

Old Martin Amis Is in Your Face Again

Dave Weich, Powells.com

To say that Martin Amis's new novel has garnered mixed reviews would barely hint at the bipolar ejaculation of the literary press. [Yellow Dog](#) is either "furiously intelligent and touching" (*Kirkus Reviews*) or "silly and mindless wordplay" (Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times*); "mind-tinglingly good" (Robert Douglas-Fairhurst in the *Observer*) or "not-knowing-where-to-look bad" (Tibor Fischer in the *Daily Telegraph*); "scouring, elegant, and occasionally transcendent" (Vince Passaro in *Bookforum*) or "militantly chaotic, sprawling, and garbled" (Liz Jensen in the *Independent*).

In other words, *Yellow Dog* offers more of what we've come to expect from the preternaturally talented, risk-taking author. With each new publication, Amis earns rabid, contradictory responses. Why? In a word, he's *audacious*; each of the four definitions listed in *Webster's* suits him perfectly: 1. intrepidly daring (check); 2. recklessly bold (yes); 3. contemptuous of law, religion, or decorum (to illustrate a larger point, certainly); 4. marked by originality and verve (always).



John Self, the lecherous, alcoholic narrator of [Money](#), surely ranks among the most repulsive – and true – voices in fiction. The shocking invention of [Time's Arrow](#) would make many a gifted writer's career. Now *Yellow Dog* tackles the monarchy, tabloid journalism, pornography, and Internet dating, all in a format inspired by the Victorians. No matter. Whether in his fiction, commentary, or criticism, Amis invigorates the language and brilliantly illuminates overlooked corners of contemporary life. With each new book, Amis leaves a mark.



[Yellow Dog](#)

by Martin Amis

"*Yellow Dog* shows [Amis] to be once again operating his craft at the level of his 1980s work, *Money* and *London Fields*....It is also marked by a gathering

Dave: Fans will find familiar themes and motifs in [Yellow Dog](#), but in terms of structure and voice it's quite different from your previous novels. Are those changes in some way indicative of an evolution in your writing?

Martin Amis: I think you have to find your way in every book, and trust your instincts, trust your promptings, but I do feel there's a general arc – a sort of career arc with style. You know, style isn't something added on; it's intrinsic to the perceptions and the way you see life. That's really what novels are: your take on life. But I think style is very much connected with energy and with a surplus of energy. When you're young, that energy is on a high dial.

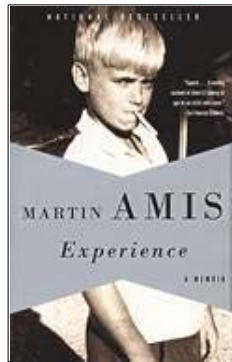
There's a kind of trade-off as you get older. The exuberance dies down somewhat and the craft aspects become more confident. You can catch yourself when you're turning down a blind alley; you know very early on, and you hardly set foot in it anymore, whereas fifteen years ago I might spend a week in that blind alley before realizing I had to get out. Similarly, when you face a difficulty, in the old days you used to sit and

ferocity, a desire to genuinely disturb, that feels new." *Charles Foran, The Toronto Globe and Mail*

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[Money](#)

Money
 by Martin Amis

bang your head against it until you got past it; now you walk away and spend a day reading something else, and it's just solved naturally by your unconscious. So a little less noise from the style, but a little more deftness in the act of mobilizing the novel – that seems to come more naturally now.

Dave: What brought you to the idea of running several distinct plots side-by-side in [Yellow Dog](#)?

Amis: The main character, Xan, was always going to be the springboard – a nice modern guy gets hit on the head and becomes a monkey overnight – but I knew I was going to be invoking a kind of Victorian tradition: you set three stories in motion – or three-and-a-half if you include the airplane – and the reader is going to think, *How are these going to be brought together?* That convention almost supplies the hook for the reader's interest. *How are these stories going to interact?*

Dave: In [Time's Arrow](#), the narrator experiences life backward, beginning at the moment of his death. Did reversing the path of time make the novel more difficult to write?

Amis: Once I'd got the convention straight of how I was going to do time backward, I would say it was easier to write than many of my other books. It felt like a gift from the gods. I became more and more convinced that what makes you uneasy writing a book like that is you think you can't go near the Holocaust unless you're going to say something appropriate or decorous, in the literary sense as well as the moral sense. But I did become convinced that I was putting my finger on what the subtitle calls "The Nature of the Offense," which in a sentence is that the Nazi project would have achieved what its propaganda said it would achieve – it would heal Germany; it was a biomedical vision for the greater health of the society – all that would be true if and only if time ran the other way. A big if. A fairly basic if. It did seem to me that that's how wrong they got it. And that emboldened me; everything seemed to fall into place in the way you always hope it will.

When I was doing backwards-in-time scenes, I would write them out in note form in real time, then start at the bottom and work my way back to the top.

Dave: Inverting the dialogue would seem to be relatively straightforward, but a character moving backward in time has only heard what comes after each spoken line. What would seem more complicated is the description of facial expressions and whatnot as the narrator interprets what he sees and hears.

Amis: But for the narrator, this is how the world is. It's

"A sprawling, fierce, vulgar display, full of Amis's quirky but articulate energy. Self is a complex and superbly imagined character."
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[Time's Arrow](#)

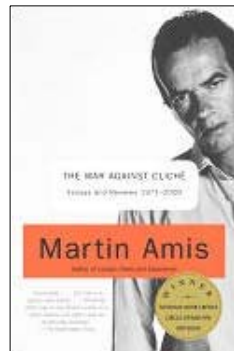
Time's Arrow
by Martin Amis

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The War Against Cliche: Essays and Reviews 1971-2000
by Martin Amis

an innocent narrator. That's why another oddity of the book is that all the moral work has to be done by the reader. It's all presented as *Auschwitz is not very nice, but by God they're doing a great job there*. And so it's the reader, not the narrator, who is dealing with the morality. That felt right for the book, too; you couldn't do it straight.

It was the time of *Life is Beautiful* and *Maus*, those graphic novels. It seemed that we were having to come at the Holocaust from other directions. We're approaching the point historically where no survivors exist. Those images of the rail tracks and the smoke stacks and the terrible emaciated bodies are almost too familiar to us now. There has to be another route to Auschwitz.

Dave: In *Koba the Dread*, you take a very different approach to a comparable event from the last century, Stalin's mass exterminations.

Amis: It was never going to be comparable to *Time's Arrow* in my mind. As *Christopher Hitchens* pointed out, I'd done one book on nuclear weapons [*Einstein's Monsters*], one on the Holocaust, and then the twenty million, so I'd sort of covered the three big cruxes of the twentieth century. I was aware that I was completing that trilogy.

I never strayed from feeling that *Koba the Dread* was amateur history through a personal prism, up to a point. I didn't feel as I did with *Time's Arrow* that I'd got some essence of it and told the story in the only way it could be told by me. It takes its place with those other books, but it's cordoned off into nonfiction.

Dave: In another recent work of nonfiction, *Experience*, you dismiss any notion of the traditional chronological memoir from the start. Did it take you a long time to come to that book in the sense of, "How could I write about my life in a manner that wouldn't offend my literary sensibilities?"

Amis: Yeah, and wouldn't offend my family, either. As *Philip Roth* said, "When a writer is born into a family, that's the end of that family." And I very much didn't want that when I sat down to write it.

I felt almost a pro bono obligation to write that book because of the rareness, if not unique nature, of my father-son deal. And when I settled down to it, you're right, the idea of typing out "I was born on August 25, 1949" made me limp with boredom. I knew I would have to write it with the same kind of priorities with which you write fiction; the connection would not be chronological but thematic. I'd have to leave things and come back to them a bit later. The chapters should

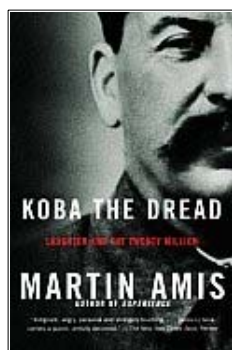
"His reviews are astringent, punkily contemptuous, name-calling, reductive, pissy, prissy, preening. They are also (alas, alack) great fun to read." *Adrienne Miller, Esquire*

Winner of the 2001 National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism

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**Koba the Dread:
 Laughter and the
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 by Martin Amis

"This fierce little book... [has the] power to surprise, and ultimately to provoke, enrage and illuminate." *San Jose Mercury News*

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balance out. Then it becomes like a novel: a matter of finding your way and following your instincts.

Dave: You've mentioned elsewhere that plot isn't what interests you. Also, you've admitted that you don't necessarily mean for your books to be easy reading. Neither statement would surprise a reader of [Money](#), yet the book isn't plotless or difficult in any conventional way. There's not much suspense, for example, and yet the relentless roll of events keeps the reader barreling along until the payoff at the end.

Talk about that balance: being mindful of the reader and at the same time being mindful of the craft. You're obviously not writing in a vacuum from the consumer culture that's going to be buying your books...

Amis: Well, it's *as if* in a vacuum. I've just written a piece about [Saul Bellow](#) in the *Atlantic Monthly*, and I say that you have an unconscious marriage with the reader; you've got to be good with the reader. For some novels, it's a different deal, a different phase of the marriage.

With [Money](#), when I finished, I read it through and I was completely horrified. I felt sick to my stomach for two days. *I'm going to hand this in and then there's going to be a white van waiting for me at my house.*

Dave: Why?

Amis: Because I'm crazy. *I've gone crazy.* What I realized was no doubt that you felt when you were reading it, which is that all the eggs were in the basket of voice. If that didn't work, it was a disaster.

That was why, when I wrote [London Fields](#), I felt, *I haven't got a great plot, but what I've got is a hook.* Even for five hundred pages, people are going to go on wanting to know who killed her or if she is going to get killed. The hook was massively established early on. I also thought [The Information](#) was pushing it a bit in that there was no pace. But with [Night Train](#) and [Yellow Dog](#), I did feel, *What I'm doing here is plot. There's a bit more structure here. My world is being mobilized at a greater speed.* It wasn't calculation; you rather surprise yourself that you've done this. You think plot is for [Ken Follett](#) and [Tom Clancy](#), but actually it's quite challenging, and it can even be artistic, too.

I think what I'm responding to – and you only realize it later after you've been responding to it – is look what's happened to poetry in the last twenty years: it's no longer a part of our lives in that way it was, certainly for me. The poets are there, but the constituency has contracted markedly. A poem slows the clock down. Indeed, it stops the clock and says, "Wait. What's going

on in this moment? Let's recreate the moment very carefully." I think now the momentum of modern life renders us very reluctant to do that. When you're reading your *New York Review of Books*, some piece about North Korea or the Middle East, and there's a poem in the middle of it, you think, *What is that doing there?* The eye doesn't want to go near it. The idea of switching from the roll of events to some little epiphany a poet had, you resist it. Similarly with a literary novel, I think. A five hundred page meditative novel like [The Information](#) is asking more of the reader than perhaps they can give now. And I've noticed this with other novelists of my generation: a little bit more drive, a bit more concern about that. It's not a cynical bandwagon; at one remove or another, it's concern for the reader. The nature of marriages change, too.

Dave: Readers often fail to make a distinction between author and narrator, and that's certainly been the case with several of your books. You've been accused of misogyny, for instance; [Money](#) was quite controversial when it was published, and that wasn't so long ago.

Amis: And I think it's a feminist novel. The lesson of feminism is presented to him. He doesn't quite get it, but it's there and it's dramatized.

When I look at my first novel [[The Rachel Papers](#)], there is some misogyny there, but I think it ceases to be an issue. My readers used to be predominantly men, and I think now, particularly in America, it's much more fifty-fifty. I think women have grown up enough and there's not the pitch of politicization where just a word like *rape* sets off an alarm. You know what it's like being politicized – you're het up and overcompensating in every direction. Now that's quieting down.

Someone said, "If you had, in one word, to say what you'd been writing about these last thirty years, what would it be?" I said, "Masculinity." And I noticed the first section in [The War Against Cliché](#), when I was grouping together these pieces, it's called "On Masculinity and Related Questions," so even at the book reviewing level, this is the preoccupation.

No woman has anything to fear from what I write. On the contrary, I'm much harder on men than on women.

Dave: There's evidence to support that statement in [Yellow Dog](#). One reviewer even wondered if the depiction of some of these characters wasn't so harsh that the novel would repel its ideal readership. He might have mentioned Clint's newspaper columns, but he could have been alluding to any number of things.

Amis: It's strong stuff, but we can talk of [Dickens](#). After he wrote [The Pickwick Papers](#) – people loved that – then he wrote [Oliver Twist](#), which was about murderers and prisons: Bill Sikes killing Nancy and all the rest. There was quite a chorus of people saying, "You should have stuck to *Pickwick*," and he said, "I'm not interested in the views of this fastidious class that would like to see real life purged of things that actually go on in it."

No one who's read me will expect me to be fastidious about those things. It's strong stuff, but that's what I do. Some people don't like it, and some people do. You can't shy away from things. I satirize it. It's meant to cushion you from the unpleasantness. This isn't true of the pedophilia and the incest, but the pornography: you hold it up to ridicule. That's the best way to attack something, not with zoning laws and the pedantry of the legal system coming down on it. That's the way to keep the mind unoppressed by it, too.

Pornography thinks it's vaulting into the mainstream and that it will be utterly

accepted within half a generation, but I don't see how it can. Such a human barrier will have to be crossed where you'll have to say that masturbation is hip, and we all kind of know for sure that it isn't. That's why no one ever sees anyone doing it.

I think I'm very clear about where it all stands morally, and I don't think at any point I'm encouraging anything pernicious. It is what the modern world looks like. Novelists have a duty, not every time, but they should be thinking about the near future. That's your big subject: the near future.

Dave: You mentioned the three cruces of the last century. More recently, we have September 11th. How long will it be before someone writes a cogent, forward-thinking novel about the post-9/11 world?

Amis: As [Norman Mailer](#) said, the temptation to rush in is immense, but you've got to let it simmer, back-boil it. This is true of every experience for writing; it has to have a chance to get into your unconscious and up your spinal column. You can't do it with the front of the brain.

[Yellow Dog](#) just deals with the mental environment that seemed to come after September 11th, but it will be a while before anyone can really assimilate it and write a novel that doesn't look as though it's just blurred out. [Don DeLillo](#) might well be the man to do it. He said, I think in [Mao II](#), which is quite a ways back, "The mood of the future is not going to be determined by writers; it's going to be determined by terrorists." And by Christ, they created a mood.

Dave: In [The War Against Cliché](#), you wrote: "[Underworld](#) may or may not be a great novel, but there is no doubt that it renders DeLillo a great novelist." Expand on that.

Amis: Well, a novel of that size and ambition can brush away many a pernicky criticism, but it did seem to me that there was almost a sort of generic error in it. It starts fantastically powerfully and ends very powerfully, too, but writing about artists is horribly difficult — it's like writing about sex or writing about dreams. His lady artist is a sort of dampener. There are bits in the middle of the book where you think, *This is all very quiet. It's gone quiet around here*. Then it sort of picks up again and ends powerfully, but I thought that was a flaw. Brave of him to try and do it, but the conscious artist in a novel is almost impossible. It's like writing a novel about a poet.

Dave: [Ian McEwan](#) has found a large readership with his last few novels, particularly with [Atonement](#). As someone who has been reading his work for a long time, do you think that growth in readership follows a similar trajectory of achievement?

Amis: I do. And I think if he just started off with these last three or four novels, he probably wouldn't have got this reception. It's on trust with the early stuff and it develops out of that. It's a career award, as it were, the bigger audience.

Dave: You've written at length about [Updike](#), whose continued output with each passing year staggers the mind. The first volume of his collected stories was published recently, [The Early Stories](#), which omits everything written after 1975, and still it runs 860 pages.

Amis: I think Updike is like [Anthony Burgess](#). These guys have something called pressure on the cortex, facility in the best sense: it just flows, and their job is contraception rather than worrying about the birth rate. Maybe you pay a price for that, such a fast-flowing talent; maybe he can't stop. To name his only clear

superior, he can't do what [Bellow](#) does: he can't get the weight of voice that Bellow gets, perhaps just because he's just flowing too fast.

Dave: You consider [Ulysses](#) the best novel of the twentieth century, but you're not as big a fan of [Don Quixote](#).

Amis: No, but actually the second volume is miles ahead of the first. And you have to reel back and say, "Not only did he write the first novel, he wrote the first postmodern novel, too, and all in the early seventeenth century." It's the father of the novel. As I say, it's sort of bubbling and farting like primal soup with invention and ideas. It's a great leap. But it's a torment to read, particularly the first half with its terrible digressions and repetitions and paddings and so on. It's a beautiful thing, but as [Nabokov](#) said, "It's a crude and cruel old book."

Dave: If you could distinguish something about *Ulysses* that sets it above the rest of twentieth century literature...

Amis: It defines the modern novel. Almost anything that looks new is in [Ulysses](#) somewhere. It's a violent evolutionary lurch for the novel that you couldn't imagine ever being repeated, that someone would take the novel so much further. And most basically and pricelessly, he included the common man, his common actions. Bloom on the toilet is an incredible breakthrough for the novel, to be written about so beautifully and delicately. That's why [Virginia Woolf](#) said it's the sort of novel you'd expect a costermonger to write. It's hilarious to see the snobbish objection to it, but it is a great democratizing book.

It's a noble, democratizing book — alas, written by this man who was too inverted to take it further. Talk about a marriage with the reader: he's like [Henry James](#) in the growing estrangement from the reader in his corpus. *Ulysses* is a great, long honeymoon, but then he withdraws from the reader: separate beds and separate rooms. [Finnegan's Wake](#) is indifferent to the reader to a sadistic extent. Look at it: It's all dreams told in puns, the two most inimical things. With James, the estrangement of the marriage was even more fiendishly prolonged. All the hospitable stuff is over by the early-middle period, then more and more coldness and self-inspection. We all write for ourselves, but the whole idea of the marriage has broken down at that point.

Dave: At this juncture, how do you internalize your literary heritage? Even aside from genetics, the environment in which you were raised must have been incredibly profitable for an aspiring writer.

Amis: Except why aren't there more writer sons of writer fathers, or mothers and daughters, if it is so conducive to a writing career?

Dave: Why do you suppose?

Amis: What seems to happen — and I'm thinking of [Auberon Waugh](#) and [David Updike](#) — they write one or two things, then they stop. Whatever the impulse was, that satisfies it. But it was never like that for me. I knew I was in it for the long haul. So it wasn't personal between me and [my father](#); that's what it wasn't. Still, I agree, with that caveat, that it was conducive having not just my father but also my stepmother writing away in the house.

Dave: Have there been periods in your life when you really just wanted to get away from it?

Amis: No. I get antsy almost at once when I'm not working or not reading. There's nothing I like better than looking up a word in the dictionary. Every time I do it, it

seems like I'm getting one back for the dead brain cell that had me not remembering [Marlon Brando's](#) name the day before. You're sort of clawing something back.

It may yet happen, but it hasn't yet.

Dave: Are there younger authors whose work particularly impresses you?

Amis: [Will Self](#). I'm fascinated by what he writes, but I don't know if I would have tried him had he not been a friend of mine.

On the whole, you resist the younger writers. It's partly because with the older ones time has had a chance to separate the less excellent. With the young ones it's a bit of a lucky dip, isn't it? Who knows which ones will stay the distance? And there must be other causes for this reluctance. My father once said, and said it well, I think, that the trouble with younger writers is that they're telling you, "It's not like that anymore. It's like this now." Which of course you're very reluctant to hear, and maybe it's worse when it's your own son telling you, too.

Martin Amis visited Powell's City of Books on November 20, 2003. The week before, I was in New York City, criss-crossing Manhattan carrying [Money](#) in my backpack. Heading downtown on the N Train one evening with nothing to read but the [Mini Rough Guide to New York City](#) in my back pocket, I stumbled upon the editors' recommended fiction about New York. *Money* appears first on their list.

Several hours and bars later, I sat in bed with one last beer, reading one of the most convincing drunk narrators in literature discourse on the teeming city fifteen floors below.

New York is a jungle, they tell you. You could go further, and say that New York is a jungle. *New York is a jungle.* Beneath the columns of the old rain forest, made of melting macadam, the mean Limpopo of swamped Ninth Avenue bears an angry argosy of crocs and dragons, tiger fish, noise machines, sweating rainmakers. On the corners stand witchdoctors and headhunters, babbling voodoo-men — the natives, the jungle-smart natives. And at night, under the equatorial overgrowth and heat-holding cloud cover, you hear the ragged parrot-hoot and monkeysqueak of the sirens, and then fires flower to ward off monsters. Careful: the streets are sprung with pits and nets and traps. Hire a guide. Pack your snakebite gook and your blowdart serum. Take it seriously. You have to get a bit jungle-wise.