



No More Illusions

Martin Amis is Getting Old and Wants to Talk About It

by Alexander Laurence and Kathleen McGee

We looked forward to talking with Martin Amis, British novelist, and author of the new book, *The Information* (Harmony). He is the author of numerous books, including *Money*, *London Fields*, *The Rachel Papers*, *Time's Arrow*, and *Visiting Mrs Nabokov*.

Like many, we had read the pre-publication publicity articles in *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair*. The media circus treated his new book as if Kato Kaelin wrote the next *Ulysses*. Amis complained about being misquoted in *The Chronicle*, an article which came out the morning we interviewed him. He called the article sloppy and atrocious. Amis pointed out that the writer had misquoted him as saying "desperation" instead of "desertion;" while he drank a "Virgin mary" not a "Bloody mary." He ordered another one while we talked to him in a hotel around Union Square about his new novel. Much hoopla had already been made about his large advance, his new set of teeth, his mid-life crisis, his divorce, but we focused on the art of fiction.

Alexander Laurence:

Do you do e-mail?

Martin Amis:

I went on-line yesterday on the internet and answered some questions and typed up some answers. It was weird because I don't use a computer as I said when they asked me how I worked. I said "I work in a velvet smoking jacket and write with an ostrich quill." It's not quite the truth.

AL:

Good to hear it. In the spirit of Ronald Firbank....

MA:

Exactly.

Kathleen McGee:

Have you gotten many writers asking you for advice?

MA:

You get a little of that. Some advice or encouragement. If someone is struggling with their first book, the only advice I would give them is "Just get to the end, then worry. But do finish it." Then you'll know what you have in front of you. Don't worry about the little decisions along the way.

KM:

You didn't worry too much with your first novel *The Rachel Papers*?

MA:

No. Also because I was the son of a writer, there was never any question of its getting published. I guessed that, simply out of mercenary curiosity, most publishers would have taken it. Children of writers are usually good for one or two books, and that's it. There's a curiosity about book number one, rather less for book number two, and then you shut up. That's been the pattern. I'm still at it. I think that some people do think that I've inherited a full set of writer's genes, and that I lie on a hammock drawing into a type recorder, but it's just so easy for me.

KM:

I was wondering how you were affected by being around an author growing up, your father, Kingsley: how has that influenced you?

MA:

What it does is it de-glamourize the job, because nothing is more banal than what your dad does for a living. I'm the same as all writers but I'm different in that way. I can get off the train of these thoughts of being a writer. I can just let them run on, and not take them too seriously. I'm detached about it. But say you're dad was an army man like Ian McEwan; it seems like a big achievement to write books. But with me, it doesn't seem like an achievement or an oddity. So when I get a bad review I don't lie on the sofa in the fetal position all day.

AL:

In *The Information* there are two types of novelists: there's Gwyn Barry who writes effortlessly like you did with *Rachel Papers*, which you wrote so young; and there's Richard Tull who writes compendiums of knowledge which don't interest anyone. Do you think that these writers are not so much based on other people so much as them being a struggle between two sides of yourself?

MA:

Yes, except that Gwyn Barry writes crap effortlessly. Neither one of them is me. Many writers would just have one writer as the main character, then there would have been a subtle psychological conflict in a writer's mind, but I'm a broad and comic writer, so I get the two and force them apart. Gwyn is a compendium of all stupid and vein thoughts you get when you're feeling pleased with yourself and smug, and when you feel slightly over-rewarded. Tied up with that too is the idea that this worldly success is irrelevant, and no big advance, no prize, no sash, no yarn is going to tell you what you want to know: are you going to last after you're dead? It's locked in. You're never going to know the answer.

AL:

Richard Tull is obsessed with the idea of immortality: reaching a vast audience, getting good reviews, and it's somehow going to redeem him, that he's considered in the same light as Homer, Dante, Shakespeare....

MA:

That's right. Funny enough, as a subject, it's failure that is rich and complex, and poignant. Success is a drag as a subject: it's what Jackie Collins writes about. Success is for the soaps. Failure is what's interesting. Failure is where we live. On the whole, we don't walk around gloating over our little triumphs. We walk around aching about our defeats and disappointments, and since the writer's ego is infinite, there's always some damn thing you're not getting. Even if you won the Nobel prize, you'd be thinking, well, I didn't win it last year and I'm not going to win it next year.

AL:

So you think that they're going to give you the Nobel this year for this book?

MA:

Yeah. But it matters and it doesn't matter. I read in L. A. at a place called Book Soup, partly a restaurant, and then I ate there at the bar, so I could smoke while I ate. I looked down the bar and there were ten people, and eight to nine of them had my book in front of them. They were chatting and having drinks. I thought "This is the way the world is supposed to be." I want to go to any bar in the world and have people with my book. You want everyone to read you and no one else, basically.

AL:

Do you think that since this is a book about two novelists that it's self-conscious or Postmodern?

MA:

It isn't really. I've written things that are more Postmodern than this. The fact that it's about writers takes care of that kind of tricky-ness. There's no messing around with the narrative, there's no levels of reality or unreliable narrators. Although the publication of the book has become surrounded by all these Postmodern ironies.

AL:

Is it a third person narration? I thought that there was an "I" repeated a few times subtly through the book. Who is this narrator?

MA:

There's an "I" in the first sentence. The narrator is me but he disappears halfway through the book. I wondered about that: I think that I wanted to tell the reader where I was coming from. It is a book about mid-life, and for me the mid-crisis came in the form of blanket ignorance, I felt. I just didn't know anything about the world. Milan Kundera said that "We're children all our lives because we have to learn a new set of rules every ten years." Which is a good remark. But I think that the real new set of rules is when you hit forty. All of what you knew up till then is of no use, and you have to start from scratch. I felt that I had to open up to the reader about that and say "How can I be an omniscient narrator when I don't know anything." Which is what it felt like.

AL:

Perhaps, besides the mid-life, was this novel trying to track down a modern consciousness in some way?

MA:

Like Richard Tull thinks he's going to do. This novel is a "crude coeur" rather than a way of indirection like some Postmodern novels. This is direct and straight me. As I say in this book, I think that most books are written in a language thirty years out of date, a generation out of date. The rhythms of thought that are actually out there don't correspond. We write in a kind of pedagogic code. Maybe writing does lag behind the times. I wanted to suggest the new rhythms of thought which change all the time. I think that the modern consciousness gets more and more to be an ungodly mix. What was Timothy J. McVeigh's consciousness like? He probably sees it as kind of straight, that he has a motive and he knows what he's doing. I guess it's a ragbag of Rambo movies and repressed homosexuality.

AL:

Do you think you were criticizing self-obsessiveness or vanity?

MA:

Um. We need all this vanity and egotism if you're going to write.

AL:

Yeah. You need that to get going, but were you creating a critique of vanity, that this was a contemporary problem?

MA:

It's a sad thing, but it's an inevitable thing. Writers are really like everyone else in that department. Although I think that everyone sees a bit of their own egotism in these extreme examples. But what are we going to do about being self-obsessed? Try stopping them. I don't think that they're any more self-obsessed than they used to be. Some things have changed: the language, the setting, the furniture. One difference is that we're so much more clued up about what we're supposed to be thinking and feeling. I'm sure that people freaked in the middle ages when they had their mid-life crisis at age twenty-five. We know what we're going through.

AL:

A classicist would think that since Homer, there's not much new under the sun, and with Modernism, there are different levels and they chop it up a bit differently.

MA:

That's all true. Funny you should mention the chop up, the William Burroughs thing, where you chop up a page, throw it up in the air and reassemble it in some different way. Some monk in the 12th century was doing the same thing, "art of the scissors," everything has been tried. There is nothing new. What is new is the background. The observable world changes. The rhythms of thought about the world are always changing, heading in some direction, heading away from innocence. That's all we really know about the world: that it's getting less innocent just by the accumulation of experience.

KM:

There's a theme in the book of continuing meaninglessness in the world, that Richard is fighting a losing battle to find meaning or control his existence against what is out there, which is nothing.

MA:

Yeah. Nothing is the void we come from and return to. You're dead for a lot longer than you're alive.

KM:

What can happen at the end of a mid-life crisis than to discover that?

MA:

Well. You do come through a mid-life crisis. I sailed through it. (Laughter) Bought a new sports car. It does end because it's an over-reaction to a certainty that you're going to die. You just end up with a reaction. But a huge element of a mid-life crisis is what Richard has to cope with, which is that he's failed at what he tried to do. He didn't attract anyone to his internal thought processes. They weren't of interest. That's why people freak out. A guy was saying to me at a bookstore in Iowa City, he said "I wake up, and one by one, I think of all the things I thought to myself when I was twenty-something: I was going to be a great writer, and I was going to re-think the theater...." He said "I didn't do any of that." Richard has some of those thoughts, but I don't. I've done more than I thought I would. I've made a contribution of something or other.

AL:

That reminds me of Krapp's Last Tape with Krapp thinking about his past life and non-achievement while listening to tapes of himself when he was younger. His last thoughts were "I do not want those days back." Beckett was harsh.

MA:

That's a kind of a bitter thought too, isn't it? At forty, you realize that this is more or less it, no sudden expansion. If you haven't done it by then, you're not going to do it. You have a sudden certainty that life is finite. When you're young almost the definition of youth is this idea that it's going to last forever, and clever "you," you're not going to get old like everyone else. It's just a rumour.

AL:

You have animosity for older people as if they were never young!

MA:

You think that being young is a terrific achievement. At forty, the jig is up. You know damn well your place. That's why people run off with three year old girlfriends.

KM:

The mid-life crisis is essentially male.

MA:

Women have it demarcated biologically. They have something called "The change." Terrifying! They freak out. They have a hot flash. They lose their biological raison. Men don't.

AL:

Men just have problems getting it up.

MA:

Right. I was reading Larry Kramer's book Faggots, about old men in bars getting rejected dozens of times, and then they would find some other quite older guy. It would take him thirty minutes to get an erection and thirty seconds to come.

AL:

Richard Tull is battling against the cosmos as well as his own insignificance.

MA:

There's a sense that you're just a speck or a dot in the infinite void. Of course all his energies become malevolent because he's filled with envy. Also Gwyn stands for the culture: if Gwyn writes shit, and if the world likes shit, then the world is shit. That's how he works it out. Gwyn is not just Gwyn, he's the whole inoffensive, politically, euphemistic culture. He personifies that, pretending that there's no difference between men and women, and that he doesn't have a prejudice.

KM:

Is the book also a comment on book publishing?

MA:

Not really. It's about the fact that the audience has an agenda now, in a way it didn't used to, and

sometimes the press does too. Like with Tantulus Press, the vanity publishers, those people aren't really writing, they're just screaming. When Richard does the reading in Boston, he has a fat person, a black person, and an Indian person. What they want is stuff about them. Everyone's so tied up in themselves and their own little political arena. It's a satire, but not a serious investigation. The stuff about Gwyn becoming a high-tech product as a writer while he's in America: interviews, photographs, movie deals, etc.

AL:

Could you talk about the influence of Milton on you?

MA:

Yes. The poem that is mostly referred to in the book is Paradise Lost. I did reread it before I wrote the last draft. I was in a flood of tears often. It's awfully good. I made a lot of notes. It was my intention to put in lots of Paradise Lost. It just seemed right. It's the basic tragic story of our culture.

AL:

Lost innocence. A struggle of good and evil.

MA:

Yes, exactly. Lost innocence above all, and lost godhood with Adam and Eve working out between humans and angels, and the intention was that they would win a promotion to heaven. The bank of immortality and joy. Before the fall the rose grew without thorns, animals moved among with human beings and other animals. The lion layed down with the lamb. One little mistake, the minute Eve eats the apple, the rose grows thorns and the animals snarl and cringe. Adam is taken upon the mountain and given a cinematic preview of the history of the world. Disease and wars are blamed on this one act, and the film begins with his oldest son killing his youngest, and this infinity of agony and ruin. There's Adam sobbing on the hilltop because it was his fault. Then there's a great assertion of human love between Adam and Eve where they forgive each other and wander out of paradise.

AL:

Then there's Milton arrogance saying that he can tell this story better than anyone.

MA:

Because he's connected to blindness. There's that passage that he rails against the darkness that he's in. But he liked the devil. Milton gave the devil the best lines.

AL:

And he got paid fifteen pounds for it.

MA:

And he got another fiver when they reprinted it, but it's the central English poem.

AL:

There was something about modernity: losing innocence and gaining knowledge.

MA:

That is the history of the world. Getting rid of illusions. Shedding illusions. For instance, one's place in the universe was an illusion till Coprnicus came along. The earth was the center of the universe. Part of the energy of the renaissance came from shrugging off that illusion. Even Einstein thought that the Milky Way was it. He was deluded. Since then, the universe has been expanded hugely, observationally, and it's exciting to know that everyone before me didn't know the truth.

