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FEATURE FOCUS



Martin Amis leaps back into the ring

By Kate Summerscale

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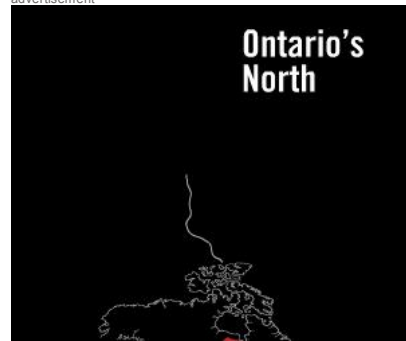
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He was even more bewildered by the reviews of his last novel, *Yellow Dog* ("not-knowing-where-to-look-bad", according to a reviewer in this paper, "like your favourite uncle being caught in a playground, masturbating").

They were "amazingly violent", he says. "It's still a mystery to me.

The real 'Crawl away and die, asshole', that kind of review." He casts about for explanations. "It's a very in-your-face novel, and it's the sort of thing that's not being written any more. It's stepping on toes, it's satirical and gross and all that, and people are steering away from those subjects, but - ach - I don't know, a really unusual hostility... It must be to do with Kingsley.

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I'm like Prince Charles. The great tenet of multi-cultural society is that nobody should be judged by their origins... but that only works from the bottom up, it doesn't work top down... Prince Charles is reviled for where he comes from, with some reason. But that sense that I didn't have to... that I did it on automatic or something..." He tails off.

The mostly enthusiastic reviews for his latest book, the novella *House of Meetings* (2006), may have shaken his assurance that people attack his work routinely out of spite and envy of his easy start as a writer.

His childhood doesn't sound particularly easy in any case. His father was compulsively unfaithful to his first wife, Hilly. "He lived for

adultery," says Amis. "Every now and then there'd be a terrible row, I mean a really terrible row, when he got busted for some new outrage... Violent discord between parents is always horrible as a child."

None the less, "I would count my childhood as a happy one. Getting on with your parents, having a loving relationship with both your father and your mother, and your brother and your sister, you can't count that as a hard childhood."

When he took up the professorship at Manchester this term, Amis said, he was motivated in part by a "vulgar curiosity about the young".

But four weeks into his first semester, he's rather disappointed that the young haven't said much. "I hope they will unfold themselves a bit more... It's not just that I'm new to them, but that they're new to each other - it's inhibiting at first, until they can relax in each other's company, until they're not scared of making fools of themselves, of volunteering their opinions."

He tells them that to learn to write, you must always think about the author as you read. "Don't identify with Elizabeth Bennet or Mr Darcy. Identify with Jane Austen. See what she is trying to do."

I ask mildly if the students might be inhibited by him. "I'm constantly saying, there isn't one way of doing it," he replies. "My emphasis is always on there being as many different kinds of writers as there are different kinds of people." But his own is "an assertive voice", he finally acknowledges.

"There's no doubt about that."

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