

Martin Amis versus Abi Titmuss

By Craig Brown

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There is something about Martin Amis that attracts spite from all quarters. Were he ever to help a little old lady across a busy street, you can be sure he would be roundly condemned by a junior transport minister ("it's high time he stopped clogging up our busy streets") and a spokesman for Help the Aged ("this thoughtless action demeans little old ladies").

At the weekend, it was revealed that Amis is now being paid £80,000 to be Professor of Creative Writing at Manchester University. This is said to work out at £3,000 an hour, as he is booked to give lectures, seminars and what-have-you for just 28 hours a year. On the other hand, it doesn't take into account any homework he chooses to do, or the innumerable man-hours it takes to purchase an advance train ticket to Manchester with Virgin Railways.

Inevitably, the size of Amis's salary was instantly condemned by the general secretary of the University and College Union, Sally Hunt. "One might question the wisdom of a university using such a large amount of its budget to fund one member of staff," she sniffed.

Personally, I have never understood why lecturers survived the invention of the printing press. Unlike lecturers, books may be opened or shut, they can be put away in a drawer or placed on a shelf for future reference, they deliver the same information over and over again, without whining, they come with indexes, can be put in your pocket and you can scribble notes on them. They can also be taken to bed: any lecturer agreeing to the same would be faced with disciplinary action.



Is £3,000 an hour for Martin Amis really that much?

Nevertheless, universities continue to base themselves around the live performance, and so are obliged to pay over the odds for star performers. But is £3,000 an hour for Martin Amis really that much? An organisation called NMP Live, which bills itself as "one of the UK's leading celebrity speaker and entertainment bureaux", offers a list of 907

after-dinner speakers on its website, complete with handy price tags.

Compared with his fellow Martins, Amis is among the lower paid. The actor Martin Clunes costs between £6,000 and £10,000, as do the former EastEnders actor Martin Kemp, the Rugby League player Martin Offiah, and someone I've never heard of called Martin Raymond ("editor of Viewpoint magazine"). The only Martin to fall within Amis's price range is Martin Peters, the former England footballer, who charges between £2,500 and £5,000. The only female Martin - Martine McCutcheon - would set you back £25,000-plus.

For the same price they are paying Amis, it is hard to imagine the students of Manchester University would learn more from Christine Hamilton ("popular and controversial speaker married to former MP Neil Hamilton"), Inspector Ken Wharfe ("former royal and diplomatic protection officer to Princess Diana"), Abi Titmuss ("household name and sex symbol") or Alex Best ("recently won the 2004 Rear of the Year award").

advertisement And most of the speakers on offer would set Manchester University back far more. Philanthropists seem to be at a particular premium. The Dalai Lama ("he has made numerous appearances in interfaith services, imparting the message of love, compassion, kindness and universal responsibility") charges £25,000-plus and Sarah Ferguson ("The Duchess of York and committed humanitarian") comes in the £50,000-plus category, along with Mikhail Gorbachev ("former president of the Soviet Union"), Donald Trump ("the entrepreneur's entrepreneur") and Anne Robinson ("established TV presenter, currently famous for presenting The Weakest Link").

When you look at the list of personalities cheaper than Amis, you begin to realise quite what a bargain Manchester University has snapped up. In the lowest, "under £2,500", category come Adrian Riddell ("Pierce Brosnan lookalike"), Amusing Nuns ("two nutty nuns causing total and utter mayhem") and Debbie McGee ("classically trained ballet dancer and wife/assistant of magician Paul Daniels").

I dare say one or two of the above acts might be more entertaining than Martin Amis, but which of them would be able to tell you quite so much about the future of the modern novel?

All in all, Manchester students and staff alike should count their blessings. Instead of Amis, they might easily have ended up with the Rt Hon Dr John Reid MP. Reid offers as his special topics "leadership", "leading and transforming poorly performing organisations" and "terror threat". For this, he charges up to £15,000; for the same sum, you can get a full five Martin Amises.

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