



Enough, says Amis, in Eagleton feud

Warring professors of cultural theory and creative writing fight themselves to a standstill over Islam

Maev Kennedy
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Guardian

After a week of thunderous rumblings as academic titans laid about one another, yesterday began with a plea from one side: "Can I ask him, in a collegial spirit, to shut up about it?"

Fat chance.

A row over attitudes to Islam and the politics of east and west, which began with a spirited exchange of views between Terry Eagleton, professor of cultural theory at the University of Manchester, and novelist Martin Amis - now also a professor, since becoming head of creative writing at the same university - has spread to embrace Amis's late father Kingsley, his stepmother novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard, and the critic and columnist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown.

This round began a year ago with an interview which Martin Amis gave, and an essay around the fifth anniversary of the destruction of the twin towers.

In the essay, *The Age of Horrorism*, Amis wrote that moderate Islam had lost a civil war within the faith.

In the interview, he said: "There's a definite urge - don't you have it? - to say, 'The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.' What sort of suffering? Not letting them travel. Deportation - further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they're from the Middle East or from Pakistan." Yesterday, in a letter to the *Guardian*, he protested: "I was not 'advocating' anything. I was conversationally describing an urge - an urge that soon wore off."

For Prof Eagleton, a Marxist literary critic, nothing wore off. This autumn he wrote a new preface for his 1991 text, *Ideology: An Introduction*, turning on the late Kingsley Amis, who described as "a racist, anti-semitic boor, a drink-sodden, self-hating reviler of women, gays and liberals". For good measure he added: "Amis fills his clearly learnt more from him than how to turn a shapely phrase." It was the Amis politics, rather than prose style, which offended him: "Not the ramblings of a British National party thug, but the reflections of Martin Amis, leading luminary of the English metropolitan literary world."

This drew several more combatants into the ring: the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard, second wife of Kingsley Amis, and her gay brother Colin Howard both wrote to the *Telegraph*, strenuously defending Kingsley.

Next came columnist and commentator Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, who has repeatedly called for voices of moderate Islam to speak out, and recalled, in Monday's *Independent*, that Martin Amis had bought her two drinks at last year's Cheltenham literary festival, and perhaps mistakenly assumed they were on the same side. There followed a counter-blast from Eagleton on the *Guardian's* Comment Is Free website, describing "Amis and his political allies" as "stomach-churning".

Yesterday brought Amis himself back into the ring, with his plea in the *Guardian*, and an open letter to Alibhai-Brown in the *Independent*, telling her that "Islamism, in most of its manifestations, not only wants to kill me - it wants to kill you." Last night Yasmin Alibhai-Brown said that if she had uttered his sentiments on the impulse to

hurt Muslims, "I would be handcuffed and taken off as a thought terrorist. All Martin has had to suffer is a couple of people crossing words with him."

A message from Martin Amis yesterday evening said: "He has nothing further to add." Read that as, "for now".

Plain speaking: In their own words

What can we do to raise the price of them doing this? There's a definite urge - don't you have it? - to say, 'The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.' What sort of suffering? Not letting them travel. Deportation - further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they're from the Middle East or from Pakistan ... Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children.'

Martin Amis, interviewed by Ginny Dougary, Times, September 2006

'Moderate Islam is always deceptively well-represented on the level of the op-ed page and the public debate; elsewhere it is supine and inaudible.'

The Age of Horrorism, essay by **Martin Amis**, Observer, September 2006

'A racist, anti-semitic boor, a drink-sodden, self-hating reviler of women, gays and liberals. Amis fils has clearly learned more from [him] than how to turn a shapely phrase'

Terry Eagleton, on Kingsley Amis and his son Martin, preface to 2007 edition Ideology: an Introduction

'Martin Amis ... generously bought me two drinks at the Cheltenham festival last year and seemed to believe we are on the same side. He should hold off the first sip ... I see him as another kind of threat to the kind of society I stand up for. He is with the beasts ... the Muslim-baiters and haters, these days as likely to come from the Groucho and Garrick clubs as the nasty secret venues used by the neo-fascists.'

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Independent, 8/10/07

'There is something rather stomach-churning at the sight of those such as Amis and his political allies, champions of a civilisation that for centuries has wreaked untold carnage throughout the world, shrieking for illegal measures when they find themselves for the first time on the sticky end of the same treatment.'

Terry Eagleton, Guardian Unlimited, 10/10/07

'I have never even heard of this man Eagleton. But he seems to be a rather lethal combination of having been a Roman Catholic and become a Marxist ... He strikes me as like a spitting cobra - if you get within his range he'll unleash some poison.'

Elizabeth Jane Howard, Daily Mail, 11/10/07

'The extremists for now have the monopoly of violence, intimidation, and self-righteousness. Meanwhile I don't want to stripsearch you, Yasmin, or do anything else that would even momentarily surprise your dignity, or that of any other eirenic Muslim.'

Martin Amis, open letter to Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Independent, 12/10/07

'I was not "advocating" anything. I was conversationally describing an urge ... that soon wore off. And I hereby declare that "harassing the Muslim community in Britain" would be neither moral nor efficacious. Prof Eagleton is making a habit of this kind of thing ... He has submitted to an unworthy combination of venom and sloth. Can I ask him, in a collegial spirit, to shut up about it?'

Martin Amis, letter to the Guardian, 12.10.07

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