



Martin Amis: "Why should I tell the story of my life?"

(photo: Michael Birt)

FAMOUS AMIS

BY DANIEL HANDLER

I don't quite remember the details of the confidentiality agreement that came shackled to advance copies of *Experience*, the new Martin Amis memoir, but it's OK to talk about it *now*, right? It's safe to mention Amis's big fight with novelist Julian Barnes, or the fact that he got his teeth fixed, isn't it? Amis's lawyers—sorry, *solicitors*—won't break my legs if I talk about his illegitimate daughter, or the serial killer who murdered his cousin, now that the book is actually in stores, will they? I mean, now that you can find *Experience* on the shelves, it's permissible to mention that Martin Amis is the son of Kingsley Amis, right?

That last one, of course, ain't news. But then neither are those other juicy stories, if you've been following the British novelist's high-profile career. As surely as Amis has been in print, he's been in the papers: For every terrific morsel of a novel, like *Money* or *Dead Babies*, there's been terrific tabloid attention to go with it, climaxing, if that's the word, with *The Information*, a novel that was reported, semiaccurately, to be a bitchy and thinly veiled send-up of the London literary scene, and for which Amis received an enormous, much discussed advance. It might seem absurd to paste a confidentiality agreement on a book that re-creates all these fireworks, but *Experience's* hush-hush publicity suits the book entirely. Britain's faded but feisty bad boy puts on one of his shiniest displays here—all flashy, stylish, explosive bursts of sound and fury. But—to paraphrase another famous British writer—what do the sound and fury signify, exactly?

Throughout *Experience*, Amis doth protest too much that he is not at all, not nearly, as good as Vladimir Nabokov, whose masterful memoir *Speak, Memory* is liberally quoted and fetishistically invoked all over this loopy book—and he's right. Nabokov this ain't. *Speak, Memory* is a gorgeous slide show of conjurer's tales, serving as a testament to Nabokov's ardor—and, less superlatively, our own—for a luminous inner history to stabilize the half-remembered chaos of a loud and fragrant life. Amis has no such game plan. "Why should I tell the story of my life?" he asks. "I want to set the record straight . . . and to speak, for once, without artifice. . . . The method, plus the use of footnotes, should give a clear view of the geography of a writer's mind. If the effect sometimes seems staccato, tangential, stop-go, etc., then I only say that that's what it's like, on my side of the desk."

Um, I think those things *are* artifice. Consider postmodern playboys like Manuel Puig, Nicholson Baker, and David Foster Wallace, footnoting all over the place to maintain their staccato, tangential, stop-go styles. Amis couldn't write without artifice if he had a gun to his head, of course, but even *pretending* that he's shooting from the hip gets him thrown out of Club Nabokov. He also fancies himself in the company of his friend Saul Bellow, but I'll get to the part of *Experience* where Amis compares religious Jews to trained chimps later. In the meantime, if Amis insists on a comparison, how about Prince? Both the Brit and the Glyph had a bunch of terrific, boundary-stretching hits that simultaneously acknowledged and twisted the touchstones of the medium, mostly during the 1980s. Both stars have dimmed somewhat, although they remain in the public imagination due to their own smirky, unfettered attitude. It's this attitude that keeps Amis fresh even when he stumbles. Recent works, like the stagey neo-noir of *Night Train* and the odd, try-anything-once stories in *Heavy Water*, are as spectacular to behold as they are difficult to get through. The closing gimmick in *Heavy Water* is a story rendered in indecipherable dialect, but even when slogging through every line of "he zhed, she zhed" dialogue you can sense his restless and fanciful talent. No wonder *The New Yorker* published it.

Or maybe it was because he slept with Tina Brown, "a love affair . . . over too soon, as if something much longer had been confusingly compressed into six or

Experience
By Martin Amis

seven months." That's one of the few actual secrets this book contains, and by far the juiciest. As Amis himself says, "So much of this is *already* public." *Experience* rehashes nevertheless. The Barnes fight is refought. The teeth are refixed. The illegitimate daughter is relegitimized. The cousin is remurdered.

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Amis digs up long-dormant trivialities, like A.S. Byatt's frowning on his large advance for *The Information*. A bewildering paradox emerges. All the while, Amis tells us how terrible it was to see these stories in print, and that they should never have been told in the first place. But if his reunion with the long-lost daughter isn't any of our business, why is he telling us about it? Amis writes that having his teeth pulled left "a darkness, a void, a tunnel that led all the way to my extinction," but if the story is worth so much ink in *Experience*, why shouldn't it have been in the papers?

This contradiction sinks its teeth in a little deeper when the subject is Kingsley. After some clear-eyed and often brilliant portraits of his comic and complicated father, Amis writes a scathing Appendix denouncing the publication of an intimate account of his father's difficult last days written by his biographer shortly after Kingsley's death. This furious Appendix is not a surprise; during an intimate account of his father's difficult last days, Amis pauses, in a footnote, to tell us that Kingsley "openly peed into a mop-bucket," adding, "I would have spared my father this detail, but it is already in print (see Appendix)." Perhaps I will now be chastised for quoting this personal detail, and the Möbius strip of Amis's gambit—*I'm telling you my dirty secrets because somebody else already did*—will finally be complete. Most distressingly, Amis offers his opinion of Kingsley's unfinished novel. "Rather slow, and perhaps rather weakly focused," he says of the 106 pages sitting by his father's typewriter. It may be that Amis is exploring, without artifice, the contradiction of writing a memoir in order to correct crimes against personal privacy. But he tries to have it both ways, airing dirty laundry to reprimand and titillate rubbernecking readers.

But what would Prince be without precisely that sort of nerve? Just a silly symbol, and much of *Experience* manages to transcend its pettier sections with the good old Amis bravado. The inclusion of his own mortifying college correspondence, hilariously annotated, simultaneously mocks and upholds the feisty-young-man trope of a typical memoir, and the bookworm dalliances—for example a discussion of the "phobia" subsection of Amis's *Thesaurus*—confirm that the bellicose and fidgety intelligence of his best novels is still up in the belfry, with one eye inward and the other out on the literary landscape. He's even still willing to provoke controversy without any real reason, observing, while recounting a trip to Israel with Bellow, "To see the guy in the beanie doing his stuff at the Wailing Wall now put me in mind of Nabokov's remark about chimpanzees dressed up for circus tricks and how this demeaned their animal nature." For some, this sort of flash might be enough. But for a writer whose lovesexy style has always allowed him to soar over the pitfalls of autobiographical fiction, Amis is so focused on getting the record straight that he falls into the deep murk of irrelevant anecdotes and tirades against unworthy and forgotten opponents. Can't get above the fray, Martin? Then get over it. Don't make us think that they slipped in a glass jaw with your new teeth.

Daniel Handler's novel **Watch Your Mouth** will be published in July.

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