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The Amis way of saying things

(Filed: 07/04/2001)

Following the progress of Martin Amis, reviewer and critic

STYLE has always been important to Martin Amis. It is one thing he has never lacked. Compassion and character development may be missing from such early works of fiction as *Dead Babies* and *Success*, but there is no denying their narrative verve. Money and London Fields are supreme examples of a style in search of a subject. In other words, it is not what Amis says, it is the way he says it that counts. In these two novels, for example, self-abuse and apocalypse are simply the springboards which enable him to show off his talent for turning verbal somersaults.

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A literary critic, though, does not have to find a subject: it is usually delivered in a Jiffy-bag to his door. Amis is an excellent critic. **The War Against Cliche** is his third collection of journalism. It is a sign of Amis's superstardom that he has not had to compile it himself. This task has been ably carried out by James Diedrick, author of *Understanding Martin Amis* and founder of *The Martin Amis Web* (<http://martinamis.albion.edu>).

Amis himself has contributed a few defensive footnotes, emphasising more than once how young he was (23) when he ticked off elders and betters (J. G. Ballard, William Empson), and an amusing Foreword in which he attacks "the forces of democratization" - ie dumbing down. "You can become rich without having any talent . . . You can become famous without having any talent . . . But you cannot become talented without having any talent. Therefore, talent must go."

The War Against Cliche is a rallying cry for all those who believe in "the talent elite". The literary canon - including Coleridge, Austen, Milton, Dickens, Donne, Waugh and Wodehouse - is wheeled out to blow away the ignorant hordes who think Michael Crichton is as good a writer as V. S. Naipaul. In a hilarious review of Crichton's *The Lost World* - the sequel to *Jurassic Park* - Amis identifies his

BOOK INFORMATION

Title

The War Against Cliche: Essays and Reviews, 1971-2000

Author

Martin Amis

Category

Literature

Reviewer

Mark Sanderson

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08 April 2001

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Jonathan Cape

Date Published

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0224050591

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"anti-talent for dramatic speech ('Brace yourself, Sarah!', 'There's no time to waste', 'There's something funny about this island, Ian')" and tracks the "herds of cliches, roaming free". When it comes to value judgments, Amis himself is not afraid to seem like a dinosaur.

Since the reviews in this collection span almost 30 years, the reader can follow Amis's progress from precocious pup to cultural guard-dog. The earliest, a piece on The Guinness Book of Records for The Spectator in 1971, is easily the weakest. His first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, was still two years away. The frequent use of the personal pronoun and a reference to the publisher's "review notes" suggest a young gun sure of himself if not of his aim. Furthermore, now that Amis's hi-energy vocabulary has become a hallmark, it is a real shock to see him using a word like "nicely".

On the other hand, the last piece in the book, a brilliant essay on *Lolita*, written in 1992, represents Amis at his best. From the arresting first sentence - "Like the sweat of lust and guilt, the sweat of death trickles through *Lolita*" - right through to the final confession that, having read Vladimir Nabokov's book "eight or nine times", he expects "to read the novel many more times", Amis shows how this "cruel book about cruelty . . . rushes up on the reader like a recreational drug more powerful than any yet discovered or devised".

In Amis's world Class A literature is habit-forming. Reviewing a biography of Malcolm Lowry, the alcoholic author of *Under The Volcano*, Amis says "his addiction becomes our addiction".

Lowry may have been British but, as far as Amis is concerned, America is the home of the real thing. Besides Nabokov, who lived there for a while, John Updike, Philip Roth, Don DeLillo and Saul Bellow are his heroes (Iris Murdoch, Fay Weldon and Jane Austen provide the book with a token female presence). The American Eagle is a fond appreciation of Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*. As usual, Amis is more interested in how the prose achieves its effects rather than what those effects are. However, he does point out that it is impossible to separate style and content: "they come from the same place. And style is morality".

Amis's own style relies on iteration and alliteration: "When poets die, there is usually a rush to judgment: a revaluation, a retaliation - a reaction, anyway." He is a great reviewer because he is never dull or humourless, because he backs up his assertions with quotations, and always indulges in some good, old-fashioned practical criticism. If Norman Mailer's "private mental thesaurus", in Amis's view, reads "ego, bitch, blood, obscenity, psyche, hip, soul, tears, risk, dare, danger, death", then his own must read "brilliance, chaos, cliché, dazzle, fragile, hard-edged, irony, jangle, literature, quiddity, superbity, talent".

Praising V. S. Pritchett, Amis declares "all artist-critics are to some extent secret proselytizers for their own work; they are all secret agents". What better subject can there be than yourself? *The War Against Cliche* cunningly and entertainingly reveals how Amis and his fellow authors go about their subversive art.

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