

washingtonpost.com

Off the Page: Martin Amis

With Martin Amis

Novelist, Essayist

Friday, November 7, 2003; 1:00 PM

Martin Amis's reputation as the bad boy of British writing shouldn't overpower the fact that he's simply a fantastic writer. His brash, intelligent novels are sharp with insight, and his wordplay makes reading Amis feel like playing: swinging high in a swing, hanging from monkey bars, just having fun.

Yet his view of the world is not a light one. Like Ian McEwan and the very different Edna O'Brien, authors across the "pond" often hone a super-realism that is actually bleak. Amis's hyperbole makes his works funny, but they're funny with an edge.

His new novel, *Yellow Dog* (gleefully lambasted in England when it came out there early this fall), explores the underside of society, or maybe the underside of men: an actor and writer, Xen Mao, who becomes violent after he is attacked by thugs, the king's equerry who has fantasized about the princess since she was four. "It was not his intention, now," Xen thinks as the novel opens, "to ponder the obscenification of everyday life." Maybe, but it's undoubtedly Amis's.

Amis was online Friday, Nov. 7, at 1 p.m. ET to discuss his new novel, his critics and his writing.

Read the transcript.

He also talked about his work on camera. Watch the [video](#).

Host Carole Burns, a news producer at washingtonpost.com, is also a fiction writer with short stories published or upcoming in *Washingtonian Magazine* and several literary journals. Twice a fellow at The MacDowell Colony, she's at work on a novel.

Editor's Note: [Washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com) moderators retain editorial control over Live Online discussions and choose the most relevant questions for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer questions.

Carole Burns: Welcome to this week's Off the Page. We are thrilled to have Martin Amis online today to discuss his new novel, *Yellow Dog*.

New York, NY: Books like *Money*, *The Information* and *Yellow Dog* often get tagged by critics as satire. How do you feel about that label? Does it give more or less freedom to you as a writer?

Martin Amis: How do we define satire? Satire has been called "militant irony." This suggests that you're actually trying to change things. I don't feel I am, except in the broader sense of trying to enrich the imaginations of my readers. But there's a playful distance between the writer and the characters in *Yellow Dog*, which makes it feel like my most satirical novel so far.

Advertisement



Worcester, Mass.: How do you react to the claim that your recent writing suffers by trying to "sound American"?

Martin Amis: I only try to "sound American" when I have an American narrator. But my connections with America are so deep and lifelong that the more demotic rhythms of the American language are to be found in mine. And certainly, I have always been a reader of American literature, rather than my native brand: it's something to do with hitting various registers at the same time, and not sticking to a middling, bourgeois kind of a voice.

Washington, DC: Are you reading in town any time soon? What do you like to read to live audiences? Does it ever teach you about your writing, about the response it can generate? Is it different reading in America than in Britain?

Carole Burns: Martin is reading tonight at 7 p.m. at Olsson's Metro Center, 1200 F St., N.W., Washington.

Martin Amis: I once wrote, in *The Information*, that an Englishman wouldn't bother to attend a reading even if the author in question was his favorite living writer, and also his long-lost brother--even if the reading was taking place next door. Whereas Americans go out and do things. But Meeting the Author, for me, is Meeting the Reader. Some of the little exchanges that take place over the signing table I find very fortifying: they make up for some of the other stuff you get.

Carole Burns: Do you like characters such as Xan Meo, the actor/writer turned violent in *Yellow Dog*, Clint Smoker, the badly endowed tab journalist, or even Keith Talent from *London Fields*? Rather, what do you like about them, and perhaps, what don't you like?

Martin Amis: John Updike once asked: What is it about fictional characters that we respond to? After all, we love brutes and rogues and vamps. His answer was that what we like is *life*. If they're alive, then we will like them, no matter what they do. I adore all my characters indiscriminately, like my children, but I have no favorites.

London, U.K.: In an interview last month with a British newspaper, you were quoted as saying: "As you get older you realise that all these things - prizes, reviews, advances, readers - it's all showbiz, and the real action starts with your obituary."

I wondered if you could expand on these comments and perhaps suggest what you would like your epitaph to be.

Martin Amis: The fact that the real action starts with your obituaries is a satisfyingly symmetrical fate, because you won't be around to witness the response, one way or the other. It keeps you honest. But I'd like to be remembered as someone who kept the comic novel going for another generation or so. I fear the comic novel is in retreat. A joke is by definition politically incorrect--it assumes a butt, and a certain superiority in the teller. The culture won't put up with that for much longer.

Carole Burns: Do you think that's related to why reviews of your books recently have been so vitriolic? (The Post review, by the way, is running in the Nov. 16 issue of Book World. No advance word on the verdict!)

Martin Amis: Partly. I have been outflanked by the culture. I am now seen as a drawling Oxonian, and a genetic elitist, who took over the family firm. People subconsciously think that I was born in 1922, wrote Lucky Jim when I was 7, and will live for at least a century. This feels odd to me, because my father was a "angry young man" and helped democratize the British novel. I'm not a toff. I'm a job.

NY, NY: I've never read a word of Larkin (except what I've read you quote) Many friends say I'd fall in fall. Where should I start?

Martin Amis: Everyone knows the poem "This Be the Verse" and its thrillingly depressing last stanza: "Man hands on misery to man/ it deepens like a coastal shelf./ Get out as quickly as you can/ and don't have any kids yourself." But there is a sister poem called "The Trees" which ends: "Yet still the unresting castles thresh/ in full-grown thickness every May. / Last year's dead, they seem to say:/begin afresh, afresh, afresh." Try that.

Capitol Hill, D.C.: I wrote my senior paper in College on *London Fields*, brilliant piece of work. Was it optioned to be a film?

Martin Amis: The most serious attempt to film a novel of mine (excluding *The Rachel Papers* and *Dead Babies*) was the attempt to make *Money*--with Gary Oldman and John Self. I had a couple of meetings with Gary. The first thing he said to me was, I've been ill, but I'm still working on the character. I've got a GREAT new cough. And it was a great new cough. That project collapsed, but they're trying hard to get going on *London Fields*. You never know, though, with films. You're pretty sure the film will be made when it's in the rental stores, and not before.

Westchester, NY: I found *The Information* to be absolutely hilarious (and adored it). But others who have read it found it only depressing. I don't know which experience is closer to what you intended the reader to feel - probably a combination thereof - but how do you feel about a reader who takes something entirely different from what you foresaw?

Martin Amis: I don't think any interesting work of art can possibly be depressing--otherwise, *King Lear* would kill more people than cholera. If it's good, it's cathartic, and the reader feels purged and renewed. I think the reader who gets depressed by *The Information* is probably depressed to begin with. Although I would say that that novel was written under heavy skies. *Yellow Dog* felt more high-pressure--the sky above was clear.

Fairfax, Va.: Sex seems to play an important role in many of your novels. And you manage to write about it in an intelligent and compelling way. What is it about sex that makes it one of your favorite topics, and what approach do you take to writing about it in such a way that it doesn't come off as out of control libido?

Martin Amis: Sex is hard to write about because you lose the universal and succumb to the particular. We all have our different favorites. Good sex is impossible to write about. Lawrence and Updike have given it their

all, and the result is still uneasy and unsure. It may be that good sex is something fiction just can't do--like dreams. Most of the sex in my novels is absolutely disastrous. Sex can be funny, but not very sexy.

Carole Burns: I'm afraid we're out of time. Thanks--both to Martin, and to readers--for such an intelligent discussion.

Be sure to sign on next week for D.C. novelist [Carolyn Parkhurst](#), who will be online Thursday, Nov. 13 at 1 p.m. to discuss her debut novel, *The Dogs of Babel*.

If you wish to be added to the "Off the Page" e-mail list, send me an e-mail at offthepage2004@yahoo.com. While you're at it, suggest a future guest.

Til next week!

© 2003 Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive