



The young Turk

James Wood applauds Martin Amis' tender defiance in *Experience*

James Wood

Saturday May 20, 2000

Guardian

Experience

Martin Amis

Cape, £18, 412pp

[Buy it at BOL](#)

Experience is a beautiful, and beautifully strange book, and it is unlike anything one expected. One feared a trough of plaint: either a sad, Gosse-like reckoning with the father; or an angry, journalistic reckoning with those journalists who have hunted Amis from tooth to tooth.

But *Experience* is not quite a memoir, nor is it quite a portrait of his father, nor is it really an autobiography. It is an escape from memoir; indeed, an escape into privacy. In the very book which might, at first glance, seem most exhibitionist, most shamelessly metropolitan, Amis has softly retreated to the provinces of himself.

His book often reads like a letter to his family and closest friends. It is sometimes embarrassing to read; the ordinary reader feels voyeuristic, at times almost uninvited, but very moved. What seems at first just gossip and guestlists - sprays of names offered without explanation, diaristic footnotes, a refusal to universalise - soon becomes a kind of tender defiance, as if Amis wanted the book to vibrate with an atmosphere of wounded privacy.

Thus *Experience* has an undulating, open-ended form, something like a notebook whose pagination has been erased. Obvious chronology is scrambled, so that at any page or two we might move from the mid-1990s back to Amis's earliest childhood days, forward to the 1970s, then forward to the moment at which Amis is writing the book itself, and so on.

The book's reminds us that, in an inversion of the usual adage, life is lived backwards but is thought forwards. For we are always thinking forwardly: what next?; yet more often than not what comes next has already been decided by the court of our past, so we must live backwardly. Amis's book is imbued with this sense of the past, especially childhood, as a future already determined.

One such determinism - it is the book's major theme - is that innocence will necessarily become experience, song turn to growl. This will happen gradually, as life teaches us its experience. But, as Amis describes it, that change happened savagely and very quickly to him, in 1994 and 1995. These years are the book's pregnable pivot, the wound to which the text recurs again and again.

In 1994, Amis learned that his cousin, Lucy Partington, who had disappeared in 1973, was one of Frederick West's victims. He grieved, and grieves, for his cousin, and some of the book's loveliest passages evoke her, and childish holidays spent with her on the beach in Wales. The Partington family were innocence, while the Amises were experience. The Partingtons were from the village, the Amises were from town, and when the families met, "the lion lay down with the lamb". (Echoes of Milton and Blake on innocence and experience.)

Also around this time, Amis lost an old friend (Julian Barnes), an old agent (Pat Kavanagh), separated from his wife and two children, became horribly famous for his teeth (not, of course, the extraction of a few molars, but the reconstruction of his entire jaw), and lost his father, who died in November, 1995. He also learned that he was the

father of a 17-year-old daughter, Delilah Seale, whom he had never met. Amis did not really collapse so much as die into middle age. Innocence had been vandalised. His tears, as the Psalmist has it, had become his meat, day and night.

These experiences are wrought in a rich and sedimented prose that displays all of Amis's usual powers of nimble paradox (a chemist that smelled of "decaying penicillin", a tennis court strewn with "shop-fresh garbage"), with wonderful plumage and peacockery: his head, during toothache, "TV-shaped with swellings", or the delicious sentence used to describe his father's stately, plump fall on the Edgware Road: "It was a work of colossal administration."

Yet as the book describes Kingsley's last days in hospital, Amis knows how to dilute his tangs, and let a flatter, harder prose report the inevitable: "How hard it is to die. You have to chase it, panting." And finally, this bony epitaph, as Martin looks at his father's corpse: "It is 1995 and he has been there since 1949." What is so moving is the rightful selfishness of those dates: he does not write "since 1922", which would be Kingsley's birthdate, but "since 1949", which is his own - for his is the reality that now matters.

The book's oblique patterns educate us in the ways that the past contains the seeds of its future. For instance, we read of Kingsley Amis's divorce from Martin's mother, and Kingsley's second divorce from Martin's stepmother; we already know, because of the book's switchback form, that Martin's divorce will follow many years later. Likewise, in the course of the book, a daughter is lost (the Partingtons' daughter) and a daughter found (Delilah Seale), and a daughter birthed (his baby daughter with his new wife, Isabel Fonseca). And a father is lost, while a father-substitute (Saul Bellow) is found. And through it all, the fearful symmetry of father and son: one writer begetting another.

This layering of incident allows Amis, most beautifully, to touch the hems of his themes without dragging too strongly on them. When, for instance, Martin regrets that he lost touch with his stepmother after her divorce from Kingsley, he laments "our vanished relatedness, cancelled by law but not by feeling". Yet that tiny elegy speaks forward too, perhaps, to another, later vanished relatedness, that between Martin and his first wife, Antonia Phillips. There is a sense in which Amis is continually speaking through people to other people in this book, a sun happy to be outshone by their moons. This self-dimming is something new and unexpected in his work, and suggests a new emotional climate.

As Nabokov does in his memoir, *Speak, Memory*, so Amis buries his patterns deep in the aesthetic textures of his book. At one point, he tells us that a local Italian restaurant serves a dish which might be translated as "from grandmother's handbag". There is a joke that one might as well fancy "a plate of hairgrips and DentuFix". The book has, not surprisingly, established teeth as one of its themes of hardship: there is a funny riff about the indignity of Martin's having to buy Steradent for his dentures. Thus "Dentufix". But why "hairgrips"?

Seventy-four pages later, we learn in a footnote that Lucy Partington's body was found with rope, packing tape, and "two hairgrips". So a plate of "hairgrips and DentuFix" is, essentially, a plate of experience, a plate of pain. From such painful, painstaking pebbles, such subtleties of detail and implication, is this fine, affecting book built.