

Martin Amis: The Biography by Richard Bradford – review

An ill-judged portrait of Martin Amis leaves the field wide open for a proper biography



Tom Lamont
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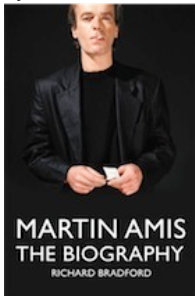


Martin Amis circa 1985, shortly after the publication of his novel *Money*. Photograph: David Montgomery/ Getty Images

Nonfiction work about the Amis family, uncommon for its father-son brace of novelists, Kingsley and Martin, threatens Mitford proportions; things must be getting silly when you can anticipate the punchlines to half the dinner-table anecdotes, groaning affectionately, muttering "Nice one, Mart" and "Not again, Kingers!" before panickily reminding yourself *this is not your family*.

Martin Amis: The Biography

by Richard Bradford



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Published so far: an autobiography apiece by Martin and Kingsley, 2000's *Experience*

and 1991's *Memoirs*, straddling Kingsley's death in 1995; a thorough and brilliant biography of the elder Amis by Zachary Leader in 2006 (who also edited, five years earlier, a collection of Kingsley's letters); in 2008 a work by Neil Powell comparing the family's "two literary generations"; and before that assorted minor, mouldering lives of Kingsley, one written by the academic Richard Bradford, who now offers this 400-pager on Martin. As the first in the billowing genre to focus exclusively on Martin, it gets to call itself *the* biography. There may already be lots of Amis material out there – but let's hope it's not that.

There are warnings, early, that this project will be second-rate when the biographer shuffles forward to talk about himself. (Leader, in his *Life of Kingsley Amis*, seemed embarrassed to make our acquaintance on page 815.) Bradford writes on page three: "Martin certainly knows what's funny, which will not be a surprise to readers of his work. 'But,' asked an old friend of mine [...], 'what's he *really* like?'" Oh boy: the people-often-ask-me gambit. Somewhere out there, presumably, there's an abandoned draft that got things under way with an *OED* definition of the word "biography".

Bradford's licence to tell us what the novelist is "*really* like" has been challenged, according to reports, by Amis himself. The *Sunday Times* wrote last week of "hostilities" between subject and biographer, suggesting that Amis had been involved in the book's delayed publication. Regardless, Amis gave five interviews to Bradford before the alleged falling-out, and these quotes from him, especially in the early chapters, are the book's main strength.

He tells an anecdote that well summons the chaotic, hands-off parenting of Kingsley and his eccentric wife, Hilly. Martin and his elder brother, Philip, have decided, with parental approval, to canoe some miles along the treacherous Welsh coast. They are nine and 10 years old. "The Swansea *Evening Post* eventually reported that my act of heroism, getting ashore and summoning the coastguard, had saved my brother's life. Actually, he'd paddled back before I'd been washed up on the beach and was drinking Tango in a seafront cafe, trying to remember our home phone number." Quickly the biographer wants in on this, calling it "the kind of licensed recklessness that many children crave and is now prohibited, with parents or 'carers' likely to face prosecution if they allow their wards to play conkers, unsupervised" – and only hazily, after that little lecture, can we remember a time when the paragraph was any fun.

Bradford makes a clumsy host. A story from *Experience*, about Amis's younger sister, Sally, and the family nanny, Eva, is rehashed here (fairly), and embellished (fatally). The nanny is mischievously trying to get Sally to look on the scene of a car crash, something everybody else wants to prevent. *Experience*: "We seemed to be safely past when Eva propped Sally up on the back seat and said, 'Look at him, Sall. *Writhing in agony*, he is.'" Bradford: "Eva seemed to feel it her duty to have her charge, then barely three, behold the sight of a man [...] twitching either from terrible pain or as a last concession to mortal existence. She announced, rather in the manner of the Satanic nanny in *The Omen*..."

Sally – or, at least, the figure of a wayward younger sister – recurs frequently in Amis's fiction. The biographer acknowledges this but doesn't delve far into the relationship between the siblings; the news of Sally's young death, from alcoholism at the age of 40, is a shock delivered and dispersed in a single paragraph. Similarly, Amis's long friendship with a pal from his sixth-form crammer, Rob Henderson – a man disliked by Amis's other closest friend, Christopher Hitchens – is not given the space it probably merits. The tug-of-war for Amis's soul between the scrappy, dive-dwelling Henderson and the pompous, high-minded Hitchens seems to have influenced so much of the novelist's work, fuelling his career-length fascination with the contrasting highs and

lows of British society. But Bradford pays Henderson (who died in 2001, a year after Sally) only minimal attention.

He does a careful job, anyway, picking other figures from Amis's life as they appear in the fiction. There's Cynthia, an early girlfriend and the seed for Amis's 1973 debut, *The Rachel Papers*. And there's Mary Furness, to whom Amis proposed when he was a snappy young literary critic in the 70s: she was a socialite and firebrand and likely the model for the manipulative Nicola Six in 1989's *London Fields*. Amis did not marry on that occasion, but in 1984 wed the philosophy academic Antonia Phillips, courted while he was writing his most famous book. Bradford identifies Phillips in 1984's *Money* as Martina Twain, arguably the novel's only affectionately drawn character.

That marriage ended in the early 90s. Hitchens is amazingly indiscreet about the beginnings of his next relationship, with the writer Isabel Fonseca. "It was at one of the dinners for Salman [Rushdie, then in hiding after the publication of *The Satanic Verses*]. She was being hotly pursued by Salman, among others, but Martin [...] moved quite rapidly to the head of a long queue." They married in 1996.

In the book's second half Hitchens gives up plenty of gossip like this, while Amis's own interviews with the biographer feel increasingly flat. Maybe he's irritated by the pet theories he's called on to deflect. I haven't read it, says Amis, at mention of the novel *Brazzaville Beach* by William Boyd, soon after which Bradford states that Amis's 1995 novel, *The Information*, contains "an undisguised caricature" of Boyd's first page. Something's off, but this occurs on page 290, and by now we're well used to Bradford's maddening contradictions.

Amis's friend from his tennis club in Notting Hill, Chris Mitas, has "no replicas [...] in Martin's novels". Later we're told he inspires a major player in *The Information*. Qualifying the sense of fluidity he says he felt while writing *Money*, Amis points out that "it would be ridiculous to say I was in a trance [while writing it]. It was not automatic writing". Half a page down Bradford says the novel was written in a "'trance-like' bout of 'automatic writing'". Mean to compile a rap sheet, but the meticulous attention to detail was what made Leader's *Kingsley* so impressive. Bradford suffers terribly in comparison.

It was during a match at the Notting Hill tennis club that Amis, disillusioned by his father's previous biographer, commissioned Leader to take over the editorship of Kingsley's letters; a job that led to the writing of the *Life*. A hopeful guess, nothing more, but perhaps Leader has been earmarked by Amis to do the same again for son as for father – write *the* biography.

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