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## Martin Amis: As good as it gets

Philippa Kennedy  
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Martin Amis's controversial opinions and outspoken writings have, in certain quarters, earned him a reputation for being arrogant and posturing. [Any Leang / The National](#)

Martin Amis is seldom photographed smiling. So it is quite a surprise to see his face light up with amusement and discover that he is far removed from the arrogant, pompous person often profiled in the press.

The author is resigned to the fact that many people see him like that and baffled, in an intellectual rather than an emotional way, as to why.

"I'm not an actor so I can't smile. When you're being photographed and they say smile, one can't but one should because you get the reputation of being gloomy and arrogant. I find being photographed a very strange, suspended state because you're not actually doing anything. Some photographers tell me jokes to try and make me smile. There's a sense of imposture about it. You're not yourself," he says.

The 60-year-old author, whose outspoken opinions frequently create controversy, is in Dubai for the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature. On Wednesday evening he spoke to a packed audience about the art of writing, but he was clearly ready for another avalanche of questions about what he is supposed to have said about euthanasia, terrorism or whether he was a bad godfather to the daughter of the television presenter Anna Ford and her late husband, the cartoonist Mark Boxer.

He refers to a satirical article he wrote recently in an attempt to explain why he thinks he has been a target since he published his first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, at the age of 24. It is, he believes, that some people think he had an unfair advantage in the literary world, as the son of Kingsley Amis, one of the foremost novelists of his time.

"In the article I said that I was born in 1922. My first novel was *Lucky Jim* and then I started publishing two novels a year. It's the only explanation I can come up with. I don't think it's a conscious thing. It's an unconscious thing in this tiny echelon of semi-literate journalists. The serious literary journalists don't do it. There are people on papers who might be doing anything, but occasionally do a writer. In

 

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### Oasis



their anxiety dreams I'm Kingsley II and I have just been around too long. It explains why every novel of mine has to fight for legitimacy in a way that no other writer does.



"Also they've been telling me since my forties that I'm washed up, I'm finished and that I've gone off. All this return-to-form stuff... I've never lost form. My last novel before this one got the best reviews I've ever had. It's a journalistic fall-back position that I'm 90 years old, born in 1922... I must be in decline mustn't I? I often wonder how it has become so completely out of hand and so very far from what I'm like. Ask anyone I've worked

with, any publicity person or editor or our housekeeper if she has ever seen me scowl in 15 years.

"There's an element of envy in it. Envy is sort of locked into the writing profession. If you review a piece of music you don't get out a violin to do it, and if you write about a film you don't make a film about it but if you're reviewing a prose narrative you're writing a prose narrative, so it's bound to be emulous. That's part of it.

He also attributes it, in part, to his combination of literary success and success with women. "I have a geo-historically beautiful wife who is a reminder of that," he says, managing not to sound too smug about his lovely second wife Isabel Fonseca, an author in her own right, who is with him at the literary festival.

The bit about success with members of the opposite sex is certainly based in fact, but one can see how it could sound like boasting to anyone who wanted to find Amis the conceited and posturing figure of popular perception. The list of his former girlfriends includes Tina Brown, Emma Soames, Julie Kavanagh and Angela Gargas. Then there was Lamorna Heath by whom he has a daughter, Delilah – who walked into his life for the first time when she was 19 – and his first wife, Antonia Phillips, with whom he had two sons. The marriage ended in 1993 when he fell in love with Fonseca.

With the publication of his latest novel, *The Pregnant Widow*, the attacks resumed, which surprised Amis because the initial reviews were excellent.

"It surprises me every time and I'll tell you frankly that I don't really mind if it's just me they're attacking but when it bleeds over into the book as it did with *Yellow Dog*, that is like having flu because it's like someone jeering at your child. But that's only happened that one time and I don't believe that *Yellow Dog* is a weak novel. I think it's one of my best.

"It's humiliating to talk about it so much but what happened with *The Pregnant Widow* is that it got very good reviews, then a lot of murk in the press. Then after the reviews are a month old they are saying it was critically savaged. They just assert that it got bad reviews. It was as if they were retroactively awarding me bad reviews and that is galling because it's untrue amongst other things."

The new novel, set in 1970 is about the sexual revolution and features a group of young people spending the summer in a castle in Italy. Amis says it was a struggle and started out as a much bigger and more autobiographical project.

He explains: "I had a miserable couple of years with it. The funny thing about life, when you try and write fiction about it, is that life is dead. It's palpably dead. What animates a novel and brings it to life is the imagination but also all the unities, symmetries, echelons, bestiaries, imagery that you bring to it, all the contrivance that you bring to it. It's the artificiality that makes it live not its reality-based element.

"I toiled on and on and on and I remember John Banville (the Booker Prize-winning novelist) saying, 'What you're trying to do is impossible.' Impossible is quite a good word to have in your head when you are in the early phase of a novel and I've had that before and brought it off. Writing a novel (*Time's Arrow*) about the Holocaust backwards in time was 'impossible' but it got done."

The project that eventually resulted in *The Pregnant Widow* was temporarily abandoned because he felt it was "dead – a great huge corpse". Then Amis decided to turn it into two separate books. In between the two halves, he wrote a short satirical contemporary novel called *State of England* that he has just finished.

The second half will be autobiographical. Its working title is *Life, A Novel* and it will be about Amis and three literary friends, Philip Larkin, Saul Bellow and Ian Hamilton.

The cultural drought is almost over and the exhibition season looks set to open with a bang. Next month, Abu Dhabi will see the world premiere of an exhibition entitled RSTW (Rauschenberg, Ruscha, Serra, Twombly, Warhol and Wool), featuring selected works from the private collection of the art-world titan, Larry Gagosian. All 20th-century, post-war American artists, the collection will feature not only paintings, but sculptures, drawings and photography that have never been shown together.

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"I was miserable for a couple of weeks and then found there was one bit of it I liked because it was the most fictional: the Italy bit. It was pretty fictionalised anyway, which is why I liked it. It was alive. When I got back to fiction the freedom was so wonderful. That's what writing fiction is, no limits anywhere. If you write autobiographically you're dooming yourself to unfreedom," he says, admitting that there was indeed such a summer sojourn in Italy in his own life, "but absolutely nothing happened".

Having once described the new book as "blindingly autobiographical" he now says the only character modelled on a real person is the sister of the central character Keith. His own sister Sally, an alcoholic, died in 2000 aged 46.

"To this day I have this wish – she was always religious and she converted to Catholicism. I wish she had converted to Islam. She might still be alive because of the continence of Islam, the austerity, the demands it makes on you. I just sort of helplessly think it every now and then. She would only be 56 now and she'd still be here.

"She might have had a chance. She would have had to embrace it earlier than she embraced Catholicism. She was such an uncontrollable girl that there was even talk of her joining the army when she was 17 or 18 because we all sensed that she needed a really tight structure, an *esprit de corps* of shared belief. Islam in its way gives you that, a collectivity that she could have been a part of, which incidentally forbade alcohol and premarital sex."

His views on Islam are not to be confused with his feelings about Islamist terrorism, for which he has been castigated in the media. He insists he was misrepresented and painstakingly relates how.

"The gravamen, which means the gravest part of an accusation, is something I said on the day after the plot to blow up 10 airliners was exposed. It was the third plan for the mass murder of my fellow human beings in 13 months by al Qaedaists," he says explaining that he uses the term Al Qaedaists because "Islamism" has too many letters in common with Islam. "It's a useless word for that reason."

He continues: "There was July 7 which did actually kill 54 fellow Londoners. There was the plot later that month by North Africans and a year later there was this. That day, the journalist who had come to interview me in Long Island had flown the Atlantic without being able to bring a book on board. I felt this seemed to symbolise the triumph of incuriosity, stupidity, everything I hated and murder as well. Who is on those trans-Atlantic flights [in] mid-summer? Mostly women and children, families and they wanted to kill 3,000 of them.

"So I said, 'There's an urge to say that it's up to Islam to put its house in order; until then there should be discriminatory stuff like racial profiling at airports. My friend Jeffrey Eugenides [the American Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist] was staying with me at the time and he said, 'Then they'd all hate us,' and I thought, 'That's right.' I changed my mind that day.

"I said, 'There's an urge to say that, and is anyone telling me there wasn't an urge to say it?' Novelists are supposed to tell the truth. They're not like politicians or PR men. They're supposed to record real feelings even if they're ugly feelings. But of course 'the urge to say that' gets chopped out of the quotation."

After that, Amis was branded a racist, something he says is "just not a serious accusation", although he admits the description might be more accurate of his father and grandfather. "Racism is for the street or more particularly for the gutter," he says. "It doesn't exist in the greater discourse. My sons and daughters will have less of it than I do."

Having said that, he still believes it is an illusion to pronounce yourself free of all racial feelings. "You've got five million years of human history that is fiercely tribal and familial and which conditions you to protect your own community. The idea that at a single snap of your fingers you abolish all that is an illusion which rots the conscience. It should be on your conscience that you still have these atavistic urges and feelings.

"The idea that you have spring cleaned your psyche to that extent is childish. We're all works in progress. You can't cut yourself out of human evolution like that and proclaim yourself a new man. It's a silly and pious utopianism, and untrue."

Amis's much-reported remarks on euthanasia were satirical, but he did have a serious point to make. He talked about "a population of demented very old people, like an invasion of terrible immigrants, stinking out the restaurants and cafes and shops", and suggested a euthanasia booth on every street corner.

He was merely making the point that the balance between young and old has been severely skewed by the baby boom and can't resist predicting a "civil war between the ages".

"I wasn't talking about people who are old now. I was talking about our generation. We're going to be a nightmare. There was a quote from the writer Diana Athill saying, 'Martin Amis is mad.' Did you see any headlines saying Terry Pratchett is mad. No. There wasn't a single syllable of dissent there and we're

making the same point.”

He is similarly baffled by the attack by the broadcaster Anna Ford. Ford was married to one of Amis’s closest friends, the political cartoonist Mark Boxer who died in 1988, and has gone one record saying, among much else, that Amis was a terrible godparent to their daughter after Amis published an article relating to his views on assisted suicide.

“It came absolutely out of nowhere,” he says. “What it came down to in the end was that I’m a poor godfather. Well, I think there are quite a few people of my generation who haven’t got a clean card on that. The idea that Anna had been sitting on it for 22 years and just cracked when he saw the piece which she described as whingeing . . . it wasn’t whingeing at all.” Amis says that he was, in fact, making fun of the British media.

He lives with his wife and their two daughters, Fernanda, 13 and Clio, 11, in North London in the same street where his father once had a home. His parents’ divorce in 1965 is an event that has left a permanent mark upon him, one that he understands that his children by Phillips may bear.

“It was very shocking when your parents break up, as it was for my children too,” he explains. “It’s a great violence you do to them. It’s the thing I feel worst about in my life, having to tell my sons that I was leaving home. As Kingsley wrote, divorce is an incredibly violent thing to have to do. I had a very happy childhood, and always had a marvellous relationship with both my parents. I’ve only come to realise how rare that is in the last couple of decades. I have a wonderful relationship with all five of my children, so there’s absolutely nothing to regret there.”

“When people ask what kind of father mine was, he was pretty absent. He was in his study, that was just what he did and what we all accepted but whenever you passed him on the stairs he would always leave you smiling. In that way, he was a great father.”

Having lived with two writers as a teenager, his father and stepmother Elizabeth Jane Howard, he finds writing in the same house as his present wife, Fonseca, is “tremendously bonding”.

“She knows what I have to do in my study and I wouldn’t want to be doing anything else but there are times when it’s grim,” he says. “And I knew exactly what she was struggling with when she was writing her novel. A novel leaves you open like a poem never does, a short story can’t – it was Kingsley who said that.

“So, I felt that I understood her hourly life as well as the deeper things in her life that naturally come out in a novel. You realise what a busy eye she has. It was a very deepening experience. It may sound a bit schmaltzy but that’s how it is.”

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