with Ramona Koval
Friday 9/04/1999

Martin Amis (Transcript)

Summary:

This week, a conversation with the acerbic English author Martin Amis.Son of the famous Kingsley Amis, Martin has carved his own niche in contemporary literature. Novelist, short story writer and literary journalist, he has created his reputation for satire and witty observation of contemporary manners with books like THE INFORMATION. His latest collection of short stories is HEAVY WATER AND OTHER STORIES.
(JONATHAN CAPE)

Details or Transcript:

Books and Writing's, Ramona Koval in conversation with English novelist, short story writer and literary journalist, Martin Amis. The son of celebrated comic writer Kingsley Amis, who became a difficult alcoholic eccentric, Martin Amis at forty-nine has made his own reputation for acerbic witty novels that deal with the grotesqueries of modern life and the monsters that it makes of people.

From his first novel the *Rachel Papers*, through *London Fields* to the last one, *Night Train*, Amis makes a splash. Who can forget the scandal around his last but one novel, *The Information*? And the million dollar advance he demanded for the book which dealt with animus and envy between two not very talented writers - so called friends Glynn Barry, the hugely successful one, and the other, Richard Tull who languished and festered.

Martin Amis's own life has had it's share of ups and downs. He left a marriage, took up with another American writer and left his agent, who was the wife of his former best friend, Julian Barnes - all this closely followed by a breathless media eager for dirt.

Martin Amis's newest book is a collection of short stories called *Heavy Water*, many of them published over the years in the *New Statesman* or *The New Yorker*. With a bit of trepidation, Ramona Koval spoke to Martin Amis from his home in London. Trepidation because as a master of the literary interview, Amis has interviewed and written profiles of some of the most interesting writers alive. In fact, in a profile of John Updike, Amis wrote that; "the literary interview will not tell you what a writer is like - far more compellingly to some, it will tell you what the writer is like to interview." He said that a personality is more palatable than a body of work - that the tragedy of modern marketing of the writer and Amis should know.

In *Heavy Water* Martin Amis is clearly interested in reversals. There's a story called *Career Move* about a screenwriter who languishes in his room waiting for yet another rejection slip from a little magazine. And a poet who is swept up by Hollywood for the latest sonnet he's written:

> When Luke finished the new poem - entitled, simply, *Sonnet*, he xeroxed the printout and faxed it to his agent. Ninety minutes later, he returned from the gym downstairs and prepared his special fruit juice while the answering machine told him, among many other things, to get back to Mike. Reaching for an extra line, Luke touched the pre-select for Talent International.
>
> 'Ah Luke," said Mike, "It's moving we've already had a response.'
>
> 'Yeah, how come? It's four in the morning where he is.'
>
> 'No, it's eight in the evening where he is. He's in Australia. Developing a poem with Peter Barry.'
>
> Luke didn't want to hear about Peter Barry. He bent, and tugged off his tank top. Walls and windows maintained a respectful distance - the room was a broad scene of sun haze and river light. Luke sipped his juice: it's extreme astringency caused him to lift both elbows and give a single embittered nod. He said, 'What did he think?'
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> 'Joe? He did back flips. It's "Tell Luke I'm blown away by the new poem. I just know that 'Sonnet' is really gonna happen." '
>
> Luke took this coolly. He wasn't at all old but he had been in poetry long enough to take these things coolly.
>
> Luke said, 'You haven't talked numbers yet. I mean like a ball park figure.'
>
> Mike said, 'We understand each other. Joe knows about Monad's interest and Tim at TCT.'
>
> 'Good,' said Luke.
>
> 'They'll want you to go out there at least twice,' said Mike. 'Initially to discuss... They can't get over it that you don't live there.'
>
> Luke said, 'Come on Mike. They know I hate all that LA crap.'

In other Amis stories in the collection, there's a description of a world in which most people are gay and heterosexuals are outed. In his novel, *Times Arrow*, he had time running backwards. There are all kinds of

reversals in much of his work, and so Ramona Koval began by asking about this propensity of Martin Amis for aksing himself, if only?

Martin Amis: It's not really a social exploration so much as a satirical one, in that you turn the world on it's head and perhaps in the end, in an educational way, you do see things clearer. But it's really the comic possibilities that appeal to me and in a way we can look again at the way that we actually do live. I think that writers in general when they step out into the street always wonder why it is this way and not another way. Because no one really decided any of this, some of us like to pretend that it took some other route earlier in the evolutionary chain.

Ramona Koval: You say it's not a social commentary, but Margaret Drabble once said of you that you were so horrified by the world you see in the process of formation that you feel compelled to warn us all about it. Do you think that's true? Are you horrified?

Martin Amis: No, I don't think I am. I don't think any writer really is and there are extreme examples. Perhaps Celine is one where you feel a deep antipathy and cynicism but I think, by definition, writers tend to be lovers of life - otherwise they wouldn't bother to adorn it, and order it and give it moral and comic point on the page.

Ramona Koval: Yet your last novel *Night Train* was about a woman who had everything - who was beautiful, intelligent and had a cosmic view of the universe as an astronomer, but she commits suicide. She judges it all to be not worth it.

Martin Amis: That's right. I did think I was playing devil's advocate with that short novel. And I thought well if we are going to do noir then it is a kind of noir novel - like a cathedral in the James Elroy mode. I thought then lets make it thematically as noir as we can get it. But that's not my feeling, that's just the difference between sincerity and literary sincerity, and I wanted to get it as noir as I could get it but that's not actually how I feel about things.

Ramona Koval: So it was an exercise?

Martin Amis: Well, no. It's an exploration of that dark chip in you that is capable of feeling that way about the world maybe one per cent of the time - let's hope it's not too much more than one per cent - but you can explore that significant fraction. In the end, *Money*, that novel...I took the one per cent of me that was a reckless debauchee like John Seff and imagined that the other ninety-nine per cent didn't exist. That's how novels are written.

> An hour into lunch in this fish restaurant for rich old men and something extraordinary was about to happen. Nothing from the outside world. It was just that Richard was on the verge of passionate speech. Yes: passionate speech.
>
> You don't think that's extraordinary? Oh, but it is. Try and think of the last time you did it. And I don't just mean 'Well I think it's absolutely disgraceful' or 'You're the one who brought it up in the first place' or 'Get straight back into your room and get into bed'. I'm talking speech" passionate

speech. *Speeches* hardly ever happen. We hardly ever give them or hear them. See how bad we are at it. 'Marius! Marco! The pair of you - are a pair!' See how we fuck it up. We salivate and iterate. Women can do it, or they get further, but when the chance of tears presents itself they usually take it. Not having this option, men just shut up. They're all *l'esprit de l'escalier*. Men are spirits on the staircase, wishing they'd said, wishing they'd said... Before he spoke, there in the button plush, Richard hurriedly wondered whether this had been a natural resource of men and women - passionate speech - before 1700 or whenever Elliot said it was, before thought and feeling got dissociated. The sensibility of men was evidently much more dissociated than the sensibility of women. Maybe, for women, it just never happened. Compared to men, women were Metaphysicals, Donnes and Marvells of brain and heart.

So, his passionate speech. Passionate speech, which unrolls, with thoughts and feelings dramatized in words. Passionate speech, which is almost always, a bad move.

Ramona Koval: The writerly life you depict is like a battle field - it's hardly the serene and quiet life of the garret is it?

Martin Amis: No, I think I've got a theory about that - why it is so rife with envy and all these other corrosive emotions. When you review an exhibition of paintings you don't compose a painting about it, when you review a film you don't make a film about it and when you review a new CD you don't make a little CD about it. But when you review a prose-narrative then you write a prose-narrative about that prose-narrative and those who write the secondary prose-narrative, lets face it, must've once had dreams of writing the primary prose-narrative. And so there is a kind of hierarchy of envy and all those other things. But actually the writers and are not serious writers at all in a sense, they're writers that never really developed. And in England writers get on pretty well I think - in America not so much but it's only the journalistic end of it where the course of emotions coagulate.

Ramona Koval: So it's money and the media?

Martin Amis: I think it's money. I think it's a cruising hostility that has to do with frustration and these days vulgarity, because the literary world certainly in England used to be an enclosed thing that only people who had a feeling for literature ever wandered into because the rewards were so tiny that you wouldn't bother otherwise. But now I think the gigantism of the media has meant that they soon run out of wife beating footballers and rent boy-loving politicians and they have to reach out further to find people whom they can chomp up and poop out and fill all those column entries with - and that's where the bad feeling gathers - not among the protagonists, not among the genuine writers.

Gwynn Barry was nearing the climax of a combined interview and photo session. Richard entered the room and crossed it in a diagonal with one hand effacingly raised,

and sat on a stool, and picked up a magazine. Gwynn was on the windowseat, in his archeologist's suit, also with archeologist's aura of outdoor living rugged enquiry, suntan.

The room - Gwynns' study, his library, his lab - was very bad. When in this room it was Richard's policy to stare like a hypnotist into Gwynn's greedy green eyes, for fear of what he might otherwise confront. He didn't really mind the furniture, the remoteness of the ceiling, the good proportion of the three front window. He really didn't mind the central space- platform of floppy disks and X-ray lasers. What he minded were Gwynn's books: Gwynn's books which multiplied or ramified so crazily now. Look on the desk, look on the table, and what do you find? The lambent horror of Gwynn in Spanish (sashed with quotes and reprint updates) or an American book-club, or supermarket paperback, or something in Hebrew or Mandarin, or cuneiform or pictogram that seemed blameless enough but had no reason to be there if it wasn't one of Gwynn's. And then Gallimard and Mondadori and Alberti and Zsolnay and Uitgeverij Contact and Kawade Shobo and Magvetö Könyvkiadó. In the past Richard had enjoyed several opportunities to snoop around Gwynns study - his desk, his papers. Are snoopers snooping on their own pain? Probably. I expect you get many young girls who. You would be delighted to hear that the. Your air tickets will be. The judges reached their decision in less than. These turns are we feel exceptionally. I am beginning to be translating your. Here is a photograph of the inside of my. Richard stopped flipping through the magazine on his lap (he had come to an interview with Gwynn Barry), and stood and surveyed the bookshelves. They were fiercely alphabetized. Richard's bookshelves weren't alphabetized. He never had time to alphabetize them. He was always too busy - looking for books he couldn't find. He had books heaped under tables, under beds. Books heaped on windowsills so they closed out the sky.

Ramona Koval: So you think things have really changed since your father, Kingsley Amis was writing, in that more refined time?

Martin Amis: Well, I would not say it's more refined and it's idle to complain about historical change. It may be a fad thing, but what it mainly is, is an inevitable thing. But I can feel it in my own lifetime. When I took up this profession it was a coherent little world, that dealt in cheques for twenty-five pounds for reviews and advances of two hundred and fifty pounds for first novels, and you would be an idiot if you were in there for anything other than the internal satisfaction. There were no interviews, no profiles, reading tours or photo sessions. All that has come along since the paper has got bigger and needed more pages to fill.

Ramona Koval: You lampoon all that so brilliantly in *The Information*. But then again that little world of the little magazine and the few pounds for a poem, you lampoon that too.

Martin Amis: I feel that with affection, because it was a world of dedicated people. But I feel the trouble with the expanded kind of gossipy literary world is that it's full of people who not only have no feeling for it but are actually unaware of what a novel is or what a poem is and who cheerfully assume, not even *accusingly* assume that you are just in it for the money, along with everybody else - and that's a dilution to be regretted - but it is as I say inevitable.

Ramona Koval: There is another theme that you follow and that is extremes of luck and talent. I think Nabokov once said that the only school of writing is talent, didn't he?

Martin Amis: He did - that there's only one school of writing, that of talent. He's penetratingly right there I think that all the groups and schools and movements and so on that Nabokov prided himself on for *not* being associated with are journalistic illusions and all that really shows through is originality, which is a synonym for talent.

Ramona Koval: I think in *The Coincidence of the Arts* - that short story *In Heavy Water* - there's a sign on a shop in New York saying: 'Omni's Art Material for The Artist in Everyone'. There is a sense that in New York City *everyone* is an artist even though they're making a living selling real estate or working in a restaurant. What's the story there? What's with them?

Martin Amis: Yes, there's that line in the film where the girl asks the guy what he does. And he says, "I'm an actor" and she says, "Which restaurant?" I think, that's a great tribute to the kind of bohemian picture of New York. In my view, being an artist is the best way to live. Who would not give it a shot before settling into being the middle aged waitress or the middle aged waiter.

Ramona Koval: Is it the best way to live? With all the things you write about, the envy, the jealousy, the plotting, the humiliation and the desperation to be remembered. Why is it a good way to live?

Martin Amis: It's the people who are basically dissatisfied by the day to day trudging - that 'get up in the morning, go to bed at night' existence that we lead and who insist on imposing another narrative on it which has all those things we talked about, like form and shape and point. It's a fascinating addiction. The only thing I would say, the only bit you regret over the years, is that you're so committed to nursing your time and your preoccupation that you do become a kind of ghost to the rest of your life and sometimes, particularly when your finishing a book, you'll go down in the evening and say to your wife, 'How was your day?', and you'll add in square brackets, 'As if I give a shit.'; and then you bounce your child on your knee, but it feels like some ghastly impostor that's doing it, and you feel you miss out there and you short change your family. But other than that, it's tip top.

Ramona Koval: It's a hugely egocentric endeavor that you're going to sit there and somebody is going to be so interested in what you think about anything and what you've written. It's a big ego that says that I'm going to devote my life to that. But then it's such a risk; it's such a risk to the fragile ego isn't it to have it out there and to have people say mean things?

Martin Amis: But that's the whole fluke of it, is that amazingly to you it

sinks in that over the years that what you produced in your study is of general interest or has sufficient general interest. When you feel you have a kind of core readership, then there's not too much worry about what else is said about you.

> *'Find time for my novel,' said Pharsin. He continued to urge such a course on Rodney for a further twenty minutes, saying, in conclusion, 'I gave you that typescript in good faith and I need your critique. You and I, we're both artists. And don't you think that counts for something?'*
>
> *In this city?*
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> *The sign said: Omni's Art Material - For the Artist in Everyone. But everyone was already an artist. The coffeeshop waiters and waitresses were, of course, actors and actresses; and the people they served were all librettists and scenarists, harpists, pointillists, ceramicits, caricaturists, contrapuntalists. The little boys were bladers and jugglers, the little girls, all ballerinas (bent over the tables in freckly discussions with their mothers or mentors). Even the babies starred in ads and had agents. And it didn't stop there. Outside, sculptors wheelbarrowed chunks of rock over painted pavements, passed busking flautists, and a troupe of clowns performed mime, watched by kibitzers doing ad lib and impro. And on and on and up and up. Jesters teetered by on ten-foot stilts. Divas practiced their scales from tenement windows. The AC installers were all installationists. The construction workers were all constructionists.*

That's from the Martin Amis story *The Coincidence of the Arts.*

Ramona Koval: You write so devastatingly about New York and LA and the Americans and you even had a column once for the *London Observer* called *Letter From New York*. What do you make of America?

Martin Amis: I think it's presumptuous to generalize about America because it's like generalizing about the planet. America is more like a world than a country. I think that one's feeling about it is determined by the fact that it is now the Super Power, and that it is further pitched into the future than Europe, as well as being besett by various barbaric attivisims. The most powerful country tends to write the most powerful novels because this is a feeling that rubs of on all citizens, just as the nineteenth century was the time for the big imperial all seeing panoptic English novel, the twentieth century has been the time for the American ditto. And that's what makes it so appealing to me.

Ramona Koval: You send it up so completely so often, but also there are American writers, as you say, that you think are writing the most important books - that you have a great affinity with. Saul Bellow for example, to whom together with his wife Janice you dedicated *Night Train*. Tell me about you and Bellow, do you see him as your literary mentor?

Martin Amis: Someone once said to me, is he your literary father. And I said no he's not my father, my father was my literary father, but he is that kind of figure to me on the American wing. And I said to him not long ago that as long as he's alive I will not feel entirely fatherless. And that's how far the paternal feeling goes. Although he's a good friend he is originally at least a figure, and of the writers that have meant most to me in this century then he is on one wing and another Russian American writer Nabokov is the another. And for Bellow, Nabokov is the great puppeteer and the great master of hauter and wonderful snootiness. Whereas Bellows has greater style in his different ways, but his feet are more firmly planted in life and that's as least as important as an influence to me.

Ramona Koval: His last book *The Actual*, was I suppose a rounding up a rounding off in a sense. It didn't have the viciousness and the speed of his other work.

Martin Amis: Well it's not a rounding off because he's just finished a full-length novel which is absolutely superb and quite barbed and full of elbows. And the illusion he gave that he was going to write the more delicate novellas and fade out with jocosian brevity and this idea has been reversed. Suddenly we have a big Saul Bellow.

Ramona Koval: Oh that's wonderful I'm really pleased to hear that.

Martin Amis: It is wonderful.

Ramona Koval: What about other American writers, Roth and Updike and De Lillo?

Martin Amis: Roth ... well, I'm a huge fan of *Portnoy*, and the *Counterlife* but I'm not so sure about him now. Updike is amazing and wonderful, and even though he wrote a hostile review of *Night Train* I still love him. Doe Lillo I think is the new genius who's carrying on the great American domination of the post-war twentieth century novel for at least another half a generation, because one or two things are very noticeable about American fiction at the moment - that the Jewish novel is going to die with it's current exponents (there are no replacements queuing up behind Roth and Bellow and Mailer and Heller) - that phenomenon seems to be coming to an end. And although De Lillo and perhaps Pynchon and Robert Stone are fighting a good and last battle at the moment it seems that the superiority is passing to the Brits at the moment.

Ramona Koval: And which Brits do you read?

Martin Amis: Well I only read my mates because I have a policy about not reading my contemporaries.

Ramona Koval: Why?

Martin Amis: It's a time and motion question really because time hasn't had time to weed out the excellent from the not so excellent, so I only read the books of the people I'm going to meet next week. Two of my very best friends are Ian McEwan and Salman Rushdie and I read them with great admiration, but otherwise I tend to read a generation behind usually.

Ramona Koval: Who do you read, poets?

Martin Amis:I still read poetry, and care about poetry a lot and I wouldn't of written *Career Move* unless I not only read but also sympathized with the poets who have the short end of the stick generally in all worldly rewards. And for that reason, strike me as more dedicated. And my father was a poet as well as a novelist and always cared much more about poetry than fiction and I still think that at least for another half a millenium, well half a century, poetry is still going to be more important than fiction, more central to what literature is.

Ramona Koval: Why, because?

Martin Amis: Well, because what the poet does is slow things down and really examines the moment with meticulous care and meticulous meaning, besett by small fears and really try and locate a moment of significance. Novelists are trying to do that as well but at a much greater speed and without letting things slow down. And I think that's what writing should be doing, is examining things very, very carefully. So poetry remains for awhile at the pinnacle but you look around and you think that compared to say eighty years ago, the big figures are now the novelists rather than the poets.

Philip Larkin 1992-1985

Philip Larkin was not an inescapable presence in America, as he was in England; and to some extent you can see America's point. His Englishness was so desolate and inhospitable that even the English were scandalised by it. Certainly, you won't find his work on the Personal Growth or Self- Improvement shelves in your local bookstore. 'Get out as early as you can,' as he once put it. 'And don't have any kids yourself.'

Anti-intellectual, incurious and reactionary ('Oh, I adore Mrs. Thatcher'), Larkin was himself an anti-poet. He never wanted to go anywhere, or do anything. 'I've never been to America, nor to anywhere else, for that matter.' Asked by an interviewer whether he would like to visit, say, China, he replied, 'I wouldn't mind seeing China if I could come back the same day.' He never read his poems in public, never lectured on poetry, and never taught anyone how to write it'. He lived in Hull, which is like living in Akron, Ohio, with the further advantage that it is more or less impossible to get to.

Ramona Koval: You wrote a lovely obituary for Philip Larkin, who was a friend of your father's and your brother's Godfather, but you describe his life as very very limited, limited to Hull?

Martin Amis: Yes, no marriage, no children, no war, no travel. He makes my father look like Evil Kaneevel. I've always found that kind of moving, that the people of that generation who settled for such a miserable and constricted life to write the poetry. But, I always feel it's a deep subconscious deal that you accept a melancholic life if you know

that your talent is melancholic, most eloquent, upon that theme.

Ramona Koval: The image of him with one chair at the table so that he won't have anybody sit down with him, much less stay with him, is so sad and so miserable.

Martin Amis: I know, but he got great poems out of it and that is real dedication. More than that it's self-immolation. And it's that vocational ideas that are very strong in me and I feel are kind of going out of style.

Ramona Koval: You've said that you never write something because you're interested in the subject, that you write something because it's given to you to write. So are you saying really that Philip Larkin was given that kind of personality and the kind of life out of which he was going to write those kinds of poems. He wasn't going to be able to write great passionate love poems or poems of travel.

Martin Amis: That's right and Peter Porter's 70th birthday has just been celebrated over here and I contributed to a festschrift and said that in a different way Peter had done the same kind of thing and although compared to Larkin he'd lived deliciously and travelled and had children and all the rest that he had very much hunched up his shoulders to nurture a kind of excluded melancholy, a thwarted melancholy and he'd done it. And you know, that's what one finally admires is the collected poems, not that collected in life.

Ramona Koval: Yes, I think in that obituary you wrote you said that when he was growing up wasn't it that he didn't like anybody but as he actually grew older he discovered it was really only children he disliked.

Martin Amis: That's right, nasty selfish little brutes, he said. He was always very respectful of my brother and me and although a very mean godfather, my godfather would drunkenly shower us with ten shilling note, but Larkin would solemnly count out three pennies each, or rather three for me and four for my brother because he was older.

Ramona Koval: Did you complain to your father? Did your brother complain to your father about how come he got that kind of godfather?

Martin Amis: Yes, I think we did. But it was possible that my father would slip us sixpence on top of Larkins' miserable offerings.

Ramona Koval: It's kind of perverse to make a man who hates children a godfather of anybody.

Martin Amis: Well I don't know, I think my brothers proud to be his godson and when my sister was born three and a half years after me he wrote a very sweet poem called *Born Yesterday* for Fanny Amis - and that's quite a present to have.

> The boys heard a loud bedraggled wail from across the passage. This sound, it's register of pain or grief, was unconnectable to their father or anyone else they knew, so perhaps some stranger or creature - ? Marco sat back, thus tugging at his tangle of duckling and velociraptor, and the little table slewed; his eyes had time to widen before it fell, had time to glaze with tears of contrition and

preemption before Richard came into the room. On patient days he might have just said, 'Now what have we here?'or, 'This is a sorry tangle', or more simply (and more likely), 'Jesus Christ'. But not this Sunday morning. Instead, Richard strode forward and with a single swoop of his open hand dealt Marco the heaviest blow he had ever felt. Marius, sitting utterly still, noticed how the air in the room went on rolling, like the heaving surface of the swimming-pool even after the children had all climbed out.

Twenty years from now, this incident would be something the twins could lie back and tell their psychiatrists about - the day their father's patience went away. And never returned, not fully, not in it's original form. But they would never know what really happened that Sunday morning, the chaotic wail, the fiercely crenellated lips, the rocking boy on the sitting-room floor. What happened that Sunday morning was this: Gwynn Barry's *Amelior* entered the bestseller list, at number nine.

Ramona Koval: In *The Information* there's a really ambivalent attitude to children. Richard Tull is, I think, a truly dreadful father. He hardly has a moment to give to them when he's not plotting the downfall of his friend Gwynn Barry. It was a bit of a shock to read such parental ambivalence and yet it's probably very common.

Martin Amis: Well you're protecting you're solitude if you're a writer and actually I think he's a much too permissive because, lazy parent, but not an unloving one and that's the main thing. I certainly am much more tolerant of intrusion than my father ever was. You could never go into my fathers study without a very good excuse. Whereas my boys, sloop up to my study and just lie on the sofa and I make the effort and chat to them as if it's perfectly legitimate to do that. I remember really gearing myself to enter my fathers study because he protected it so fiercely.

Ramona Koval: Did you get the impression that what he was doing was a sort of a holy endeavor?

Martin Amis: My mother infuriated him one time by saying, 'Come out of your father's study children. "your father is writing a poem." - with sarcastic quotation marks around it. I know he never forgot that. I thought he was preoccupied. I just felt that when he came down for a cup of coffee he still looked it. And that's the thing that's hard for writers' families to understand that when you come down for a cup of coffee you're still working.

Ramona Koval: What about the fathering of you? Do you feel that your dad did a good job with you while tending a blooming career of his own?

Martin Amis: I think he did a very good job. Although, he was naturally indolent and left almost all the child rearing to my mother, who was pretty much on for that really, that was the most important thing for her. In all the most important ways I'd give him top marks. For the great transitions in my life, he was always endlessly sympathetic and imaginative and gave it a lot of thought and help.

Ramona Koval: When your first novel *The Rachel Papers* was not only well received it was actually plagiarized by an American, which I suppose is the greatest form of flattery. Was he threatened by your success at all?

Martin Amis: I think it was less fun for him than it was for me, this perhaps unique relationship of two writers who at the same time had a body of work out there. I don't think there are any other examples of that. It irritated him, because you are naturally irritated by your youngers and in one unusually candid conversation, he said because the younger writers are always saying to the older writers, it isn't like that anymore you've lost your knack for listening to the current rhythms of thought, the younger guys are saying to you that you can no longer hear that and no one wants that particular message.

Ramona Koval: He sometimes says publicly that he couldn't finish a particular book, that he had some criticisms of your writing, did he say that privately as well?

Martin Amis: It was actually more in the press, than in person. No, we conducted that little feud in public and actually seldom talked about it.

Ramona Koval: Was it real? Or was it his way of saying well if I praise my son's work in public, people will think that's obvious - but if I criticize it, people might take him more seriously or something.

Martin Amis: Oh no, no it was real alright and the trouble with him was that where most of us would tell a white lie to preserve a relationship, he was incapable of saying anything he didn't mean about literature. I'm a complete hooker when it comes to that, but he was very straight and oh no it was for real.

Ramona Koval: Are you a complete hooker, you'd do it for money?

Martin Amis: No, I just do it for a quite life. But if a semi-friend or a minor acquaintance of mine gave me a novel to read and I read it and didn't think much of it I would lie, but he was incapable of lying about literature. He was true to his feelings about it and I respect that. But if my sons wrote novels I think I would read them.

Ramona Koval: And if they were better than yours wouldn't you be thrilled and proud?

Martin Amis: Yes, I think I would.

Ramona Koval: Your mother was your father's first wife. That's right isn't it?

Martin Amis: That's right.

Ramona Koval: Because they had this most remarkable thing happen to them later in life that when your father was older and sicker, your mother moved in with him and her third husband and they lived in the same house and your mother looked after him.

Martin Amis: That's right, but they were not conventional people.

Ramona Koval: So there must have been an enormous amount of feeling between them that they could come to that kind of arrangement

at the end of their lives.

Martin Amis: Yes, it was a pragmatic arrangement in that my father had been left by his second wife, Elizabeth Jane Howard (the novelist), and he was a phobic man who couldn't fly or drive or even take a tube train by himself and he didn't like to be in house alone after dark. And my mother and her husband were financially hard up and so the two pieces just seemed to fit. So my brother and I managed a trial dinner and they decided to give it a go. We thought it would only last a few months but it lasted until his death thirteen years later.

Publications:

Heavy Water and Other Stories
Martin Amis
(JONATHAN CAPE)

The Information
Martin Amis
(JONATHAN CAPE)

Presenter:
Ramona Koval

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