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Martin Amis: You can judge a man by his enemies...

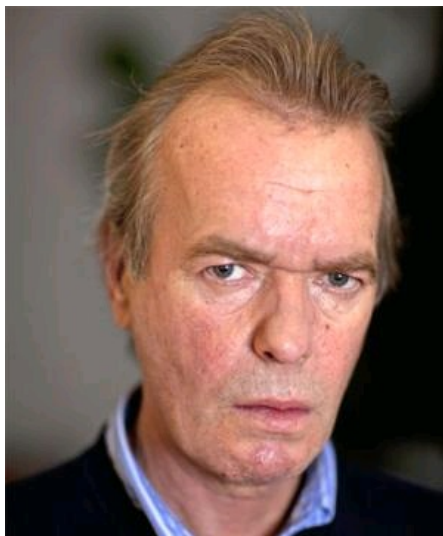
What is it about Martin Amis that makes him the object of so much vitriol? As Anna Ford joins the attack, Andy McSmith revisits his greatest feuds to find the answer

Wednesday, 24 February 2010

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There is something about Martin Amis that makes him easy to dislike. You can dislike him from a distance, without having met him, for the things he says, the way he portrays women in his novels, his wealth, his famous father, or any other of a wide range of reasons. But it seems to be even easier to take a disliking to him if you actually know him. The list of people who have known and fallen out with Amis is long and distinguished. The resulting spats, some would say, are more fun to read about than his novels.

The latest, ironically, was set off when Amis sought to defend himself against what he called the "reckless distortions" of him by newspapers. He had in mind some of the commentary on his novel *The Pregnant Widow*, out this month, in which fictional characters are said to be recognisable as people he knows. There was also the rumpus caused by an interview in which Amis was quoted as saying that there should be euthanasia booths on street corners where old people could end their lives with "a martini and a medal". Yet, despite what people might think, Amis maintained that he is not a "controversial-on-purpose" sort of person.



TERI PENGILLEY

Amis insists that he's not 'controversial-on-purpose'

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Anna Ford, the former ITN newsreader who has known him for about 30 years, was so incensed by this self-portrait that she fired off an open letter accusing Amis of "narcissism" and a "need to court attention". She related an incident involving her late husband, the cartoonist Mark Boxer, whom Amis visited in 1988 when he was dying. "Mark was exhausted because you stayed far too long. You smoked over his bed. I later learnt... you were filling in time before you caught a plane." She went on to accuse him of being a neglectful godfather to her daughter Claire, who was six when her father died.

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Amis responded yesterday with an elegantly written and surprisingly restrained open letter, in which he pleaded guilty to the second charge, but not the first. He wrote that he was deeply moved by his final meeting with Boxer, never smoked over his bed, and as for the plane, it was not leaving until the following day.

Whatever the truth was about that final visit to Boxer's sick bed, what stands out is Amis's singular talent for falling out with people. Born in 1949, he has been in the public eye since he published his first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, at the age of 24. He became an established star of the literary circuit with the publication in 1984 of *Money*, an exposé of junk culture which is in the process of being turned into a two-part BBC drama.

Success caused the first of his great fallings-out, with fellow writer Julian Barnes. Amis wanted to spend a small fortune having his teeth fixed, and was seduced into sacking the agent who had served him since the start of his career and hiring Andrew "the Jackal" Wylie, who secured a £500,000 advance for Amis's 1995 novel, *The Information*. The agent he sacked was Pat Kavanagh, Barnes's wife. Barnes wrote to Amis to wish him the same success as two other Wylie clients: Salman Rushdie, who was living in fear of his life because of a fatwa, and Bruce Chatwin, who died of Aids. The letter was signed off with two words, the second of which was "off".

Kavanagh's half-sister, Julie, met Amis soon after his first novel was published. They began a torrid affair which she recounted in a memoir published last year. At his worst, she wrote, he was "nasty, facetious and belittling". During their relationship, he cheated on her with other women. One liaison resulted in the birth of a daughter, Delilah, whom Amis did not meet until she was 19. Other early flames included the journalist Tina

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Brown, and Winston Churchill's granddaughter, Emma Soames.

Some of the resentment directed at Amis probably derives from the suspicion that he would never have succeeded so quickly were he not Kingsley Amis's son. Many people think the father was a greater novelist than the son. Kingsley thought so. He disliked Money so much that he is said to have hurled his copy of the book across the room.

The old man was another attention-seeking controversialist, a former communist who became an outspoken reactionary just as Marxism came back into fashion in the 1960s. The younger Amis did not display much interest in politics until the age of 50, although his best friend at university, Christopher Hitchens, made a name for himself as an active Trotskyist. Amis belatedly decided to get serious about communism by publishing *Koba the Dread* in 2002. The opening chapters were a philippic about the Stalinist purges, but from there the book moved on to Amis's relations with his father, with his sister Sally – an alcoholic who died aged 46 – and with Hitchens.

This provoked a public riposte from his old friend, who wrote: "I have lately been reading bushels of stuff about myself, generated by reviews of your book on Stalinism. I wince on my own behalf a good deal as I wade through, but I don't forget to wince for you as well." This was a relatively good-tempered spat. Others were not so gentle. The *New York Times* critic Michiko Kakutani described the book as "the narcissistic musings of a spoiled, upper-middle class litterateur who has never known the kind of real suffering Stalin's victims did."

Two years ago, Amis dived into politics again, with a fictional account of the 11 September bombings. Amis then gave interviews and talks in which he seemed to conflate Islam with terrorism. While the comedian Chris Morris poked fun at Amis for being "culturally dim", the venerable Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton laid into him for being the son of a "drink-sodden, self-hating reverer of women, gays and liberals", who had learnt more from his father than "how to turn a shapely phrase".

Technically, Eagleton and Amis were colleagues: both lectured at Manchester University, though they did not overlap for long. Amis got a contract in February 2007 as a part-time lecturer in creative writing. The *Manchester Evening News* calculated that his fee was £3,000 an hour. A year later, the university announced that it was laying off staff because it was in financial trouble. One of the axed lecturers was Eagleton.

So is Amis a monster or misunderstood? The *Independent's* literary editor, Boyd Tonkin, who knows him, does not think that he is bad. "There is open season on Martin. Everybody thinks they can have a pop at him, and these spats are made very public," he said. "This is because he is vulnerable. He is very open and does not hide what he thinks. He doesn't protect himself. He attracts bad publicity in a way that no other writer does."

The Amis Papers: Who's Who by Kevin Rawlinson

Anna Ford

Earlier this month, Amis wrote of his sadness at the death of his friend Mark Boxer. But Mr Boxer's widow, the former ITN newsreader Anna Ford, insisted she had seen no evidence of the tears Amis claimed to have shed. She added that he had overstayed his welcome when visiting Boxer in hospital, and claimed that he had only stayed so long to kill time before he caught a plane.

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown

The columnist has attacked Amis for his views on Islam. The novelist wrote a letter to *The Independent* columnist defending his comments after she accused him of being "with the beasts" when it came to dealing with Islam. She also denounced him as a "toff" and sarcastically suggested that Muslims be punished "collectively, all the time, as Martin Amis fervidly imagined in his poetic thought-experiments".

Chris Morris

In a column entitled "The absurd world of Martin Amis" in a national newspaper, the satirist Chris Morris compared Amis to Abu Hamza and accused him of acting like a senile 12-year-old, telling people to "fuck off" when criticised.

Ronan Bennett

The novelist Ronan Bennett decried what he saw as an example of the racism "symptomatic of a much wider and deeper hostility to Islam" after Amis seemed to advocate discrimination against Muslims. In an interview with *The Times*, Bennett said: "Amis should have been taken to task by his peers for his views. He was not."

Terry Eagleton

After Amis was appointed professor of creative writing at Manchester University, Eagleton – one of his new colleagues – accused him of expressing views more appropriate for a "BNP thug". In an introduction to his book *Ideology*, Eagleton attacked "Amis and his ilk" for railing against Islam instead of promoting tolerance.

Christopher Hitchens

He wrote a letter published in a national newspaper after Amis accused the British left – including his best friend Christopher Hitchens – of ignoring the crimes of Communist Russia in his book *Koba the Dread*. He said: "You say sneeringly that the 'New Left' of the 60s represented 'revolution as play' and that its 'death throes' took the form of 'vanguard terrorism'. The atom of truth in this – or the grain of received wisdom – doesn't excuse you."

Julian Barnes

Barnes, the writer, had been a close friend of Amis' for years; his wife, Pat Kavanagh, was the novelist's literary agent for 22 years. But the pair fell out when Amis dumped Ms Kavanagh in the 1990s.

AS Byatt

After the Pat Kavanagh episode the Booker Prize-winning poet AS Byatt also criticised Amis. She said: "I don't see why I should subsidise his greed, simply because he has a divorce to pay for."

Julie Kavanagh

Amis also had a falling-out with Ms Kavanagh's half sister Julie with whom he had been in a relationship. After it emerged that he had cheated on her with her best friend Emma Soames, Kavanagh, a writer, described him as an "inveterate womaniser."

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