

"Bestial turbulence"

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Martin Amis entered the bar of his Toronto hotel in the state a therapist might call 'recovery.' Having already been chauffeured through various interviews, his Random House chaperone led him to the table with the after-effects of his flight into Pearson airport still visible. As he gingerly settled in behind an espresso, there was a sense of *deja vu* to the scene.

Different hotel, New York, 1996. Amis was mildly wrecked after having bounced around inside some angry cirrus on the way to JFK. Bad planes appear in both his fiction and his journalism. Surely this flight into Toronto was an ordeal because, for him, they all are. "No," he reassured me, "It was very specifically horrible."

There followed a story about a "tiny, cramped, hot" Air Canada plane circling the airport for 45 minutes "in bestial turbulence," with "the clouds shaking it, as a dog shakes a rat." He delivers this last with the mordant relish for life's trials recognizable from the books, languorously drawing out words in a smoke-cured baritone.

But "a crisis can't go on being a crisis." A crisis is acute; it has to end, or become something else. Planes land (one way or another), and even Amis' super-publicized mid-life upheaval (divorce, sundered friendship, massive book contract - all yesterday's birdcage-liner) has closed behind the publication of *Experience*. Amis' literary memoir has been splashed across pages usually reserved to celebrity - in the glossies *Vanity Fair* and *Talk* (with whom Amis has a publishing deal), and in every major newspaper in Britain, where even now the critics line up on either side of the posterity divide.

At 50, Amis is still reassuringly terrified of flying, and relaxingly lacking in *soigné*: navy off-the-rack-author jacket, hair by undertaker, both confirmed he is not spending his money on his looks. The descriptions, in *Experience*, of lower-jaw tumours and an Inquisition of dental torture were understandably humbling for critics of the purportedly vain £14,000 dental work. His hands are tremulous, perhaps the result of "not out-of-control, but habitual" drinking.

Either that, or he's a shambles from the book tour.

"And if you really want to see what a tour will do, check me out in 21/2 weeks." He rolls three Golden Virginia cigarettes during the hour-long conversation, a confirmed if not excessive smoker. Amis has written before, and repeats here over his espresso, how literature does not - cannot - prepare you for the "the Main Events, particularly the main one of getting all fucked up in the end." Here comes the inevitable physical

decline of middle age, and he's feeling it. "I started to have tremendous pain in the hips. And you think, 'What's this, cancer of the nuts?'"

Instead, stretching exercises were prescribed. He went twice a week to a Pilates class, because only through this could he continue to play tennis. And then "the stretching sort of replaced the tennis."

Age 50 seems early for discussions of a writer's place in history, but Amis invited the debate. The memoir about his father which he mentioned in a car in the Manhattan rain in '96 became *Experience*, an epistolary, anecdotal but still novelistic meditation on loss and discovery.

The entire life was raw material (and the precision of memory, in details and the convincing recollection of feelings, is impressive), and the rarity of the pere-et-fils author relationship was the spark, but the focal period is '94-99. During that time, Amis lost his father twice: first the novelist's memory and vocabulary failed, with all due portent for the son; then the dad succumbed. Amis then learned a cousin, Lucy Partington, had been a victim to serial killer Fred West, the English equivalent of a hillbilly ghoul; discovered he had a college-aged daughter through a '70s affair with a woman, Lamorna Seale, who killed herself; and fathered two daughters by his second wife.

"And I'm not sure I want to read another review of *Experience*" he says now. "There's that nice bit in Humboldt's Gift when Charlie Citrine is walking down some alley in Chicago, and a guy comes out to mug him. And he says 'I took off. He chased me but I was amazed at how fast I was. So I'm still doing okay. I'm still outspeeding passionate criminals on the streets of Chicago'."

The story is meant to illustrate Amis' strong connection to Saul Bellow, his jones for tough survivor talk, and the distance he can still put between himself and his perceived enemies. Eric Jacobs was Kingsley Amis' biographer. Jacobs and Martin exchanged correspondence; Jacobs then scandalized the Amis clan, selling intimate stories from Kingsley's sickroom to the press. Jacobs apologized, but then "slagged me off again in the Times." The episode ends with a passionate attack on the Fourth Estate ("those toiling smallholders" with their "world-famous attributes of intrusiveness, negligence, vulgarity and dipsomania") in an appendix to *Experience*.

"I can speculate all I can and I haven't got any fresh clues why he did it. Of my family, I am the least vindictive. My brother said he wanted him dead. Same with my sister and mother." Jacobs, Amis says, had an "exaggerated notion" of the relationship with Kingsley," and adds an off-the-record comment to back this up.

"But let's not give it (criticism) false prominence, because one of my father's gifts to me was thickskinnedness, conferred by example." Nevertheless, "When it's your life, it's different."

The future of that life will probably be in America, particularly Long Island, N.Y., where Amis feels he will move, having "written his London

novels." Amis spent New Year's Eve with Salman Rushdie in the Millennium Dome. Hoping for a millennial frisson, he got "a six-hour stopover in a second-rate German airport. I thought it was going to be a glittering occasion, but it was a dog."

While he plans that future, the past keeps nosing its way in. In satisfying parallel with *Experience*, the life observes no linear progression, bouncing from generation to generation. I thought of titling this piece "Faster Than Fiction," after Amis' description of how he writes journalism. In fact, he has written that "I find journalism only moderately easier than fiction," and he is briefly returning to it. Having finished with *Experience* (if not experience), Amis is writing another kind of memoir now. "Don't worry, it's only 60 pages long," but longer in ambition: a "political memoir plus a shot at amateur historiography on Bolshevism."

The pamphlet will be grander than that. He wants to stimulate popular debate on the significance of the 20th century Russian Soviet experience - the 20 million or so who died in famine, in gulag, in purge, and the concurrent murder of the truth. "The Holocaust is where it is" in the human imagination, but Amis wants to give the Russian experience something it doesn't have: a name.

And as with all things Amis at the moment, there is a family link. Kingsley Amis was friends with anti-Stalin historian Robert Conquest. Amis and the 83-year-old had dinner recently. "Very satisfyingly, he's become a friend of mine now."

That prompted a question. "I'm guessing part of turning 50 is that people your age or older are much more interesting than people who are 25."

"Yeah." ***** The 25-year-olds remain interested. The Mockingbird, a warehousey bar on King St. W., is packed with them as Amis settles in for a brief reading, followed by a Q&A moderated by former Governor General Award winner Paul Quarrington. Like the audience, Quarrington is star-struck, and Amis' allure is never clearer.

Unlike many coevals, Amis has a foot planted firmly in post-modernism; he is a character in two of his own novels. While his critics offer him left-handed compliments for style, for the omnivocabulary, the precision and intellect, they always dismiss the content; but for this audience, that's half the draw. One major Amis concern, something we might call Fucked-Planet Syndrome, resonates deeply with the literate young and their dread of genetic tampering, all of them experienced with the old stories of AIDS and Acid Rain. And then there is the allure of faded bad-assedness.

I came to praise Amis, not to bury him, and for the right reasons. A seasoned (born?) performer, he sends frisson after off-colour frisson through the crowd. He recently interviewed porn king John Stagliano, partly for an article, partly for his upcoming novel. "Sitting by the porno

pool, on the porno patio,” he asks Stagliano why anal sex is so popular in porn right now. Why so much anal, John? “Because pussies are bullshit,” Stagliano says.

Stagliano’s vulgarity is a lead-in for a story about Amis, Rushdie and other lit hitters substituting “Bullshit” for “Pussy” in various phrases and titles: Bullshit-whipped. Bullshit Galore. OctoBullshit. He builds laugh after laugh, sliding in jokes about Wales being “the Puerto Rico of the U.K.” By literary standards, where the great majority of readings are a German airport stopover, this is entertainment, and it proceeds from political incorrectness to human truths about family, about authors and their readers. The fans understand: there’s no bullshit, and he’s no pussy.

By comparison, Quarrington is understandably awkward. He praises *Experience* for its “fabulous footnotes, which are, if anything, better than...” and he breaks off with a clang, realizing what he’s saying. “There’s a popular myth that your father didn’t like your books...”

“Oh no, that’s not a myth” Amis interjects. “The myth is that we didn’t get on.” The ensuing story of a political fight between Kingsley and Martin includes his dad shouting “If you’re against nuclear weapons, you’re probably gonna wear ITAL/ sandals / CLOSE next.” And many sandaled Torontonians shift from foot to foot, laughing nervously.

Then they troop into line - seemingly all of them - for autographs. Amis’ own youth appears in *Experience* in the form of letters, written to Kingsley and stepmother Eizabeth Jane Howard from college, where Amis was trying out the new vocabulary. The letters come with apologies but are included, nonetheless, in all their callowness. “And incuriosity” Amis had said. “They’re there to show the distance you’ve traveled. Also because they’re horribly revealing.”