



The Portland Phoenix

July 13 - 20, 2000



Time's arrows, continued

by Chris Wright

IN HIS 1984 masterpiece *Money*, Amis has his inspiredly debauched protagonist, John Self, say, "Sometimes I feel that life is passing me by, not slowly either, but with ropes of steam and spark-spattered wheels and a hoarse roar of power or terror. It's passing, yet I'm the one who's doing all the moving."

In *Experience*, he writes: "It would be a ferocious slander of Martin Amis if I called *Money* autobiographical. . . . But I see now the story turned on my own preoccupations: it is about tiring of being single; it is about the fear that childlessness will condemn you to childishness."

In *Experience* again, Amis quotes his father, Kingsley: "[My novels are] firmly unautobiographical, but at the same time every word of them inevitably says something about the kind of person I am."

If *Money* says something about the kind of person Amis was when he wrote it, then you have to assume he wasn't counting his blessings at the time. It's wonderful for Amis that he is so content these days, but for those of us who relish his misanthropic bite, this development raises a troubling question: what kind of novels can we expect from the snapshot-wielding doting daddy before us? The worst-case scenario presents itself with depressing clarity: a literature of burping babies, domestic wrangles, trips to the all-night pharmacy.

"Just to reassure you," Amis says, gesticulating with his scraggy cigarette, "the novel I'm writing is very much the same stuff. There's a guy in it called Clint Smoker, who works for a newspaper that's rather like the *Daily Sport*, called the *Morning Lark*². There's also pornography in it, and an East End gangster, and a parallel royal family. The king is Henry IX, and he has a daughter who is kind of entrapped in a sexual thing by . . . I don't want to give too much away."



SAUL MATE: Amis, daughter Clio, Saul Bellow, and Bellow's wife, Janis. Amis has made no secret of his love for Bellow. "I am not is son, of course," Amis writes. "What I am is his ideal reader."

NOT GIVING too much away has been one recurrent criticism of *Experience*. In particular, reviewers have complained that there isn't enough juice about Amis's romantic -- or sex -- life. Implicit in this criticism is the belief that there is a contract between memoirist and reader: a promise of full disclosure.

"I don't think there's any -- what's that phrase where you deceive a customer? -- false advertising," he says. "I didn't decide not to put that stuff in, it was just sort of instinct and manners, really. Manners are an index of morality, too." Amis refuses to play the catty tattletale -- no gleeful malice, no jolly slander. "All of these things," Amis says tartly, "are decided by your tact." [3](#)

Then there are those who wish he'd left more out. The publication of *Experience* led to the bizarre spectacle of critics saying: "I wish he didn't go on so much about the *teeth*." These, of course, are the very same teeth that, a few years ago, became a national obsession in Britain. Details of Amis's huge dental bills consumed gobs of newsprint at the time and came to symbolize the author's slide into vanity and decadence. The story was that Amis had taken his crooked English gnashers to New York, where he'd forked over \$20,000 for an impeccable, American-style smile.

Though he insists otherwise, you do get the sense that Amis's painstaking accounts of his dental adventures are an attempt to set the record straight. His surgery, he explains, was anything but cosmetic: the teeth were a frequent source of swellings and throbbings. There was even a possibly life-threatening tumor lurking in the lower jaw (it turned out to be benign). If the teeth loomed large in the press at the time, they loomed even larger for Amis.

"I know all about the expert musicianship of toothaches," he writes. "Toothaches can play it staccato, glissando, accelerando, prestissimo and above all fortissimo. They can do rock, blues and soul, they can do doowop and bebop, they can do heavy metal, rap, funk and punk. And beneath all this anarchical stridor there was a lone, soft, insistent voice, always audible to my abject imagination: the tragic keening of the castrato."

One thing that has been largely overlooked in reviews of *Experience* is how funny it is -- especially when Amis turns his wit against his younger self. "What elicits my hoarsest moan of shame," he writes, "was the plumed and crested manner I vainly tried to cultivate." As an accompaniment to this self-deprecation, Amis regularly supplies us with examples of what he calls the "Osric Archive": toe-curlingly naive letters from Martin to his father. "I put those letters in," he says, wincing, shifting, "to sort of ground myself in what I inescapably was. Here was conclusive evidence of what I was like then. Every 20 pages or so I had to type out these letters, wanting to suppress bits and not doing it."

In one letter, dated November 4, 1967, Amis indulges in a bit of early literary criticism:

Ezra Pound -- Trendy little ponce.

Auden -- Good, but I feel he must be an awful old crap.

Hopkins -- Great fun to read, but doesn't stand up to any analysis.

Donne -- Very splendid.

Marvel -- " "

And you have to give Amis credit for not suppressing the following, an entry from his brother's diary: "Mum told me she found Mart crying in the night about the size of his bum. I do feel sorry for him, but *a) it is enormous*, and *b) it's not going to go away*."

BUT IT'S not all larks and giggles. There are other tears shed, over matters far more grave than a fat arse. Central to the book is the death of Amis's father. Kingsley's death doesn't just happen -- *yerk!* -- it infuses the final hundred pages of the book, hanging over the family's efforts to carry on with day-to-day life. You imagine that Kingsley would have appreciated the subtlety -- perhaps more than he appreciated the ceaseless hyperbole of his son's novels.

As the book makes clear, Kingsley and Martin had a very complex relationship. Though they plainly shared a deep affection for one another, there was friction between them, too. Some of this arose from their opposing political views (Kingsley responded to Martin's left-wing leanings by calling him a "fucking fool"). Far more punishing, though, was Kingsley's public dismissal of his son's novels. He made no secret of the fact that he "couldn't get on" with Martin's work [4](#). When asked what his father would have made of *Experience*, Amis slumps in his chair. "The only way I can imagine him reading it is in the hereafter," he says, "because I wouldn't have written it while he was alive. I think he'd have been pretty gripped by it, actually, and moved by it. It would probably appall him to know how complete his collapse was in those areas that he cared the most about."

In addition to Kingsley's death, there are other calamitous episodes in the book. There is the discovery that Amis's cousin, Lucy Partington, was a victim of the serial killer Frederick West. There is Amis's falling-out with his friend Julian Barnes, the life-threatening illness of his friend Saul Bellow, the divorce from his first wife, Antonia Phillips, and the wrenching separation from his two children. And then, of course, there are the teeth.

Most of this stuff occurred in 1995, Amis's annus absolutely fucking horribilis [5](#) -- the same year the press waged a kind of war against him.

"It would seem that I was in poor shape, as the year turned," Amis writes of the period. "It would most definitely seem that I was in poor shape. Notebook: 'If weepy is poor shape, then I am in poor shape.' "

And yet, in *Experience*, as in so much of Amis's work, tears and laughter intersect. Even when discussing the death of his father, Amis cannot resist the odd nifty turn of phrase. "[N]ow, with my old man pegging out at St. Pancras's?" he writes, describing his recently improved tennis game. "Watch me leap as high as the umpire's chair for those slam-dunk overheads. Watch me twirl beyond the tramlines for that topskin backhand pass. Watch me run that dropshot down -- look at that *get . . .* "

This is a masterstroke on Amis's part -- in the face of death, life exerts itself with renewed vigor. And yet there are still those who groan at the convergence of audacious style and emotional substance. "Ingenuity and gravitas don't mix," wrote one reviewer, taking to task the book's combination of sorrow and rhetorical play. That, Amis says, "is a real A-B-C non-criticism, a ridiculous category error."

Besides, "it's the old English spirit," he adds, slipping into a cockney accent: " `You gotta larf, uvverwise . . . ' " Otherwise you'd go mad. "The rewards of being sane are not that many," Amis says, quoting from his father's novel *Stanley and the Women*, "but knowing what's funny is one of them."

If there's one thing Kingsley and Martin Amis shared, it was a highly developed sense of humor. Indeed, Kingsley's death in the book is marked not by the moment his heart stops beating, but the moment he stops finding things funny. Physical death comes as a sort of afterword to the death of laughter. "Humor and words are what he lost," Amis says, "and that felt kind of novelistic. You have to take your hat off to life, or to death, for being so symmetrical. If death is an artist, then he certainly did a good job with my dad."

But of course, as Amis points out in *Experience*, life is too messy, too incoherent to work as a novel -- even Kingsley's life. It is the life that is in the book, not vice versa. "[Kingsley's] books are all over my room," Amis writes, "on the desk, on the table, on the floor, on the shelves. I keep having to go and look for the one that I want and I keep thinking: What a lot of books you wrote, Dad, and what a lot of work you did. *These* are your last words. . . . All this is you and is the best of you, and it is still here and I still have it."

This is what Amis means when he declares that writing is "not communication but a means of communion."

I DON'T think there's a huge contrast between my novels and this book," Amis says toward the end of our conversation. "I always used to say that if I died tomorrow, my two youngest children would not remember me, but they'd eventually find out a great deal about me by reading my novels. Hopefully, they'll find out even more now. But it still stands, I think, that novels say a lot about the kind of person you are."

At the same time, novels also say a lot about the kind of person you are not. Amis is certainly not a John Self or a Keith Talent or a Big Mal -- the "spiteful and vicious people" who populate his novels. These men are hard, at ease in the harsh, criminal world of Amis's imagination. They are the close-browed bullies, the thick-necked bruisers. And they are a far cry from the physically slight, emotionally taut protagonist of *Experience* -- who once crapped in his pants when he was shouted at by a laborer, who winced beneath the blows of childhood bullies.

"Perhaps this is why I feel such equanimity now," Amis says (and you don't get *this* stuff in the novels, either). "I've only recently stopped worrying about being beaten up every time I go out. That sort of peer-group hostility -- it's a relief when that goes away."

But has it gone away? There will probably always be people eager to take potshots at Martin Amis.

In *Experience*, he recalls being manhandled, as an adult, on a London street. His assailant, apparently, was annoyed that Amis was walking too slowly. (Big Mal, of course, would have clocked the fucker there and then.) Oddly, Amis seems less upset by the assault than by the misunderstanding that provoked it: it wasn't *me* dawdling, he tells us, it was an old lady ahead of me.

"No, I wasn't *choosing* to walk slowly and, no, you don't seize strangers round the back of the neck and, no, I wasn't shitting myself and, no, I . . . The sense of compound injustice, and compound futility, the conviction that the universe was without reason or redress: this reminded me of something.

"It reminded me of being in the papers."

FOOTNOTES:

2. In the British tabloid the *Sun*, Page Three is famously given over to shots of bare-chested women. The *Daily Sport* took this a step further, filling its pages with semi-nude photos.

MA: The *Sport's* all Page Three. Page one is Page Three. Though there is a pathetic news bit on page two.

CW: And that's the bit you use to wipe yourself with.

MA: Yeah, yeah. Some of the stuff in the *Sport* is so good as horror. There used to be a column written by a guy who poses for the photograph completely cross-eyed. It's all about nudity on the telly, remarks like, "Another Channel 5 wrist-fest coming up." "This is a three-Kleenex movie, and I don't mean it's a weepie." "Make sure you leave enough bog roll for your morning dump." ([back](#))

3. Amis says his tact did slip on one occasion: "My description of my mother's second husband is perhaps a bit sharp: a dumpy-shaped tightwad. But he was a mean sod. He used to, you know, lock up the drink and hide things. He was a tightwad and he is a tightwad." ([back](#))

4. **CW:** You write that your father was not one to equivocate about literary matters. But this doesn't seem enough. There must have been times when you craved unqualified praise.

MA: He said you can get that from a dog. It was never going to be uncritical admiration. He was not a great admirer of anyone's prose. Anthony Powell's, perhaps, but after that you slam him up against a wall and say, 'Who's good?' and very quickly he's reduced to saying Dick Francis. So I was in excellent company. But it was hurtful. It was like a blow the first time. I was stunned, but it didn't rankle.

CW: Was it something you had to forgive him for?

MA: He made it up to me partly. He read *Time's Arrow* in a sitting. I said, "Oh good, you were gripped by it?" and he said, "I was gripped. It was good, too." And that was . . . it was so nice to hear that, it made me think, "Yeah, I could have done with quite a bit more of that." But it was a hell of a lot better than nothing. ([back](#))

5. **CW:** Was this a kind of emotional boot camp for you? Do you come out of something like this with more emotional muscle?

MA: I think you do. When everything is against you, you toughen up. You have to. You're sort of tensed up for more and you get more, and you get through it.

CW: And now you're through it.

MA: I find that when you're not going through it, when life is pretty smooth, that's when a paranoia of happiness sets in, when you expect this wall to come down on you. I do an incredible amount of exhausted fretting about my children. I keep imagining them falling or

getting knocked down and I twist around on my chair, I torture myself with it. When things are okay, that's a fairly jumpy state to be in. ([back](#))

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