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FEATURE FOCUS



Martin Amis leaps back into the ring

By Kate Summerscale

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Eagleton writes in, saying, 'Sincere apologies, but I stand by my point.' He's always standing by these completely exploded positions." As for Eagleton's attack on his father, Martin says he was pleased this week to see a "nice little groundswell in defence of Kingsley".

The novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard, Kingsley's second wife, wrote to The Daily Telegraph to deny that he was anti-Semitic and anti-homosexual: of the four people present at their wedding, she pointed out, one was homosexual and three were Jews. And Martin's gay step-uncle Colin Howard, who shared a house with Kingsley for many years, also wrote to testify to his brother-in-law's kindness.

According to Martin, Kingsley "encouraged [Colin] to have a love life, because he was very inhibited about it". He acknowledges Eagleton got one thing partly right; that his father had been "mildly anti-Semitic", by his own confession.



Amis is currently working on a new novel, *The Pregnant Widow*, but first – in January – he will publish a collection of his writings about the aftermath of September 11.

This will show, he says, how his views have changed over time. His first response to the attack on the World Trade Centre was "rationalist naiveté" (in the phrase of the American political writer Paul Berman): "You think, why have they done it? There must be a reason. What about all the sh***y things we have done to them throughout history?"

But he has since moved away from this position: "You have to assert a certain set of values, and they are Western values and they've been arrived at through a Reformation

and an Enlightenment and they're not there for no reason."

He is impatient with "this polite fiction that we're all the same". "Moral equivalence is a trap.

To make any judgment at all is impossible. It's crippling. There needs to be freedom and independence of thought." Islamic extremism, he adds, is "a death cult", which we should vigorously condemn. "Look who they want to kill," he says. "It's not just us, it's not just the Jews and the Crusaders.

It's the Hindus, it's the Buddhists, it's the Shia." Side-stepping the issue of race, he argues that moral superiority is based not on genes or geography, but on chronology. "Who are you morally superior to? Are you morally superior to the Taliban? Yes. And you're not defaming them. It's not genetic, it's chronological: they're not evolved."

Amis is forever pushing at the limits of what can be said, seeing himself as a crusader against cliché and conformity and he relishes such battles.

But he is also thin-skinned. This volatile blend of sensitivity and aggression can sometimes end up playing out as comedy.

In a question and answer feature in a newspaper this year, one reader sent in an email: "The phrase 'horrorism', which you invented to describe 9/11, is unintentionally hilarious. Have you got any more?" "Yes," replied Amis. "I have. Here's a good one (though I can hardly claim it as my own): the phrase is 'f*** off'."

He speaks of the business of writing and reviewing in terms of physical tussles. When younger, he says, he would come across a block in the narrative and "smash my head against it all day". Now he has learnt to walk away until his legs take him back to the desk. Writing is "a lot more physical than people think. It's your whole body".

"There's no question that you're going to suffer as a writer. You've got to do that.

It's part of what you put in. It's all anxiety and ambition." The assaults come from without as well as within. He was "astonished" by the "violence" of the response to Koba the Dread (2002), his polemic about Stalin: "a real snarl... because it was reviewed, of course, by

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academics, all of whom said, 'F*** off, this is our patch – go and write your novels, mate.'

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