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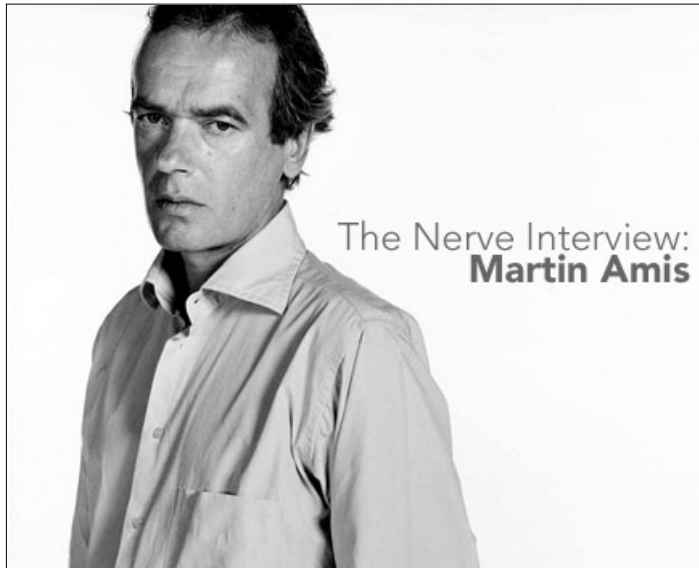
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A few years ago, when it was announced that Martin Amis was writing a novel concerning pornography, the royal family and pedophilia, the reaction in his home country was, shall we say, slightly elevated. Now that book, *Yellow Dog*, has been published, and Amis has faced a storm of criticism, most poignantly encapsulated by fellow English author Tibor Fischer, who suggested that reading *Yellow Dog* was akin to finding “your favorite uncle ... in a school playground, masturbating.”

But Amis is no stranger to the hard stuff. His previous books — such as *Success* (1978) and *Money* (1984), as well as his famously dirty short story, “Let Me Count the Times” (1981) — smartly conflated pornography with literary fiction long before that was in vogue. In 2000, he wrote a long and oddly contemplative essay for *Talk* magazine in which he interviewed John “Buttman” Stagliano and the XXX starlet Chloe, the self-proclaimed “Queen of Anal.”

The protagonist of *Yellow Dog*, Xan Meo, suffers a vicious attack that renders him helplessly sex obsessed. Eventually, he’s drawn into an ugly blackmail scheme involving the royal family and an illicit videotape. Nothing that follows will seem particularly shocking to fans of the Amis oeuvre, in which unreasonably bad things often happen to reasonably good people, making them become bad, and do bad things — namely incest, murder and a fair amount of impolite ejaculating. What might be surprising, however, is that the author doesn’t find that funny anymore.

Here, Nerve talks to Amis about his own relationship to pornography, the pervasiveness of the facial come shot, and the Great Satan of porn.

— [Philip Higgs](#)

For the new novel, how did you come to focus on porn?

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Q: Have you ever slept with a source?

surprising way. Like everything else, it's lost its shame. One is always writing about the same things, really, and I've done it before, and I'm just coming back to it from a different perspective in time.

### Are you a fan of porn?

[*laughs*] Well it's hard to be a fan here [in England], because there is none. I mean, there are sex channels, but all the action is obscured by someone's shoe, or a bowl of flowers. You'd have to be a very dedicated user of the Internet, now, to become addicted to it, as everyone seems to be. But I don't know how to use the Internet, and there's no pornography around. So, no. [And] I'm too old for it now.

promotion

### So, you're too lazy to get the porn?

I think, like every other man, there's a bit of me that would be perfectly happy looking at pictures of naked women for the rest of my life and doing nothing else at all. But I'm also of the generation that is slightly squeamish and resists it. I'm not evolved in that way. I have moral doubts about it, and they're increasing as pornography surges into the mainstream. What strikes me is that it has now taken the place of sex education, and the idea of one's children's sexuality being formed by some medallion-in-the-chest-hair artist in Los Angeles is daunting.

### I didn't grow up with the Internet, but I was exposed to sex at a young age — *Penthouse* or *Playboy* or whatever from an older brother. So there's always an introduction point, especially in the young man's life, to the pornographic side of sex. Is it the sheer mass of it all that's the problem now?

We're not sure what it is, whether it's a problem or not, but it's certainly bizarre. [Looking at *Penthouse* or *Playboy*] is not like watching hours of bump n' grind. It's hard to get a sex education out of them.

### Unless you read those little columns.

Right. But it's the graphic nature of it, with several sexual acts — well, at least one main sex act that's hardly featured in the mainstream, or never used to be, anyway. I'm referring to the facial. I've talked to young people who say that's very much part of the repertoire now.

### The repertoire in what they see or what they do?

What they do.

### Oh. Well.

[*laughs*] Yeah.

### There's an awful lot of sperm being spent in *Yellow Dog*, as there is in *Money*. Is it all some kind of onanistic warning against the wasting of the life force or something?

Well, that's what I come up with in the end [of *Yellow Dog*]; that's the reason why women object more strongly to pornography, or used to. That's their power base. If babies were made by other means — like telepathy or sneezing, say — then women wouldn't have a reason to object to pornography, because then it doesn't attack their sort of *raison d'être*: the power to give birth. And let's be clear: What pornography deals with is the sexual act that peoples the world, an absolutely fundamental act. Women don't object to gay pornography for that reason, I think, because nothing's going to waste; it's not to do with their primeval power.

### That's a pretty heavy biblical, moralist way to see things.

I don't think women consciously think that, I think that's the reason why they really do object to it in a way that men don't.



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**There's also a fair amount of anal sex in the book — a whole section on why "pussies are bullshit." Is this another take on the seed-spilling warning?**

Well, it's sort of animalistic and, well, dirty.

**In "Let Me Count the Times," there's a facial shot or two, and loads of masturbation. Where were you coming from, pornographically, in 1981, versus now? Is the porn zeitgeist much thicker?**

It's a moving target. More specifically, an evolving target. In *Yellow Dog*, it's the sort of unembarrassed nature of pornography that I'm getting at. Along with other failures of modesty in the contemporary landscape. For instance, the mobile phone, and the new democracy of the midriff. And reality TV shows and all the rest of it. The loss of inhibition is so complete and, as it were, effortless, that it makes me feel — every now and then and not for very long at a time — like a sort of medieval puritan.

**Is this the Great Moral Shift of the Oughties? What's driving this loss of inhibition?**

It's not a collective decision; it's a kind of drift. No one's forced it on them, it's spontaneous. It's in flux. It feels like a good thing in that people seem to be less inhibited about their bodies — they'll show you their midriff no matter how tubby or stretch-marked it is. That seems to be a plus. On the other hand, you get the feeling that people have never been more obsessed by their bodies — putting spikes in your lips or in your tongue, which is a tremendously assertive way of magnifying the importance of your body. If you talk to [people with piercings], that's what they say it is: They say they now have a relationship with their tongue that they didn't have before because they've got a jewel festering in the middle of it. So it's very much being into the body, but at the same time being away from it. That's one of the many contradictions. We'll just have to await developments.

**Doesn't selling have a lot to do with it? Anytime you can get someone's basic urges up, you can sell them something.**

Well, people have been talking about that for 30 or 40 years. But now we're desensitized, we hardly notice it. It's not a shadowy area anymore, it's right out in the light. But, as someone says in *Yellow Dog*, for pornography to be respectable, then masturbation has to be respectable. And indeed, that's what people are saying, that wanking's cool. It's no longer the dirty little secret; we're too grown up for that. But is it very grown up? It's sort of regressive and infantile in some ways, too.

**But there's still some shame.**

Well, it's impossible to imagine it being completely cleansed of all stigma. But we're edging in that direction. Usually these things go one step forward and one step back, but it's very hard to imagine a new Puritanism at the moment — unless it would be top-down, unless a new administration, an even more right-wing and religious administration, took on pornography, as has been the tendency in the past.

**So it's not so shocking anymore, but you say you still can't get much of it in England. Here in America, of course, it's everywhere. Is America the Great Satan of porn?**

Well, it's enormous in Russia, too. It's probably like American emissions accounts for something like twenty-five percent of the world's pollution: I should think that's an equivalent figure for pornography, too. I don't see it as a black cloud of filth that's going to choke and engulf us and all that, but I'm sure America is as preponderant there as it is in many other spheres.

**So is this a sign that we're regressing?**

No. It doesn't seem like a regression to me. We've had it with onerous things, like guilt and shame. There's been some sort of subliminal collective decision to throw all that off. But you don't get freedom that easily. What usually happens is the guilt and shame are still there, but they're sublimated, and will take new forms. Again, the past has a weight. You can't shrug it off. You can seem to, but you can't actually.

**In *Yellow Dog*, there's a great deal of temptation — sexual, violent and otherwise. And it's shown up before, in *Money*, most notably, but also in *Success*. It's always around. What's the temptation issue for you?**

I like it. I like to create women characters who really do understand male

sexuality and male sentimentality and all the rest, and who make the temptation as ferocious as possible. But it all comes under the heading of — and this is what I've always been writing about — masculinity and what a paradoxical state it is. It's a constant trade-off, and not with the conscious mind. The real paradox about masculinity is that it rests on potency and the ability to have an erection, and now that that's chemically available, and — though no one's whispered a word of it yet — what that will do to masculinity is truly revolutionary.

**In what way?**

Well it should take away the main cause of male insecurity. As someone says, "There will be no more wars."

**But young men fight wars as well.**

Well, that remark is tossed out, but in fact that is the size of this event. It might not take that form, but that is the utopian outcome.

**There's a quote near the beginning of *Yellow Dog* from one of the main characters, Xan Meo, that says maybe women have it right, that five million years of men in power hasn't done the world a lot of good and that maybe it's time to "give the girls a go." Things seem to go right in the book when the girls are in control, but the men always come around to screw it up.**

The idea that men and women have worked it out now, and made an orderly transfer of power, and that this has been frictionlessly accomplished, is something I doubt. The power struggle goes on. As Xan says [late in the book, in a letter to his estranged wife], it would be very remarkable if women weren't a bit crazed by their gains in power, and if men weren't slightly crazed by their loss. But it's just a new configuration; it's not peace between the two parties. The story goes on; it's not over, it's not fixed.

**In the book, you seem to want to reserve sex for its original purpose.**

No, that would be a ridiculous project. But one would suggest that it can't be deprived of meaning without a price being paid. To think that it's meaningless is actually not the case. When you're young, you certainly try to behave as if it's meaningless, but it isn't. It catches up with you.

**You've often been labeled a cynic. How much of that do you hold for the more traditional things — love and marriage and all that?**

I think I'm unbearably sentimental about it all. But I would say of marriage what Churchill said of democracy, that it's the worst possible human arrangement apart from all the other human arrangements.

**In *Yellow Dog*, there's no real description of sex acts that involve more genuine emotion. Is tender sex too meaningful to write about?**

As [one of the characters] says in *Yellow Dog*, there are only two things that novels can't do: sex and dreams. But novels can do bad sex, or unreal sex, cartoonish sex, insincere sex. But no one's ever written well about significant sex.

**No examples from your own oeuvre?**

No, I don't think I've ever attempted it.

**What about other novelists?**

Well, D.H. Lawrence and John Updike, I suppose, have tried hardest, but it doesn't make for comfortable reading. I think the main point is that it immediately becomes non-universal. It's too peculiar, too particular.

**You once said that after finishing *London Fields*, you felt like a "clinical moron" from the effort. After finishing *Yellow Dog* — or even after researching it, when you went to California to hang out with porn stars — how did you feel? Did you feel like a moral moron?**

No, I felt fine. I felt like Nabokov describes it: I'm like a mother who's just given birth. I'm very weak, and there's a baby in the corner of the room, its face the color of an inner tube. n°



To buy *Yellow Dog*,  
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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**



**Philip Higgs** is a writer living, somewhat uncharacteristically for him, outside of New York. He will one day write a novel, but not anytime soon.



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