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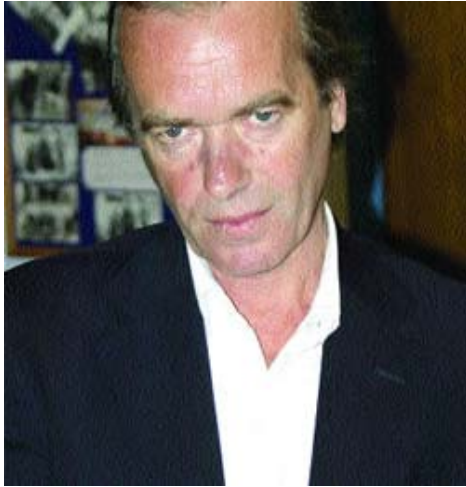
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REVIEWS

BY GERALD ISAAMAN



It's a mad, mad, wo inspires Martin



Martin Amis

Gerald Isaaman catches up with Primrose Hill Cheltenham Festival

**Yellow Dog by Martin Amis
Jonathan Cape £16.99**

He's as small as a jockey and just as lean. The face swept back hair until he smiles, yet he has an actor expressive.

"Yes, I was a bit of a bully at school, on the rare occasion smaller than me I made them pay for it," admits Martin. "But I haven't been duffed up for 35 years." It is not difficult for the author, once considered the literature with his dark and violent stories, to come since he only rarely offers an official insider's glance sits casually on the stage at Cheltenham Town Hall jeans, and cowboy boots, rolling his own cigarettes shame, and to tell us about his nasty, barking Yellow

This is his first novel for six years, one partly delayed Kingsley Amis, who, like Martin, now 54, lived in Primrose Hill used the area, plus the bleaker sides of Camden Town. Yet the event, part of the Cheltenham Festival of Literature, is a chance to unburden with wit the stresses of living in a madcap world his own books enliven.

Indeed, before Amis reads from *Yellow Dog*, he revives the death when his airplane en route to Malaga received a message made an emergency landing at a military airfield in

"It didn't just wallow, as they do, but came down a little into the tarmac," Amis recalls. "We were in the cra-

those rubber tubes.

"Now I had fortified myself with alcohol and valium. I'm not a confident flyer but I am a confident drinker and taker of valium. So I was strolling the airfield where people were lying on the floor, screaming and clutching their pacemakers. And I thought it had come through it wonderfully well."

Not so. Delayed shock set in. "I began to feel really ill and thought I was dying. I lay there trembling, sloshing around in the bed. I thought I had been tremendously brave but in fact the fear had just backed itself up into my system. I had a week of it suffering from dhengi fever." So that explains why there are airplanes symbolically flying out of control in *Yellow Dog*, which he describes as a comic reaction to September 11, one with satirical blows aimed at the tabloid press and the Royal family too.

"I thought I was submitting to the inevitable," Amis explains. "The middle classes play a very minor role in my novels – criminals, the lumpen proletariat, aristocracy, intelligentsia but no bourgeoisie. I think it is because I like to have violent extremes, my little humour of exaggeration. I just humbly said yes when my unconscious suggested royalty to me."

He read various books about royalty to give himself background and found that he more or less approved of the royal family in a lazy kind of a way. "I thought they help in the racial rainbow, they more or less pay for themselves, and it is too much trouble and work to get rid of them," he insisted. "Also they weirdly allow the country to have episodes of benign irrationality where you suddenly think you are feeling rather good and you don't why."

However, Amis ended up rejecting the royals. "It's partly to do with the institution moving into an age where it is unsustainable," he pointed out. "In my novel there's Henry the IX, Queen Pam, who is in a persistent vegetative state after a riding accident, and there is Princess Victoria, their 15-year-old daughter.

"I thought you can't ask the next generation to distort their lives in this way. It's too much to ask.

"Just as I was finishing, I read a piece which said that Prince William was absolutely horrified by what lay ahead of him. Then, in subsequent weeks, they obviously had a word with him and he started talking about duty and tradition. They are going to demand it of him – and they shouldn't."

He started *Yellow Dog* five years ago but laid it aside to absorb the death of his father and write his own memoirs.

"I didn't feel the sort of playfulness you need to write fiction, even for serious, heavy fiction," he says. "I came back to it on September 10, 2001, and was settling down and finding it was marvellous freedom to be writing fiction again, and not to be limited by the truth or actuality as you are with a memoir. Then the event happened and, like every other writer on earth, the next day I was considering a change in occupation.

"The fighting spirit said let's get back to the novel but also let's resolve that it is going to be a comic novel. The values that were attacked on the day were very much values such as reason and civilisation. There was also the possibility of humour after an enormous blow like that. Reason and humour are indivisible." The impact of the World Trade Center catastrophe impinged on his two daughters – one just two at the time – who got fed up of watching the US Open Tennis Championships on TV and kept switching on the airplanes flying into the twin towers. "You feel fraudulent that you've brought them in to such an adolescent planet, trembling with faith and fear and constant irrationality," declares Amis.

That fraudulence extends into one of the characters in *Yellow Dog*, a PC guy who believes women should rule the world because the men have ruined it, but who becomes a sexual abuser of girls after suffering a chronic head injury.

"Thinking about fathers who sexually abuse their children, intuitively you feel it

is connected with an animalistic, protective instinct," he says. "It's like a mother hamster who eats her children to get them back inside. I have never doubted that any such abuse of a child is a violent act, not a loving act. But how can these things be so confused?"

Yet Amis accepts he has an obsession with violence, reading Mad Frankie Fraser's three volumes of memoirs before writing *Yellow Dog*. "As a species, we seem incapable of learning that a violent solution is not a solution," he declares.

His creation of the salacious *Morning Lark* is his attack on tabloids. He exposes too the damnation of language by the use of text messages, two dots wickedly used to abbreviate colon cancer. Indeed, the obscenification of modern day life appears in his opening chapter. He worries too how the inhibitions of his parents' generation have been so easily lost. "The newspaper world has its own kind of shifting, cruising morality which just parks itself anywhere," he protests. "It's that close to nihilism."

Yet there is love in his brutal environment, and he needs love too, he says, though not the rosettes and sashes of literary prizes. The love he desires comes from his relationship with his reader, a "kind of marriage judged on the daily quality of your verbal intercourse," as he puts it, the more so as he describes writing as "an expression of freedom".

"In England, the writer is taken rather less seriously than the man and woman in the street," adds Amis poignantly. "Other countries have a contrary tradition where they look to their writers every now and then for guidance. But in England you are meant to shut up and disappear – and leave the crisis to the real men. I feel that sometimes I have something to say but I don't think it's an obligation. All writing is educational. You want to enrich the lives of your readers. That's the impulse – to delight and instruct your readers."

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