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## Someone needs to have a word with Amis

By Tibor Fischer

(Filed: 04/08/2003)

Usually, when you make a decision in life, unless you have access to parallel universes, you can't truly judge how right that decision was. You were happy to go and live in Rio de Janeiro, but who knows, maybe you would have been happier if you had stayed in London.

Some years ago, I fired my agent, Andrew Wylie, alias The Jackal. I want to stress this wasn't an amicable parting of the ways or a hankering on my part for fresh representation. I fired him because his agency wasn't doing enough for me. This wasn't a tantrum because he hadn't sold my book to Hollywood for a couple of million. It was a well considered verdict as I climbed the stairs to his office to collect the German edition of one of my novels which had been sitting on a shelf there for months and which I had politely asked to be sent to me four times. It suddenly occurred to me that an agent should be making my life easier, not harder.

The Wylie Agency also had what seemed to me a quite astonishing attitude towards photocopying charges. To put this in perspective, I've been with the William Morris Agency for three years, they've sold my books all over the world, and I haven't paid one cent for photocopying. I could go on.

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So jettisoning Wylie was very much the right decision. It still gives me a satisfying glow to think of it. But I did wonder, what does Wylie actually do all day long? Is he still writing poetry? I've recently discovered that he likes to spend his time creating embargoes. I received a copy of Martin Amis's new novel, *Yellow Dog*, and an embargo letter that demands that no part of the book be disclosed or reproduced in any form.

I feel I should respect that embargo, but let me refer you to Amazon.com: when dream husband Xan Meo is vengefully assaulted in the garden of a London pub, he suffers head injury and personality change. Meanwhile, we explore the entanglements of Henry England: his incapacitated wife, Pamela; his Chinese mistress, He Zhezun; his 15-year-old

daughter, Victoria, the victim of a filmed intrusion that rivets the world because she is the future Queen of England, and her father, Henry IX, is its King.

So I won't tell you anything about the contents of *Yellow Dog*, but what I will tell you is that it's terrible.

Let me go on record here: I've been behind Marty from the start (a long time before Mr Wylie, I suspect). I own a first edition of *The Rachel Papers*, Amis's debut, not because I acquired it from a dealer, but because I got it back in 1973, when it appeared. I was there when Amis read to six people (including me) in Cambridge in 1980. I enjoyed *The Information* (OK, it was a rehash of London Fields, OK, he was paid too much, but it made me laugh) and didn't understand the carping. My friends shook their heads in disbelief when *Night Train* came out, but I stuck up for Amis, pointing out the remarkable ventriloquism. Amis is one of the few living writers I can quote from memory.

You could smell the rot with *Experience*, however. Amis's memoir was beautifully written and clever. Amis is the overlord of the OED. No one can mobilise the English language like him. No one. But as a book, *Experience* was a mess, and thin. There was a desperate, largely unsuccessful, Amisian search for profundity (one of Amis's weaknesses is that he isn't content to be a good writer, he wants to be profound; the drawback to profundity is that it's like being funny, either you are or you aren't, straining doesn't help). This ache for gravitas has led to much of Amis's weaker work: *Time's Arrow* and his writing on nuclear war (it's horrible, isn't it?).

Then there's his relationship with his mucker, *The Hitch*. Obviously Amis's choice of friends is his business, but his adulation of Christopher Hitchens is deeply weird. Granted, by the standards of hackdom, Hitchens is intelligent and articulate. But aside from the issue of hypocrisy (if you're such a Lefty, why are you in the cocktail bars of Manhattan and not in a ball-bearing factory in Bucharest?) what scoop has Hitchens ever come up with? Mother Teresa: she ain't all that? Bill Clinton: he's not completely trustworthy? Hitchens isn't fit to black Amis's boots.

I was bewildered by the almost unanimous rapture that greeted *Experience*.

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Was it a cruel practical joke? I fear it's the praise that Amis received for Experience that has undone him. He's clearly got it into his head that he can write anything and he'll be venerated like Moses with the tablets. Hence Koba, the world's longest book review, with digressions on his family holidays and his mate, The Hitch.

My own novel Voyage to the End of the Room is published on the same day as Yellow Dog. I'm a little ashamed to admit that, as a writer, I'm relieved that Amis has produced a novel unworthy of his talent. No one wants a masterpiece knocking around when your own book is looking for attention. As a reader, however, I'm genuinely saddened.

Yellow Dog isn't bad as in not very good or slightly disappointing. It's not-knowing-where-to-look bad. I was reading my copy on the Tube and I was terrified someone would look over my shoulder (not only because of the embargo, but because someone might think I was enjoying what was on the page). It's like your favourite uncle being caught in a school playground, masturbating.

The way British publishing works is that you go from not being published no matter how good you are, to being published no matter how bad you are.

Louis de Bernières and I once attended a talk by John Fowles , which was painfully boring and trite (in his defence, Fowles was seriously ill).

Halfway through, Louis reached into his pocket, pulled out a railway ticket, scrawled on it and handed it to me. It was a signed authorisation to shoot him if he ever became an old bullshitter. I think I'll be sending Louis an authorisation to shoot me if I ever produce anything like Yellow Dog.

Someone, perhaps his friends, his editors, or even his agent, Andrew Wylie, should have said something to Amis.



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