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Tamasin Day-Lewis: Am I the 'leggy temptress' in Martin Amis's new novel?

Some people say that Martin Amis based his Pregnant Widow character, Scheherazade, on Tamasin Day-Lewis. If she is, she says, she won't let on.

By Tamasin Day-Lewis

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If winning first prize in a Camaby Street nightclub for the best legs in London under a miniskirt qualifies me for the part of leggy temptress Scheherazade in Martin Amis's new novel, she's all mine.



Tamasin Day-Lewis Photo: REX

The year was 1970. I was 17, the prize was £100 to spend in the Pussy Galore boutique, and a school friend and I pitched up in skirts whose waistbands had been rolled over and safety-pinned so many times they hid nothing but the barest of bare minimums from view. I had already known Mart for years – he was the stepson of my godmother Jane [novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard] – and I was as in awe of him as my youngest daughter is now of her older brother's friends.

You don't imagine that older boys could ever fancy you, and when Mart went off to Exeter College, Oxford, he entered another world; I was still at school. I was at co-educational Bedales, and we girls had crushes on our "heroes", boys four or five years older, though the greater part of these was yearning for what we knew, and in some ways hoped, was the unattainable. We weren't ready for anything more.

When Jane and her husband, the novelist Kingsley Amis, Mart's father, moved to their house, Lemmons, in Hertfordshire, I used to go for weekends. I was, like most teenagers, desperate to escape the confines of home, the perceived illiberality of my own parents [Poet Laureate Cecil Day-Lewis and actress Jill Balcon] and the stultifying tedium of being a

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teenager.

Lemmons was full of impossibly glamorous older people and a core commune of writers, painters and inventors; even the dogs and cats shared a communal basket, and there were always stray writers and publishers whose marriages were unravelling. The drink flowed as freely as an open artery at family dinners. After all, "Kingers", as we knew Kingsley, wrote about drink for *Playboy*, which sent him crates of assorted liquor every week.

When Mart came back from Oxford at weekends with Gully Wells, to whom he dedicated his first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, I was very much the skinny, gawky, teenager, as shy of opening my mouth as of attempting to join in. Mart was decked out in skin-tight velvet trousers, floral shirts from Deborah and Clare in Beauchamp Place, velvet jackets and Chelsea boots with Cuban heels. Gully was tiny, pretty, blonde and dressed almost identically.

I felt invisible, and imagined, as you do in your mid-teens, that I would stay this way for ever, not realising that you have to wait in the wings before you are

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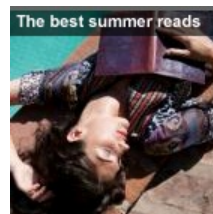
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discovered. Teenagers spend their whole time waiting.

Next came Tina Brown [former editor of *Tatler* and *Vanity Fair*, now publisher of *The Daily Beast* news website], who seemed to be as adored by Kingsley as she was by Mart.

I was still part of the furniture.

Sure, there were times when Mart, his brother Philip, his sister Sally, my brother Dan and I were a gang, taking illicit substances, drinking, smoking the throat-raspers that Kingsley smoked, playing all-night sessions of Monopoly with Jane's brother Monkey and eating obscenely overpacked comets from the tubs of Marine Ices that Jane kept in the freezer. Dan and I struggled to keep up; we were still in the third division, imagining a whole cool world where everyone was cleverer, funnier, more beautiful, more successful. Older.

Then it was my turn. I was wholly unaware of what had changed and made me attractive, and was surprised when Mart first kissed me on the white sofa in the drawing room when everyone had gone to bed. And shocked at the idea that he seemed to know I would be willing – after all, we'd never preambled, there'd been no sign. There was the trust of friendship, though, however naively realised at that age; we had hung out together, lived in the same house together, shared secrets, observed things, been conspiratorial when Jane's mother was dying at Lemmons.

Mart kept a bottle of whisky and a packet of fags by the bed. Was it to be cool? Was it nerves? Was it already part of the image? You don't ask those questions at the time, you only think of them later. I said yes to both, even though I never liked whisky. I was still at that stage where you feel you've got to be one of the boys.

Mart was the first boyfriend I'd had who had been a friend first and who would stay a friend afterwards. There was no question of that not happening, our lives were so inextricably bound together back then. That doesn't mean I didn't fall in love with Mart, but we already knew enough about each other and our different stages of life to know it wasn't binding. And, perhaps intuitively, we knew that neither of us would get hurt. Neither of us wanted to hurt the other. We were mates.

I think we both thought that neither Jane nor Kingsley would realise we'd crossed over from being friends to being lovers, although now I look back I think they must both have seen it as inevitable long before we did. I was under no illusions about where I fitted into Mart's life – his male friends, his drinking and writing came first. Meanwhile, my father was sick and I was at a crammer doing Oxbridge entrance and living with a girlfriend. My life was about to be turned upside down when we learned that my father was dying, and Jane and I conspired to get my whole family moved to Lemmons for the duration.

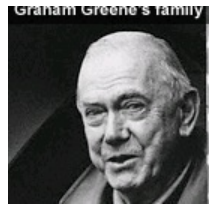
Nobody ever spoke or wrote about Kingsley being kind, and it is not how Mart is ever described either, but I saw that side of both of them, noticed their similar way of showing affection awkwardly, embarrassedly, conveying real fondness nonetheless. While my father lay dying, I will never forget the kindness, the way both Kingsley and Mart appeared to try to imagine what it must feel like and almost to tiptoe around my feelings.

Mart and I were – are – both the children of successful, well-known parents; the blessing and the curse of it linked us, however unspoken or unrealised back then. Much of the subsequent criticism we have both endured – though Mart's has been on a stratospheric scale compared to mine – has been down to the envy and assumption of others and, in his case, totally out of proportion considering his talent. Clever people are often not well liked, but when it gets personal, and, in his case, spiteful, subjective, ungiven, unforgiving, an affront, you have no means of reply; you rest silent, you have to show everything through your work and hope for reassessment later. And that is exactly what he has done.

My father was terminally ill and died in 1972, a few months after we moved into Lemmons as a family. Mart and I were both so young, we were playing at being boyfriend and girlfriend while these huge events were shaping and hijacking our lives, and during that time we both saw "home" as the place Jane had made Lemmons for both of us. Then Mart's first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, was published in 1973 to a frenzy of attention and comparison.

In all this complication, our relationship was easy. Looking back on it now, I can see quite how easy and undemanding it was. So much back-story and territory, literary and family-wise, was shared, understood. I was doing what Mart knew I would do: working to get into Cambridge to read English as one of the first women at King's College, in the same way as he had worked, encouraged by Jane, to get into Oxford. The night I heard I'd got a place at King's, I remember ringing Mart and he took me out to dinner to celebrate. That was the first time we had ever done anything like that, as we had always been at home in Maida Vale or at Lemmons. We had always been "the children". Mart was touchingly proud and pleased. That was surprising, too.

We went in and out of each other's lives with this unforced ease – sometimes dependent on which of us had another girl or boyfriend – for several more years, until Jane left Kingsley.



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Now, when we bump into each other, usually at each other's book launches, I am just terribly glad we can acknowledge something of our shared past by being genuinely pleased to see each other and pleased for each other that we have done what we have both done in life. So many of the links in the chain of our lives break, die, disappear, over the years and with the end of most of our relationships, a friendship goes, the person ceases to exist.

I am writing this, savouring the moment when I either do or don't discover that I am buried, not too deeply to recognise, in Mart's new novel, *The Pregnant Widow*. Some say they see elements of me in Gloria Beautyman "whose body was completed, entire, the final version" – though they say my arse isn't fat like hers. Others, apparently, would have me as Scheherazade, "the leggy temptress".

I have ordered my copy of the novel. If I'm in doubt, I'll ask Mart, otherwise I'll say nothing. Muses, by definition, have to retain their mystery.

* This article first appeared in the 'London Evening Standard'



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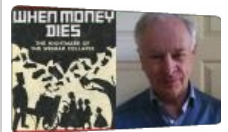
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