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## Julie Kavanagh: My life with Martin Amis

In this astonishingly candid memoir, writer Julie Kavanagh describes the "golden era" of her passionate relationship with Martin Amis during the 1970s.

By Julie Kavanagh

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Martin Amis, Paris, 1980 Photo: ANGELA GORGAS

It was the beginning of 1974. I was 21, living with my journalist boyfriend in his South Kensington flat, and working as London editor of the American fashion bible *Women's Wear Daily* and its more glamorous big sister *W*. One of my earliest feature ideas was a profile of "London's newest novelist", whose first book *The Rachel Papers* was due to be published in America in the spring.

Thanks to my half-sister Pat Kavanagh, who was the literary agent of both Amis father and son, I'd been sent an uncorrected proof the previous autumn, which I devoured in a single session, finding its derisive tone, street-smart images and obnoxious humour so stunningly original that it eclipsed any other contemporary fiction I'd read.

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If I was already ensnared by the writing, when I saw the photograph on the back flap of the published edition I was seriously smitten; the Jagger lips, moody monobrow and fag between two fingers exactly fitted the image I'd formed of a coldly alluring Martin Amis. And even sexier was the discovery that, having left Oxford with a first-class honours degree in English he was, as his protagonist dubs himself, "—ing clever".

The author turned out to be far more approachable: as witty and ironic as Charles Highway, but small, very small, and sweetly affectionate – even sentimental. Reviews had predicted that *The Rachel Papers* had laid the groundwork for a major reputation but at 24, Martin was a jobbing literary journalist, not a star. He worked full-time for the *Times Literary Supplement*, and as a freelance critic for the *Observer*, the *Listener* and the *New Statesman*, where only his colleagues knew that he was the columnist Bruno Holbrook, whose investigation of strip clubs and girly mags with their "husky, nudging captions" proclaimed him as a writer with a formidably imaginative voice.

A number of dinners at San Lorenzo and Drones in Knightsbridge were followed by half nights in the Pont Street maisonette he shared with his friend Rob Henderson. When I engineered an illicit whole night we booked into a room at The Sign of the Angel in Lacock, Wiltshire, which we hardly left. I took a picture of Martin lounging on the Angel's baronial bed dressed in his trademark "velves" and a magic-mushroom print shirt. On it he wrote, "The world is flat".

The rest of that spring continued to be clandestine. Love letters from Martin written on *TLS* headed paper were folded in an extra sheet "on account of the cheapie, see-through envelopes", and addressed to my *WWD* office in Buckingham Gate. He began involving me in his world, taking me to Barnet to

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meet his father for the first time at Lemmons, the imposing Georgian house where Kingsley and Martin's stepmother, the novelist Elizabeth-Jane Howard, lived in an odd ménage with Jane's gay brother and a lugubrious painter.

Surprising as it may seem, the atmosphere was not at all intimidating, as the focus of meals tended to be the verbal singles match between father and son, which required appreciative laughter from an outsider, not participation. Their banter was invariably funny, with Martin touchingly delighted by his father's intonations and inventions, and sometimes pleading to borrow a Kingsleyism for his own fiction. But if it was hard at first to share their amusement of favourite catchphrases delivered in silly voices (the plebby emphasis on the final "t" in "Get the ports outs", for example), I must have passed a kind of audition as Martin wrote afterwards, "I didn't feel a second's anxiety, and that's never happened before."

His intellectual circle was the next hurdle. The poet and New College don Craig Raine remembers him introducing me by saying, "This is Julie. She's the party correspondent of *WWD*," which Martin now insists was meant to be funny, not snide. And yet, although he grew very fond of some of my friends, he was contemptuous of the social and fashion aspect of my world, dismissing Manolo Blahnik as "that shoe person".

I'd never met an Oxford don, but Craig was as warm and unlofty as his wife Ann [Li] Pasternak Slater, an English fellow at St Anne's – both mentors and friends to this day. And as there was nothing at all daunting about the brilliantly funny, flirtatious Clive James (whose TV criticism for the *Observer* was an art form in itself), nor the louche, lovable polemicist Christopher Hitchens [the Hitch], who was Martin's *New Statesman* colleague, it didn't take long for me to fit in.

Martin also had an underground life in which neither I nor his literary friends played any part. This mostly involved hanging out in rancid pubs and pool halls with Rob, his flatmate, *doppelgänger* and muse. Westminster-educated Rob was the model for Charles Highway's reedy voice with "habitual ironic twang", his silky, brown hair, and long, thin, nose, and he also bore a strong resemblance to Gregory, the co-hero of Martin's third novel "Success".

The Pont Street flat was exactly that of "Success", its layout "meant for someone flash living alone, or someone flash plus his girl", but shared by Rob and Martin, whose bedrooms were those of Gregory and his nerdish foster-brother Terry. Getting to the kitchen took you a couple of feet from the bed Rob then shared with his girlfriend Olivia, and if they went to the bathroom they had to come through Martin's room.

Like Gregory, with his Nureyevian look of "angled distaste", Rob was the flash one of the two: he'd take his guitar to the Picasso café in the King's Road to sing and play, he got himself a job on the Joan Collins film "The Bitch", and it seemed to Martin that Rob's trajectory was limitless.

The see-sawing plot of "Success", however, would prove to be chillingly prescient. The next decade saw Rob almost derelict, stinking of Special Brew and serving time in Wormwood Scrubs – falling, as Martin says, "too fast, too far". He's dead now, but he still haunts Martin's imagination, reappearing as one of the main characters in "The Pregnant Widow", the "blindingly autobiographical" novel due out early next year. Rob, himself, was the son of a pregnant widow.



The see-saw was about to tip. That spring Martin learnt that he had won the Somerset Maugham Award for *The Rachel Papers*, a tremendous accolade given to "the best writer under 35", with Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney among past winners.

Kingsley had won the same prize in 1955 for "Lucky Jim", but had been furious at its stipulation that the money be spent on foreign travel. It was a deportation order, he complained to Philip Larkin, "forced to go abroad, bloody forced, mun".

Being abroad was no problem for Martin, who had decided to finish his second novel in Spain later that year – it was just getting there. Even a 40-minute flight from Paris required a numbing amount of brandy and Valium cocktails. I can still see him tipsily overbalancing as he held onto our suitcase handle on the carousel, and being carried round on the little paunch he had then, legs bicycling in the air.

By the beginning of June I had left my boyfriend, and moved into a flat in Hugon Road, Wandsworth. The three-year relationship had run its course, my deceit was souring things, and, by now, Martin and I were irrevocably in love. Spending more and more time at my place, he soon showed himself to have his father's gift for being extremely good at not helping with any housework, the source of my name for him, "Lazy S—" (he signed his notes "LS"). For a reason neither of us can now recall I was "Spider" –"Perhaps because you created a nice web round me?"

A couple of weeks later Martin took me to Spain to meet his mother. Warm, cheerful, giddy and a touch dishevelled, Hilly lived in the Andalucian town of



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Ronda with an archetypal English lord, Alastair Boyd, the 7th Baron Kilmarnock, who was the father of Martin's two-year-old half-brother Jaime.

Their home was adjacent to Casa de Mondragon, a Moorish palace, spectacularly situated on the edge of a cliff with views of the El Tajo chasm. Ali ran a language school in the Mondragon, but Hilly spoke next-to-no Spanish, communicating with Anna and Rosa, the maids, through mime or a linguistic mix, such as her reference to locals "tajoing" unwanted kittens and puppies into the gorge. Her quirky take on things struck me as wonderfully entertaining, and as much of an influence on Martin as his father. Before flying home we had a few beach days on the Costa del Sol, where we played like kids, with endless, sangria-fuelled pinball sessions.

Martin recently reminded me that I would insist we took our books to the café. "We'd have a drink before dinner and we'd read. I thought at the time how wonderfully civilised this is." I'd gone to see him this April, at his house in Primrose Hill, when he was just a week away from finishing *The Pregnant Widow*. His wife, the writer Isabel Fonseca, was away skiing with their two girls, and Martin was expecting his elder son Louis to drop in to watch a football match. "We're very close. He looks like I did on the *Rachel Papers* jacket, except that he's about six foot three." It was the first time in over 30 years that we'd had more than a party conversation; I'd asked for his help with facts and memories for this article and he agreed without hesitation.

It could have been so awkward, the experience of revisiting our past for what I suppose is basically a consensual kiss-and-tell. It certainly felt strange to be applying biographical techniques to my own life, questioning my ex-lover about events and chronology, and it was disorientating – yet also reassuring – to see glimpses of the young man I'd loved in the manners and expressions of a near-sexagenarian.

But we swiftly fell into an easy, jokey rapport; there seemed no limit to what I could ask him or what he could reveal to me. We could even laugh now about the histrionic full-stop in the note I wrote after we'd broken up: "I'll never forgive you. Ever." It was indelible to him, completely forgotten by me. This proved an extraordinary couple of hours in which I learnt things I'd never known, or simply not retained. He even remembered the book I was reading that first summer in Spain. It was his father's novel "Girl 20", which has one of the most heart-rending last lines in fiction: "We're all free now." "You were about ten pages from the end, and I looked up and saw that your face was a mask of tears."

Martin returned alone to Ronda in September 1974. "Be as good as you can," he wrote before leaving, "I can guess how frightening you might find the next two months, and I'll sort of understand if you get sad or lonely. But even if you do, nothing could change things for me." Subsequent letters assured me that the only tempresses were Connie "aged 45 or so" and "a massively shouldered American called Babs", and he also described a routine that left little time for straying:

I get up at 9 (I'm in the Mon) go to Mum's for breakfast and start work at 9.30. Usually I work till 1.30, into Ronda for Fino, tapas and pin-ball, sun-bathe in Palace garden, have a nap, back at work by 5.30, until 8.30, dinner, more p-ball, bed by 11.30, read till 12.30, sleep.

The novel was *Dead Babies*, its title, derived from us military slang for civilian casualties, regarded by some as so offensive that the first paperback publisher changed its name to *Dark Secrets*. The setting is a weekend party peopled with youthful, sex-and-drug addicted characters – several comic grotesques of the kind that now define Martin's fiction. "Either it's *King Lear* or it's William Peter Blatty's *Too Wild a Dream*," he told me, the Blatty reference meaning tasteless, but effective gore. But if his typescript was fizzing with concentrated nastiness, his letters, noting the town filled with couples, or expressing "street sadness for you and London", were full of elegiac wistfulness. One brought news that gave me shivers – I was to be the dedicatee of *Dead Babies*:

I dream of the day I'll type a blank sheet of paper the title, and my name and FOR JULIE on the other.

It's for you, Spider.

There were a few years, a decade later, after a miscarriage, an ectopic pregnancy and a blighted ovum scare, when I was convinced that Martin had inflicted a terrible curse on me, but, at the time, this seemed the ultimate term of endearment, the confirmation that all was well.

By the middle of September, having finished "typing the mother out", he was talking about coming back early. The tenancy of the Pont Street flat had ended, as neither he nor Rob could afford it, and Martin wanted to live with me. Instinctively, I knew this was a bad idea. I'd heard him remark on more than one occasion that domesticity killed creativity, and I'd quoted him myself in WWD as saying, "Goodness and niceness don't interest me. My pen starts to drag." But my plea for us to continue having two places was ignored. "It looks like we'll have to manage in one for a while. I've never done it, and the idea fills me with a

sweet tootnacne longing. I know the nardeneo, urbane Spider thinks different, but we'll have to see." In early October I went out to Ronda, and then Martin got his way, and moved in to Hugon Road.

The image I've retained of nights at home is of me cooking dinner while he sits nearby, chuckling away as he re-reads his own prose – something he did a lot. There were occasional dark, impenetrable moods, but mostly – in the early days, at any rate –he was tender and demonstrative. The way I cry at endings of films and books, which now infuriates and embarrasses my sons, was funny and touching to Martin, who still, when we meet at parties, balloons his cheeks in imitation of my plump face and looks about to dissolve.

When we went out we did what we both enjoyed (saw films, friends, ate in restaurants), though never what I loved and he hated (theatre, ballet, foreign films), or what he loved and I hated (tennis, backgammon). I had quit the Royal Ballet School at 15 to continue my dance studies, which had left me with a massive inferiority complex about my half-finished education, but Martin wasn't the type to play Pygmalion. On the other hand, listening to him talk, whether expounding on his war on cliché, or upholding the superiority of fiction over biography, was a daily lesson in creative writing. And it wasn't only Martin who was infecting me with a passion for learning – it was his whole group.

What regularly gathered the so-called literary mafia together were the lunches which took place most Fridays at a Turkish-Cypriot joint on Theobalds Road. These were almost exclusively male occasions, but I was tolerated from time to time either because I was Martin's moll, or because of my flattering sponging-up of every word.

Looking back, I suppose the Friday lunches could best be described as combining the highbrow, uninhibited conversation of the fortnightly dining club at Magny's restaurant in 1860s Paris with the irreverent jousting of today's *Have I Got News for You*. But if Flaubert, Gautier, Turgenev and the Goncourt Brothers had feasted on M. Magny's Chateaubriand and Tournedos Rossini, the London literati made do with kebabs or a Yobs' Breakfast – ie, a mixed fry-up – at a nearby caff, washed down with gallons of red wine.

Its abbreviation "YB" was collectively understood by the group, as were the other code words, expressions and inflections: "rig" [penis]; "tonto" [mad]; "sock" [house]; "Taxiiiiiiiiiiii!" [desperate to get out of a situation]; "unlucky" [said with a yobbish dip ]; "hot in the cot" [good in bed]. These were either expressions from Martin's novels or inventions of the Hitch, his conversational foil.

Current affairs rarely came up, as Martin was completely uninterested in politics at that period, but recurring topics were things like plagiarism – what was and was not permitted for a writer to steal. "It's absolutely ok – in fact it's a triumph to take something from ordinary speech," Martin says at a lunch I once taped. "Well, I wish I'd thought of skinhead," adds Craig. "Skinhead is brilliant." Much hilarity sprung from juvenile word games (substituting "sock" for "house" in well-known titles or phrases, as in Bleak Sock, The Sock of Windsor...) or mimicry, with Martin inevitably taking the lead.

"The glue of those Friday lunches was everyone's adoration of Martin," says James Fenton, the poet, theatre critic and foreign correspondent, who was another participant. Hitch agrees. "He was the conversation, he was the charisma." But Clive James was always a stellar performer, and so was Kingsley, an occasional guest of honour. Julian Barnes, later to be my brother-in-law, was noticeably more reticent, though he added a note of gravitas, as did the other, less extrovert regulars Dai [Russell] Davies, the critic and jazz musician, and Terry Kilmartin, the Observer's literary editor. "We needed them there," says Hitch. "We couldn't just have shown off to each other."

I didn't know then that this was a golden era; that each player would become a star in his own right, and eventually an elder statesman. To me, their brilliance was the inevitable result of their Oxbridge education, and I developed a simplistic notion that three years at university might enable me to compete. This became a fixation. Craig recalls sitting next to me at a dinner, and saying something innocuous like, "You should come to Oxford more often," at which I burst into tears. "It was because you felt this edge of scorn in Martin. That it was impossible to be taken seriously unless you'd been to Oxford."

But any scorn was my own. I remember Martin flinching once at catching me reading a Harold Robbins paperback on the beach in Spain, but he was never bullying or absolutist with me in the way he could be with friends – with Salman Rushdie, for instance, whom he once goaded and sneered at for not sharing his contempt for Beckett's prose. "Martin didn't think of you at all as an airhead," Hitch told me. "Nobody did." But it made no odds that in the last 18 months I'd interviewed Tom Stoppard, Gore Vidal, Ralph Richardson, Jean Rhys, Andy Warhol, David Frost...I didn't know the difference between Keats and Yeats and that was shaming. "You hardly knew anything," Clive James told me, "so almost everything came as news. But your excitement at the news was the tip-off. Clearly what you needed was time to read properly."

By the summer of 1975 Martin had become as famous as his father, and it

By the summer of 1970 Martin had become as famous as his father, and it seemed to me that everyone was after him, however unlikely, from Germaine Greer to Mark Boxer. "The surest guarantee of sexual success is sexual success," Terry says in *Success*, when his fortunes with girls are turning, and Martin was now discovering this for himself.

The feelings of profound unattractiveness from which he claims to have suffered a couple of years before we met – feelings of short-arsed, physical inadequacy which he novelises time and again – had given way to Byronic magnetism. There was lost time to make up and no time for restraint. I have just the faintest memory of a party when he disappeared somewhere with a bohemian beauty named Lamorna Seale, only to return to me with his mouth smothered in lipstick, but he writes about my distress and his air of "defiant innocence" in his memoir *Experience* [1]. In retrospect, it's understandable: both had been struck by such a powerful coup de foudre that neither was responsible, though an element of remorse came later.

Spider – Been gradually dawning on me today how awful I must have been last night. Forgive me. Have gone to Barnet – best thing, I think – until Sunday. Tired, depressed, guilty, etc, and need to work. I love you. Will ring tonight. S x

The outcome is public knowledge: the birth of Martin's daughter Delilah. She was 18 when Lamorna's husband, Patrick Seale, the man Delilah had always believed was her father, broke the news about Martin. The Hitch remembers a conversation he and Martin had after Lamorna had told Seale that she was pregnant. "Patrick said, 'If it looks like Martin Amis it's going straight round to him in a basket,' but in the end he was an absolute gent."

I was pretty understanding too. "You were heartbreaking," Martin remarked in April. "You said, 'I know you're only human'." Remembering the lipstick, he doubles up laughing, "I was so bad at it. At duplicity." But he wasn't, he was very cunning. There was a dinner at a Greek place in Charlotte Street with Clive James and the critic Lorna Sage, when I thought that Martin and Lorna were doing more than just sitting side by side, and after picking up the fork I'd dropped, had my suspicions confirmed.

Tears and recriminations later were a waste of energy, because Martin's defence tactic was to turn the tables of blame, attacking me for making an issue out of something so unimportant. This was Martin at his worst – nasty, facetious and belittling –and I didn't have the confidence then to know that his behaviour was unacceptable, not mine.

I did, however, stumble on something that could hurt him just as badly. We were out somewhere with friends when I made a joke about the dental wreckage of his mouth. He made no comment at the time, but sat silently in the car afterwards before saying, "I can't believe how insensitive you were." Hitch claims that he learnt from me, "what a big deal Mart's teeth were for him," but we both should have realised earlier as it was there in black and white: for all his suavity Charles Highway has curdling milk teeth and a mouth "like a Meccano set"; while "dental monomaniac" Giles is pictured at the start of *Dead Babies* with his teeth cascading from his gums like beads from an unstrung necklace.

By 1975 we were living in the flat I had bought in Pimlico and Martin had moved to the *New Statesman*, assisting its literary editor Claire Tomalin. Frederic Raphael saw them having lunch, noting Martin's "innocent gigolo eyes and an air of candid arrivisme", and when I joined them on another occasion I sensed a complicity that very evidently excluded me. There was a heatwave that summer, and on one stifling August night we were at a party in Claire's north London house when she suggested that we all went for a swim in Highgate Ponds.

This was the episode written up in *Private Eye* when a group, which also included Craig, Li, the Hitch and the newly married journalists Valerie and Trevor Grove, climbed over the locked park gates and went skinny-dipping. My most vivid image is of the polymath Jonathan Miller, the only one of us who kept his clothes on, even his tweed jacket, standing on the platform and trying to engage any surfacing bather in earnest conversation. Hitch has an idolising memory of Martin going all the way up to the top board, gathering himself for a few seconds, and then "butching it out" and diving into the inky water. Valerie remembers her euphoria: "it seemed as though life was always going to be like this – tropical nights, naked swimming, bliss all round."

But to me, the heat, nudity and fecundity (Li was eight months pregnant, Valerie pregnant but not yet aware of it) brought an oppressive air of foreboding, which not even the amusing diversion of Hitch dog-paddling out and making a smoochy pass at me could lighten. Only later did I discover why. "It was when Martin was carrying on with Claire, and you didn't know," Craig said.

It didn't last long according to Martin – "Five weeks?" – but his notes to me from this period until the end of the year are almost all alibis. All-night poker sessions with Tony Hard-On [Anthony Holden] were the most convincing, provided his tracks were covered (eg, "Don't tell Rob abt poker 'cos he'll bitch abt not being asked"). And then, over the Christmas weekend which we spent at Barnet. Jane Howard took me for walk on Hadlev Common and confided that

Martin hadn't been coming there on the occasions he'd told me he was.

This may have been an attempt to be sisterly, her way of bonding over the misery that the Amis men were capable of inflicting – her situation with Kingsley was dire at the time – or it may have been revenge. My sister Pat had managed to be as popular with Jane, by helping in the kitchen, as she was with Kingsley, by being a good pub companion. But I was inexcusably remiss when it came to preparing Sunday lunches as it was much more entertaining to be at the pub with Kingsley and Martin from 11.30am to closing time, than it was to stay in Jane's kitchen with its haze of ruined roast and resentful martyrdom.

I didn't tell Martin about the conversation, but I must have vented my anguish on one of his notes, as the lines "Off to a poker party with Tony H. Go to Barnet v. late & prob back tomorrow afternoon" are furiously scribbled over in green felt-tip. A week later, we were in New York, knocking back killingly strong whiskey sours at P.J. Clarke's, skating in Central Park, checking out the Met, dining at Elaine's with a kittenish Anna Wintour, now the formidable editor of *American Vogue*. We didn't spend much time in our Lowell Hotel room but, when we did, it almost rivalled Lacock's "sweaty delirium" – I suppose because we both knew this was the end.

Soon afterwards – February 23rd to be exact – I went into the sitting room and saw Martin slam down the receiver. My address book was on the table, lying open at S. It was Emma Soames, my best friend. They'd started an affair while I was away on a W trip to Israel, a situation I should have seen coming. Not only was she very endearing, Emma was huge fun – much more fun than me – and I often went to bed leaving them playing backgammon together.

In *Experience* Martin attributes an element of Kingsley's fondness for her to the fact that she was Churchill's granddaughter, but I wonder if this wasn't truer of himself. Her family, hooting at each other across the table, was superb copy, while Martin and Emma's hilarious, blustering brother Nicholas clearly delighted in each other's company. It was the kind of heady pull of an aristocratic world that drew Waugh's Charles Ryder to *Brideshead* – "a very tony world indeed," as James Fenton said. "Martin wasn't talking about Nabokov with Nicholas Soames. This was feeding a different side of his ambition."

Ignoring Martin's half-hearted plea to sleep on the sofa, I threw him out that night, and he told me later that he'd slouched off to some cheap hotel. He left a note the next day:

Julie – I've hung on to the keys because I'll probably need them for moving my stuff out...Bill me for anything I owe you. Goodbye. Forgive, forgive. Martin x

By the spring of 1977 my diary records that he had moved on again.

Friday March 4th: Hitch came round with the news I've been waiting a year to hear – that Martin has dumped Emma – but it fell flat & I feel very sorry instead.

Thursday March 10th: Emma called & I invited her round. I suppose secretly I wanted to gloat. She is numb & shattered but v. stiff upper lip. Can't sleep or eat – echoes of me last year.

It was easy to be magnanimous. "I simply do not want you to feel that in getting rid of Martin you have lost the world academically," my mother wrote after we broke up, but that's precisely how I felt – as though a lifeline had been snatched away.

Now, however, not only was I adored by a young Adonis, I had acted on what Tina Brown calls my "independent little epiphany" by giving up WWD and devoting all my working hours to reading – cramming for an entrance exam to Oxford. The transition from party correspondent to English undergraduate that autumn was as tough and scary as it was fulfilling. Martin played a peripheral but supportive role, sending me alpha-standard essays and brilliantly annotated editions of Shakespeare, and just before Finals a letter arrived from Paris, where he was living with his then fiancée, the photographer Angela Gargas. I'd asked for his help with Nabokov for my American literature paper, and he delivered that and more.

I'll probably be back before your exams start and I'll give you some last minute advice. But don't worry. Eat lots of steak and don't drink and you'll be cool.

I graduated with a First – not Martin's formal, congratulatory kind, but the hard-won result of a viva cross-examination that still gives me nightmares. "He was nettled when you got a First," a mutual friend told me. "And I nettled him myself. I said, 'It's only a test of how much people work. It's just industry that gets you these things.'" In my case it was industry – the joy of reading in the Bodleian Library from opening to closing time – combined with inspirational tutoring by Craig, Li and Peter Conrad, the Christ Church don who had become my intellectual lodestar.

The point, though, was never the degree (which I haven't collected), it was English literature and Oxford itself. Oxford is still the love of my life, and I work whenever I can in the Bod, sitting where I always sat: U44 in the Upper Reading

Room with its view of the Radcliffe Camera and the fins of All Souls. It's where I'm writing this last sentence now.

*\* This piece originally appeared in the summer issue of 'Intelligent Life' magazine, on sale now ([www.moreintelligentlife.com](http://www.moreintelligentlife.com))*

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