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The Amis papers

In the last month this newspaper has published two major Martin Amis essays on 9/11 and the rise of extreme Islamism. These, and the release of his new book, means Britain's most celebrated writer is in the firing line again. Rachel Cooke travels to Long Island to hear him talk about families, fame and the really big issue - women

Rachel Cooke

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Observer

By the time you read this, Martin Amis will be in London, bracing himself for the reviews of his new novel, *The House of Meetings*. But I have come to see him in the Hamptons, on Long Island, where he is, I guess, bracing himself for all the bracing. He certainly looks quite braced, like some twitchy frequent flier who is about to announce for the fifth time today that, yes, he did pack his own bags.

He gave up reading reviews years ago - or so he insists. The trouble is that if you are Martin Amis, you cannot avoid them. Publication day is a carnivorous and gleeful public carnival; the bastards all want your guts for garters. The reviews for his last novel, *Yellow Dog*, were toxic - the worst of his life.

'You're minding your own business,' he says in his transfixing smoker's drawl. 'Then you see the strap-line on the Times: "Martin Amis is Shit."' He pauses. (He's a real pro at pauses.) 'So it's a drive-by shooting.'

Not that he makes any effort to protect himself. He could stay here, by the beach, until the whole bun fight is over, or he could whip back to Uruguay, where he and his wife have a home (she is half-Uruguayan), and have been living for the past couple of years. But, no. Into the thick of it he goes, writing essays, giving interviews, sitting on the *Newsnight* sofa beside Benazir Bhutto.

Has he a death wish? Not exactly. But while the 'eisteddfod of hostility' that has greeted every book since *The Information* causes him pain, it is, I think, an exquisite kind of pain and he must reach for it, jab at it a little, as a nail does for a scab.

This is wearying, but perhaps not so wearying as you or I might find it. Amis is sustained by a writerly ego that, unlike the decayed grandeur of his exterior, remains in fat good health. He does not think he is at all shit. Plus, he likes to talk. 'Secretly, you enjoy being interviewed,' I tell him, a bit amazed at my discovery. 'Errmm, perhaps not so secretly,' he says, settling in his chair. He flashes me a smile of purest complicity.

The timing of this encounter is so apt that it feels somehow ordained. I flew out here on the day of the Great Security Alert, having managed to scramble aboard one of the few 747s that left Heathrow, albeit without books or water to sustain me. Amis hates flying (you only have to read the bit in *The Information* where poor old Richard Tull, failed novelist, failed everything, travels in economy class to know this), so his sympathy would be with me anyway.

But the fact that wannabe terrorists are behind my 18-hour journey - 18 hours! - has given everything a vivid import. We are in this together: me, him, anyone who must ever leave the security of their home.

Amis is much preoccupied with terror just now. A review of *Flight 93*; a story about Muhammad Atta, one of the 9/11 pilots; an essay in this newspaper about Islamism, hence the chat with Paxman: oh, he's full of it. When I arrive, his head is bowed prayerfully over Lawrence Wright's bestseller, *The Looming Tower*. Does he feel that, in extremis, we look to writers for answers? At a time like this, what should art do? Is it game over for novels about women who live in Hampstead and spend their days worrying about schools and sleep?

'That's what the English novel was like when I started out: it was 250 pages of middle-class ups and downs. But as Norman Mailer said when 9/11 happened, the temptation to charge in should be resisted because what happens with writing is that you receive the stimuli and they go down into your subconscious, and what settles settles, and what doesn't doesn't. You find, after a couple of years, that you've got something to write about. It's part of your silent anxiety about what Don DeLillo calls the world hum. Now that period has passed, and a lot of people are writing about it. So Updike [whose latest novel is about an aspiring terrorist] is about on schedule. It fills the sky at the moment. It fills the consciousness.

'What does it achieve? Novels are not made to achieve things. A novel asserts nothing; it provides a framework for thinking about things. I suppose we're in the education business. But as for stiffening sinews, no, I don't think you can ask writers to do that.'

This stance is somewhat at odds with his icy critiques of extreme Islam elsewhere (on Newsnight, he referred to it, rather thrillingly, as 'an irredentist death cult'). 'Well, I do have a solution,' he says. 'It's basically consciousness-raising in Islamic women. There's a huge sexual element in this. It's about Islamic masculinity; it's to do with powerlessness and humiliation. When the last Islamic king was booted out of Spain, his mother said, "Do not cry like a woman for what you cannot maintain."

'That goes to the heart of the existential crisis of the Islamic male. You go back into your past and you see that it was always there. Yes, there was that Pakistani girlfriend and, yes, there was that Iranian girlfriend ... Ian Hamilton [the poet and critic who died in 2001] converted to Islam so he could marry. He didn't buy it in his heart at all, but he went to Riyadh.

'I remember him telling me about the social atmosphere in Saudi Arabia, how it was on the brink of violence all the time. You're driving along, you're in the back of the car with your wife, then someone cuts across four lanes of traffic to scream something at your driver: "Tell that bitch to put some clothes on." But there was still a palpable feeling that we were getting more rational. Now, religion is back.'

While the West is 'punch-drunk' on 30 years of multicultural relativism, the extremists of the Middle East are enjoying an Osama-inspired 'power rush'. It is, he believes, time for a revival of snobbery. 'Not class and all that shit. Intellectual snobbery, aesthetic snobbery. Roger Scruton [the right-wing philosopher] says the West is suffering from a kind of moral obesity. It can't act.'

Extreme forms of Islam are, he thinks, so 'rancid' they will have to 'peter out' in the end. But there will be big trouble first. He has a 'horrible intuition' that the war with Lebanon may be the beginning of the end for Israel; the only thing the irredentists like about modernity is its surface-to-air missiles. He feels for Israel. His wife is Jewish, which means that his daughters are also Jewish: 'They'd be high on any list for extermination camps.'

He now sounds so bleak I wonder why he's coming back to London, an enemy target. 'Oh, you just have to get on with it,' he says. Besides, he's a novelist. Novelists are nothing if not used to anxiety.

I arrive at Amis's summer residence in a taxi. There is no one around, so at first I don't know if this clapboard house is the right clapboard house (the one I'm looking for belongs to the family of Amis's wife, Isobel Fonseca, who is always referred to in print as an American heiress - and also as the woman who told him to spend some of the £500,000 advance he won for *The Information* on fixing his teeth).

I peer through a screen door. Silence. So I 'coo-ee!' I hate to coo-ee! It is humiliating, especially if the person you're trying to find is Martin Amis. A coo-ee! is just not macho. Finally, someone appears - a housekeeper, I think. 'He has been waiting for you,' she says, which is gratifying, and also useful since, as is the way of places where very rich people live, this is something of a transport black spot.

She shows me through the kitchen. It is covetably pared down, all old wood and battered saucepans, another sign, to be *Through the Keyhole* about it, that someone rich and elegant lives here; a bourgeois like me would have ruined it long ago in a fit of 'sprucing up'. In the garden which, green as far as the eye can see, seems never to end, is Amis, dressed like an Englishman: trousers, shirt, shoes but no socks.

He springs up. For a man who, in his *Rachel Papers* heyday, lived in a fetid flat his friends all called 'the Sock', he is beautifully house-trained. I love his elegant manners, his wry, nervy warmth and his slightly furtive way with a coffee pot.

But goodness, he looks frail. I had imagined him to be a fist of a man, yet my overwhelming feeling now - and this is very odd - is one of protectiveness: he is shaky and too bony, a husk that would crack if you squeezed him too hard.

You can tell, at a glance, that he would rather smoke than eat (a legacy, perhaps, from the time when his teeth hurt too much to chew). In the old days, it was always men - young men - who were sent to interview Amis, and usually they butched it out, playing tennis with him, or snooker or darts. These men admired and envied him in almost equal measure. It was not just that he was a young gun; he was their young gun. As Will Self once put it: 'Every writer under 45 would secretly like to be Martin Amis.'

Lately, though, more women have got the gig and I think he appreciates this. He's always liked women, naturally, and he has a formidable list of exes, such as Tina Brown, the former editor of *Vanity Fair*, not to mention a beautiful wife. But he seems to have an altogether new estimation of them now. It's not just that he has two daughters - Fernanda, nine, and Clio, six - with whom he is moderately besotted (his two sons, from his first marriage to Antonia Phillips, are at university); it's an age thing. He is approaching 60. Men, maddeningly, can only really appreciate women when they're older. That's when they see them as if for the first time.

He has been thinking about women. His new novel tells the story of two brothers exiled to one of Stalin's gulags. It is a bit of unfinished business, a byproduct of *Korba the Dread*, his badly received book about Stalin and his apologists.

The title, *The House of Meetings*, refers to the hut where prisoners receive occasional, painful conjugal visits. It is, as usual, pure stylistic neon: the sentences dazzle, even if they don't tamper with your heart. But apart from his infinite gradations of the stench of suffering - Amis has always loved 'extreme states' and suffering is the most extreme state of all - what I was most struck by was an analogy he draws between exile and adultery. In a 21st-century male, the latter, he writes, results in separation from one's children and the kind of 'atavistic despair' that used only to be caused by war. This seems a bit strong to me. On the other hand, the shock waves of a divorce can be rather, well, long-lasting.

At the end of his life, Kingsley, Martin's father, was still guilty at his leaving of Martin's mother, Hilary (he left her for novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard) and his son, too, has been thinking of such things, even if the specifics of his divorce are, strikingly, one of the few remaining no-go areas both in his writing and in interviews. All he will say to me about it is: 'What made getting divorced myself so horrible [was] I knew exactly what it would mean.'

When he considers his past, he says, it isn't his work on which his mind lingers. 'It's to do with your children and, more fascinating, how it went with women. That's the big question.' Does he mean whether or not he was nice to them? 'Yes, and whether they were nice to you. The work just shrivels into the past. But women - mistakes, admissions, something that you didn't take far enough - that all becomes weirdly omnipresent. It turns out to be the most important thing. Did you have a good time with women? And "yes" is the answer. It's nice to be able to look back and think that, yes, that all went pretty well.

'But I talked about it with an old friend and he said, "Oh, no. It wasn't like that for me. I suffered. I had my heart broken.'" And he was surprised by this? 'Yes, I was very surprised. But when I thought about it, I wasn't. Come to think of it, he laid himself open in a way that perhaps I didn't.'

Why? Did he have a Graham Greene-style icy chip lodged deep in his heart? 'Yes, I think I did and I sort of regret it. I developed it for two reasons. One affects almost everyone with divorced parents: it makes you distrustful of love. The other [reason] was my sister. It was very clear very early on that she was heading for trouble and no one could stop her. I made a decision. Not a conscious decision, but I formed a strategy. If you're an older brother, what you do is you protect your sister. My brother and I used to say: if anyone fucks Sally, we'll kill them. Well, I withdrew. He didn't, but I thought: this is going to be bloody.

'He went on being a brother socially, hanging out with her. I didn't. So when she died, my brother went crazy for a few months; I didn't. But then I had years of suffering for it.' Because he felt guilty? 'Yeah... I made a huge mistake. There was never any hope of avoiding suffering. All I did was delay it.'

Sally Amis died soon after his father, in 2000, at the age of just 46 - she had been an alcoholic and had suffered periods of depression - and her name forms part of a terrible roll-call of loss in Amis's life: she and the King were

followed by Rob, his oldest friend, dead from cancer at 51, and, last year, his father figure, Saul Bellow.

Does he feel doubly fatherless now Bellow is gone?

'Yeah, I do. Although Saul was very much in and out of consciousness. He had Alzheimer's and sometimes it was painful. But when someone dies, you're not in a situation, you're in a process.'

Grief, as he writes in his memoir, *Experience*, is like rain: you have to put your head down and walk right through it. Does he stand by *Experience*? When it was published in 2000, it was critically acclaimed - Amis *Does Feelings Shock!* - but controversial: there were those who thought his reflections on the discovery that his cousin, Lucy Partington, had been killed by Fred West were self-indulgent.

'I stand by it,' he says. 'But it's not my idea of a good night in to have a thorough read of me.'

Amis's first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, was published in 1973, when he was 24; *The House of Meetings* is number 10. Writing does not get any easier. *The House of Meetings* was the usual struggle. 'It took the form of what felt like a loss of confidence. I was very worried about the story. It was incredibly difficult to do, to find the legitimacy. I was in Uruguay with my beautiful family writing about penal servitude in the Arctic Circle. Suffering is really physical and it is hard to do by the pool. For a year, I felt perfectly awful.'

Still, he is already well into his next book - and I get the impression that it will cause quite a stink. There are those who believe that he has written only one great novel - *Money*, his riff on the 1980s - and that his sentences increasingly strain for significance; he should just get on with the business of character and story.

Well, his next book is going to be autobiographical. It will, like one of Bellow's novels, feature real people: himself, his father and his father's best friend, Philip Larkin. 'Yes, he's in my novel, and Monica Jones [Larkin's girlfriend]. A terrible woman. An eyesore, a bore, a hag. I spent one evening with them in 1984. God, I thought she was hideous.'

It will also, obliquely, take in the times: the aftermath of 9/11 and, if I have understood him correctly, a sense of the way relationships between men and women have changed. 'I think feminism is wonderful, but we're still thrashing around in it. Women abrogated power to themselves and they've ended up doing a lot of boring shit. A document comes in the mail and the guy says [adopts vague voice], "Oh, this looks interesting", and the woman snatches it away. You don't get consulted about whether you're going to live in Uruguay; it just happens. What I'm realising is that women shouldn't have done a power grab; they should have concentrated on getting men to do more in the house. So now they're doing everything.'

He agrees that the sight of a man trying to load a dishwasher can be truly pitiful. Then again, won't men always have the real power, if only because they remain a property, sexually-speaking, long after most women have become invisible? 'Yes, that's what's keeping them in business. Forty-five is a sort of animal birthday for a woman. The notion of fertility is very strong. Saul had a baby at 84.' If he notices me wince at the words 'animal birthday', he doesn't let on. Or perhaps I only wince afterwards, when I hear it on the tape; when he talks, he mesmerises.

He's had enough chat now and I must begin my journey back to London. A small, blonde child appears. 'This is Fernanda,' he says. 'She's nine.' Fernanda considers him for a moment, sticks out her belly in the way that young girls do, but says nothing. We make our way towards a screen door. Martin tries to open it and fails. He looks fatalistic about this.

But then Fernanda steps in and it's quite chilling the way some of the things that we have been talking about are suddenly before us, in microcosm. She opens the door swiftly, and efficiently, no messing. Fernanda, it is clear to both of us, is the future, though that doesn't necessarily mean that I think her father is the past.

Chapter and verse

Born Oxford, 25 August 1949.

Studied English at Exeter College, Oxford, where he took a Formal First.

1977-79 Literary editor of the New Statesman from 1977 until 1979, then a contributor to The Observer in the 1980s.

Novels include The Rachel Papers, which won the Somerset Maugham Award in 1974 and was later made into a film starring Dexter Fletcher, Money (1984), London Fields (1989) and Time's Arrow (1991), which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

They say: 'All his critics have noted what Kingsley Amis complained of as a "terrible compulsive vividness in his style... that constant demonstrating of his command of English"; and it's true that the Amis-ness of Amis will be recognisable in any piece before he reaches his first full stop.'

He says: 'My stuff has always had a divisive effect ... this is what you tell yourself when you're being beaten up - that you arouse passions in readers. But I think I do. Mine aren't the sort of books that produce a consensus. It's why I don't win prizes.'

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