of ageing and losing his talent (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/8828085/Martin-Amis-admits-fear-of-ageing-and-losing-his-talent.html)

Hay Festival Xalapa: Martin Amis, Richard Ford and many more (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8824638/Hay-Festival-Xalapa-Martin-Amis-Richard-Ford-and-many-more.html)

What happens is you're suddenly visited by the past, and it's like a huge palace in your mind, and you can go and visit all these different rooms and staircases and chambers. It's particularly the erotic, the amatory past. And if you have children they somehow are very present in this palace of the past.

I say to my sons (I don't say it to my daughters), "When you're having an affair, keep notes. Hold it in the fist of your soul. Try and remember everything about it, because this is what you're going to need when you're old. You're going to need these rooms, with a girl in each one."

Nabokov said the big difference between people is those who sleep well, and those who don't. And Nabokov was of course a champion insomniac. He has a lovely line in a late novella which is, "Night is always a giant but this one was especially terrible."

Zadie Smith says that people divide into the organised and the disorganised. And she's disorganised. But my father, Kingsley Amis, said that a huge division is between those who have a good time with the opposite sex, and those who don't. And you will know in your early fifties how that balance sheet works.

Just to go a little bit later, because I'm 62 now... Another feeling comes on you when you're 60, which can be expressed by the thought, "This can't turn out well." And that's the bit I'm at at the moment. And really that's the arrival of fear. In my case not fear of death, but fear of getting there.

So to go back to your question, yes you do look back with wonder at your youth, and you know all youth is automatically beautiful in a way. It's said that youth is wasted on the young, and that's perhaps true because you don't feel your beauty until its gone.

EPS Most of the novel takes place in 1970, so it deals with the consequences of the sexual revolution of the Sixties. One of the things it seems to say in the novel is that the women are liberated, and that produces a lot of anxiety for men.

MA Well – anxiety, but also gratitude. And people say, "But you couldn't tell there was a sexual revolution going on in 1970." You know, you weren't aware that you were in the middle of a revolution. But yes, you were.

Philip Larkin, the poet, has some very famous lines that go, "Sexual intercourse began/ In nineteen sixty-three/(which was rather late for me) –/ Between the end of the Chatterley ban/ And the Beatles' first LP."

Those are famous lines. The next stanza goes, "Up till then there'd only been…/ A wrangle for the ring/ A shame that started at sixteen/ And spread to everything."

Now I think sexual intercourse began in 1968, there wasn't any before then, and it was a palpable feeling, and what was it? It was of multiplying possibilities, and it was tremendously exciting.

I'd experienced the earlier time that Larkin was talking about when there were certain principles that had not yet

been challenged. The number one was “There will be no sex before marriage.” That was the rule. And no sex without love, and so on. It didn’t happen to me because my father had this fight with his father, but many of my male friends suddenly found they were having a tremendously hostile relationship with their fathers around 1968, 1969. And that was because of the sexual revolution, because the fathers were thinking, “I was always told there would be no sex before marriage. What’s all this going on? What are they all doing now?” And they were very bitter that the revolution hadn’t happened earlier, that it was a little late for them.

EPS Another of the consequences... When you’re talking about it, you use the word disassociation – the sexual revolution produces a rupture of the connection between love and sex.

MA Yes. During the sexual revolution, love and sex didn’t separate entirely but they bifurcated. One of the possibilities was the dissociation between love and sex, and this has got slightly out of control.

If you want to know the real meaning of pornography, it is the utter dissociation of love and sex, the banishment of love from the sexual arena.

I used to think until quite recently that women would always resist pornography, because the idea that the sexual act produces children is banished. There are no pregnancies in pornography; no talk of children in pornography. Children do not exist. I always thought women would resist it for that reason.

The sexual act is a very weird thing in that it is indescribable. Literature has got nowhere with it in centuries. No one has written well about sex, in my view. In fact it’s incommunicable. It’s like dreams. They’re too personal, too quirky – and the novel is a universalist form.

I always thought women would resist it, because the sexual act peoples the world, but now it seems that women have partly accepted pornography and come to enjoy it. If this is true then this is an enormous social change.

Let’s not deceive ourselves, our children get their sexual education not primarily from the school teacher, not from the biology class where they dissect a worm and learn the difference between male and female genitalia. They get it in high definition on the internet, and no one has any idea what the human consequences of that will be.

EPS I was very interested in the form of The Pregnant Widow, because it can be read as an essay as well as a novel.

MA Well, each novel has to find its own form. If any of you are wondering whether you’re going to be a writer, I can say this about it. It goes back to an earlier kind of developmental stage. When you’re 13, 14, everybody wants to be a writer, I think, and that’s when you start to commune with your own intelligence, when you hear a

voice that seems to be more intelligent than you are, and you commune with it. And you keep diaries and notebooks and suddenly you're an articulate being – and I think novelists never grow out of that, and that self-communion continues to be the centre of their lives.

But a novel, I mean people say, "Why did you decide to write a novel about the sexual revolution or the Holocaust or the gulag?"

Decide is always the wrong word. The process of writing a novel begins with a pang, a moment of recognition, and a situation, a character, or something you read in a paper, that seems to go off, like a solar flare inside your head. And you think, "I could write a novel about this."

That's the first moment. The last moment is when, with great trepidation, you send your novel to your agent, or publisher. You think, "I won't do any more with it, I'll read it in proof." And what happens between that first pang and the final washing of hands of it is getting to know what that novel is.

All novelists write in a different way, but I always write in longhand and then do two versions of typescript on a computer. I realised when I got to the end of the long-hand draft [of The Pregnant Widow] that I knew nothing about this novel when I began writing it.

The process of writing a novel is getting to know more about the novel until you know everything about it. And it's been described as a kind of dreamlike state where you're letting the novel make its own shape, and you're putting into it the pleasure of creation, which is intoxicating.

You can do absolutely anything; you are the freest of all artists. You're not confined by a square on the wall or musical scales or the disciplines of verse, and you're certainly freer than a film-maker who is dependent on the weather when he goes out to make his world. And it's completely uncollaborative – you don't have actors; producers; money pressures of any kind.

It's that freedom that is frightening in the end. So you have all that pleasure, but what you've also got to put into it – and you can't do this consciously; it just demands it of you – you've got to put anxiety into it.

I've just finished a novel [Lionel Asbo, to be published next year] that I wrote very happily in a year, and revised very miserably in another year, and I realised I'd left something out, which is anxiety. So I had a year of terrible anxiety about it, and now it's all right.

My father used to say if you write a whole novel feeling pleased with it, it's no good. And if you write a whole novel feeling miserable and fearful about it then it isn't any good either. It has to have that mixture of joy and anxiety. As you get older the anxiety gets slightly more predominant.

EPS Can you tell us more about this novel? I read somewhere that its subtitle is "State of England", so it's another biting satire of England today?

MA Yes, it's satirical, but it is about what happens to countries when they're in decline. We're now seeing America beginning to cope with decline, and I don't think they're going to be anything like as reasonable about that decline as England was.

England went from being ruler of a quarter of the globe to a second-rate country in the course of the Second World War. They talk about the Second World War. They say "the big three": Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill. Churchill wasn't one of the big three. Stalin and Roosevelt could hardly bring themselves to stop giggling when Churchill said, "I think we should do this", because we'd ceased to matter by then.

And somehow we got through it.

JG Ballard, the writer who was interned in China by the Japanese, returned to England at the age of 12, 13, and he said it looked as though England had lost the war. It was blackouts, rationing, everything sordid and dirty and depressed, and what we were doing was coping with this tremendous demotion from being a great power to being a minor power.

But we somehow got through, and I think we were very greatly helped by the ideology known as political correctness, relativism, levelism, because that was fiercely anti-imperialist. So as we were coping with decline – and it takes decades to do it – we had the ideology that was telling us that empires are s---, you don't want an empire, you should be ashamed for having had one.

And yet, I think there was a great deal of resentment about decline. No nation on earth has ever declined without resisting it and resenting it, just as no human being can cope with it either.

But we did get through with some show of restraint. I mean there were disastrous things like partition in India and so on…

But I don't see America's fall from being the superpower it was, as it has been for the past 20 years… I think the crazy feeling that one senses in America is, to use crude psychological language, denial of this inevitable collapse.

I've been quoted widely as saying "I'm glad to leave England [because we've just moved to New York], and I wish I wasn't English." No one with an IQ in double figures could possibly say that.

You are what you are, and the idea of being ashamed of being English is ridiculous. You know England, we now lead the world in decline, but we used to lead it in progress.

We had our revolution a century before the French did. I think only Holland is more evolved than England. We had parliamentary democracy in the 17th century, and there used to be a fashion for saying that, for instance, Russian literature is so much more dynamic and powerful because it's drenched in blood, but England has the greatest poetry on earth. Perhaps the only rival is Iran. To have the most advanced polity and the greatest body

of poetry is, I think, an incredible combination.

EM Forster says the English novel doesn't rule the world; it fears the Russian novel and the French novel and some might say the Spanish novel, but English poetry fears no one. It's a tremendous tribute to a nation to have such great literature and such a civilised political arrangement with no great blood baths, no huge injustices on British soil, no slavery on British soil, and England the country above all others that put an end to slavery.

I've lived there for 50 years, and the idea that you would be ashamed of being English while living there is moronic.

EPS You have mentioned the denial of the US, and you have written extensively about 9/11 and the aftermath. You have a book called The Second Plane. Would you say that part of the problem of the US today has to do with the way they dealt with 9/11?

MA Yes I do. A counterfactual in history that has great legitimacy is: imagine the world now if Al Gore had rightfully, as he was entitled to do, won the election of 2000 in America. If it had been Al Gore and not George W Bush who dealt with September 11, I think we'd be in a completely unrecognisable world today.

This is to make it all simple – but I think simplicity is not to be scorned for its own sake – when September 11 happened, I don't think any American president could have failed to declare some sort of war on Afghanistan, which is where the attack came from, where it was organised, and so on. But maybe a wiser president would have not tried to invade that country, but come up with a more limited operation.

History teaches us that you can't invade Afghanistan. No one's ever done it. The British Empire was humiliated and its armies destroyed when it tried to take Afghanistan. Then what happened was the full-scale war in Afghanistan against the Taliban, the ruling force there, and then another war against Iraq.

It's said Bob Woodward – who's written four books on the [Bush] presidency – believes what really swayed Bush was Kissinger and others saying that Afghanistan was not enough. The attack on America was so intolerable that we must impress upon every nation the consequences for such an attack are going to be lethal and transforming.

And then the second war was launched, and all this was done while cutting taxes for the rich. And I don't think you need look very much further for the causes of the economic collapse. No country in history has ever waged wars without raising taxes. It's just the simplest of equations.

George W Bush spent more money than all the other presidents of America put together, but without asking anyone to contribute. So not only did he squander worldwide sympathy for America – and there were many, many spontaneous demonstrations of sympathy for America in Muslim countries after that attack – America's prestige was squandered, and its blood and treasure squandered.

EPS We still have 15 minutes so I'm going to open it for questions.

Question from the audience:

Who are your inspirations?

MA I find another thing about getting older is that your library gets not bigger but smaller, that you return to the key writers who seem to speak to you with a special intimacy. Others you admire or are bored by, but these writers seem to awaken something in you.

For me the two, the twin peaks, like two mountains, are Saul Bellow and Nabokov. And those two I go on reading and rereading. And the great thing about the great books is that it's like having an infinite library, because every five years you can read them again and the books haven't changed but you have. And they seem to renew themselves, transform themselves for you.

So you can never say you've read a novel. Nabokov always said, funnily enough, you can't read a novel, you can only reread a novel. If you listen to music, you don't say, "That's it." If it speaks to you then you play it dozens of times, and you probably won't like that piece of music until you get to know it. It's the same with a novel. You have to know the kind of thing a novel is, you have to know what it's about, and the second time you read a novel you can see how this is achieved.

When I teach literature I always tell them, these would-be writers (we don't do workshops, we just read great books), I say, "When you read Pride and Prejudice, don't if you're a girl identify with Elizabeth Bennet, if you're a boy with Darcy. Identify with the author, not with the characters." All good readers do that automatically, but I think it's helpful to make that clear. Your affinity is not with the characters, always with the writer.

You should always be asking yourself, if you want to become an expert reader or perhaps a writer, you should always say, "How is this being achieved?" "How is this scene being managed?" "How is this being brought off?" Because the characters are artefacts. They're not real people with real destinies and I know that feeling, when you're reading Pride and Prejudice even for the fourth time, you feel definite anxiety about whether they're going to get married, even though you know perfectly well that they do. There's a slight sort of, "Come on, kiss her!"

I always used to think that there's only one flaw with Pride and Prejudice, and that is the absence of a 30-page sex scene between Elizabeth and Darcy. Although of course that wouldn't have worked either.

And I finally realised why you have this feeling, and this is the great achievement of the novel: here you have two characters who were made for each other, and it's such a perfect fit, you know she's going to make him a little more relaxed, a little less stuffy, bring out the playful side of him. And he's going to make her not only rich,

because, let's face it, there is a vulgar appeal to that, but he's going to make her serious as well as lively, perhaps curb her high spirits… But a marvellous osmosis is going to take place between these two people.

And it's so artfully done by Jane Austen that you can't bear the thought that it won't come about, and that's why the suspense renews itself with every reading.

Question from the audience:

How do you deal with the anxiety about writing you mentioned earlier?

MA Well it gets harder and harder, and there's a reason for that. The sort of thing that happens is you think this sentence is no good, and then you think, actually the whole paragraph is s---, and then you think the whole chapter is terrible, the whole book is terrible. And then you think all the books you've ever written are terrible, and then you have to whimper around for a bit. And then you go sheepishly back to your desk, and then you think, "Oh this bit is actually quite good", and then it picks up again.

But what happens is the terrifying realisation that medical science has condemned novelists, probably poets too – not painters so much. But we're all going to die twice. We're going to die as everyone dies, but before that our talent is going to die. There are no exceptions to this. It's an entirely 20th-century phenomenon. Shakespeare died at 52, Dickens at 58, Jane Austen at 41 and D H Lawrence at 44. But now you have the octogenarian novelist, and on the whole they're no bloody good. You can't keep it up, and there are various ways you can see novelists disintegrating before your eyes as they move past 70.

John Updike amazingly lost his ear. His last collection of short stories is full of ugly rhythms and some quite elementary mistakes, for instance two successive sentences ending with the same word. Now anyone interested in style will be told by their ear that you can't do that. It gives a terrible kind of clunk on the page. And his last collection of short stories was full of schoolboy repetitions as if his ear was no longer telling him things.

Another thing that happens to novelists is that they can't breath life into their characters any more. The whole book is dead, inert, and you just have that terrible thing where you read the sentence, "He grew very angry" or "He went over to the window and opened it", and you just find yourself thinking, "No, he didn't. You're not convincing me that he did that. Life has not been breathed into it." That's a sudden death of talent.

But what invariably happens is a sort of dilution. Saul Bellow and Norman Mailer both wrote novels when they were 85, Ravelstein and The Castle in the Forest, and they're not bad. But no one would seriously consider comparing them to Humboldt's Gift or Harlot's Ghost, these great 800-page bristling, sizzling novels. The flame, like on a cooker, just goes right down to the minimum, and that's what lies before all of us.

This is an edited transcript of Martin Amis's event at Hay Festival Xalapa on October 7. To listen to audio extracts, go to telegraph.co.uk/books. (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/books.)

The novelist Tiffany Murray recalls her favourite moments from Xalapa on page 31.

Next: Hay Festival Kerala, November 17-19, with highlights including Jung Chang, Simon Armitage, Germaine Greer, Simon Singh and Anna Funder. For more details see hayfestival.com/kerala (http://www.hayfestival.com/kerala)