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Martin Amis and the Women

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Photo by Isabel Fonseca

Martin Amis 1973:

"I wished she would go. I couldn't feel anything with her there."
The Rachel Papers

Martin Amis 2006:

"We were very late, you see, to develop a language of feeling."
House of Meetings

So what happened to Martin Amis?

"I live with women," he says, sounding both proud and amused.

Lots of 'em. There's Isabel Fonseca (wife #2), their daughters, Fernanda, 9, and Clio, 7, and "a very sweet nanny/housekeeper." Says Amis, "The only bloke I've had in the house is Diego the dog, and he was an asshole."



Well, that's what blokes are, aren't they, and that's what Amis has written about. *The Rachel Papers*, published when he was but a lad of 24, launched his distinct style, a blend of startling insights, razor-sharp comedy, and a gonzo, voracious, manic, macho voice-self-absorbed, self-aggrandizing, with self-loathing nipping at its heels. He is the gold standard of blokedom.

"I had read and reread his work obsessively-particularly *Money*-while writing *Criminals*, because I was trying to capture a certain kind of male voice," recalls novelist Margot Livesey (*Banishing Verona*).

Some of Amis's prose pyrotechnics come from pure will and a dedication to craft. Some were just floating around in the gene pool. Dad was none other than Kingsley Amis, comic novelist extraordinaire, Booker Prize-winner (*The Old Devils*, 1987), and notorious womanizer.

Martin's literary debut came 20 years after his father's, the seminal *Lucky Jim*, which, one could argue, marked the start of lad lit. The stuff that's tried to pass itself off as lad lit these past few years? Please. No one has beat the Amis boys at the game.

In addition to an almost preternatural literary talent, the two have in common crumbled first marriages, bad teeth, and, says Martin, not much else.

"I get more from my mother," says the author, who's about to pop over to visit his mum, Hilary Kilmarnock. "I get a very great deal from her. She's an extraordinary woman. She finds it impossible to disapprove of anyone."

And does Amis think the same holds true for him? He laughs. "I enjoy human folly and weakness," admits the author. "But I'm not a judger in the way my father was. I'm somewhere in the middle."



In the middle sums up much of Amis's life at present. He is in the middle of moving from one London flat to another. His new novel, *House of Meetings* (Knopf), dedicated to his mother, is just out here in the States, but he's well into another, the second of a four-book deal with Knopf, an autobiographical novel to be called *The Pregnant Widow*. At 57, more than 30 years after he assumed the mantle of Literary Bad Boy (complete with pout, tight velvet trousers, and tousled Mick Jagger hair), Amis is in the middle of a literary resurgence.

With a dozen novels to his credit and half as many works of nonfiction, he was never a slacker, but *House of Meetings* seems to mark a turning point. It has all the classic Amis hallmarks-taut, edgy prose, sucker-punch humor where you don't expect it, elegant language, a story featuring two opposing men, but something else. Dare we say it? Sure we do. Tenderness.

In his 2000 memoir *Experience*, Amis wrote, "Love has two opposites. One is hate. One is death." Hate here, in *House of Meetings*, is embodied in the book's unnamed narrator, "a political" whose rage helped him survive life in a Russian prison camp half a century ago but has since leached any happiness from his life. Death is played by Lev, the narrator's brother, imprisoned in the same gulag but fortunate enough to marry Zoya, the woman the narrator has loved all his life, a woman possessing, as Amis writes, "an outrageous allocation of physical gifts . . . When she walked, everything swayed. When she laughed, everything shook. When she sneezed-you felt that absolutely anything might happen."

This is the second time Amis has made Russia the focus work, the first being his 2002 nonfiction study of Stalin, *Koba the Dread*.

"I absolutely loved his Stalin book," says Knopf editor Gary Fisketjon, who edited *House of Meetings*. "For me, it's an astonishing work of empathetic history that opened doors I hadn't even realized were closed. The interstices of the personal and the political are veins that few writers explore as courageously as he does, and *House of Meetings* seems to me nearly a summation of this."

"What is the historical novel for if not for that?" says Amis. Though he's been reading more nonfiction than fiction lately, this time, he felt the gulag experience should be presented through the lens of fiction. "You bow and take on historical facts but you also have particular situations within, in this case two brothers in love with the same woman and sequestered for 10 years helplessly above the Arctic Circle. It's not just the gulag that's going on. It's the relationship within it."

You don't get tougher. You're at your toughest when you're 30, not when you're 57.

Amis is unafraid of taking on big themes. Once the glow of his bloke books began to fade, sometime around the mid-1980s, he realized it is not enough to be 1) talented and 2) a guy.

Since then, he's written about nuclear holocaust (*Einstein's Monsters*), the other holocaust (*Time's Arrow*), and AIDS (*London Fields*) and had even begun working on a satire on Iraq called *The Unknown Known* (the title comes from a Donald Rumsfeld remark). "I gave it up," says Amis. "You can't write satire about very serious things that could become much more serious overnight." So he said goodbye to satire and the Middle

East and wrote instead about love and Russia.

"I could come up with a rational explanation for my fascination with Russia," says Amis, who got a D in logic back in school. "But you never decide to write a novel-that's the wrong verb. You just realize you can. That's attractive enough. I do think the gulag experience is woefully under-acknowledged and under-honored. There's some satisfaction in getting people thinking about all that again."

Amis's friend Christopher Hitchens, the leftist journalist who made a hard right turn, hasn't weighed in on *House of Meetings* yet. "I'm impatient for his response," says Amis, despite the fact Hitchens was vociferous (as he is in all things) regarding *Koba the Dread*. He didn't like it.

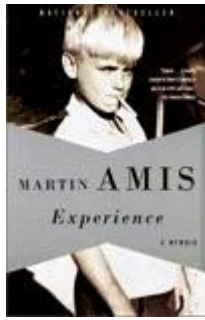
House of Meetings takes the form of a letter the narrator writes to his multicultural, politically correct Americanized stepdaughter Venus, who is innocent of the past. No one, he believes, can afford that kind of luxury, that kind of ignorance. There is no escaping the past. Even as he writes about his experience in the gulag, Russian schoolchildren in Beslan have been taken hostage.

"It would suit me very well if I could easternize your Western eyes, your western heart," he writes, and he must also set himself to the harder task of easternizing the eyes and hearts of western readers, of making them care about the narrator. "My behavior is perhaps easily explained: In the first three months of 1945, I raped my way across what would soon be East Germany." He is both a victim of war and a perpetrator of violence, a bitter, brutalized man who nevertheless holds dear a 36-year-not-so-secret passion for his sister-in-law.

While earlier Amis works like *The Information*, *Success*, and *London Fields* have two characters embodying polar opposites, good and evil, Lev and his brother each have complexity, facets. They speak of what it is to be human. "This is a love story," announces the narrator. "All right. Russian love. But still love."

It might quell some of Amis's blood-lusting critics to know writing *House of Meetings* was agony. "It was like nothing else I've experienced," says the author, still vaguely stunned. "I felt a terrible inertness and loss of confidence and the sense your subconscious isn't helping you as it usually does. Just as I was finishing, it lifted."

Amis believes the dread came from what he calls a search for legitimacy or what might also be called a case of How Dare He? "It's presumptuous, embarrassing to be writing about penal servitude above the Arctic Circle when you're living in Uruguay, writing on the shore, hearing the waves lapping, sitting with your adorable wife and painfully adorable daughters," he says.



"There's a western phenomenon called the midlife crisis," observes the narrator of *House of Meetings*. "Very often it is heralded by divorce. What history might have done to you, you bring about on purpose: separation from woman and child. Don't tell me that such men aren't tasting the ancient flavours of death and defeat."

Amis himself ate a lot of death and defeat in the mid-1990s. His marriage to Antonia Phillips died (he left her and his two sons for the above-mentioned adorable wife), his father died, he sacked longtime agent Pat Kavanaugh, hired another (über-agent Andrew Wylie, a.k.a. the Jackal), and in so doing, lost a friend (author Julian Barnes, Kavanaugh's husband). Most men would have bought a sports car and been done with it.

His first marriage might have been falling apart, but his teeth definitely were. After years of choosing toothache over a dentist's chair, Amis had no choice—he succumbed to pain, humiliation, and expense. He got new teeth. This seemed to bother people a lot. According to the hype, "I had abandoned my sons to go and live with an heiress in New York, the better to squander my advances on a Liberace smile," he writes in *Experience*.

"It was very unpleasant to feel a lot of hostility directed at you," says the author. "The skewers started to become so violent that it became repellent. You don't get tougher. You're at your toughest when you're 30, not when you're 57."

"Let's be clear: Not everyone has it in for him," says Tibor Fischer (*Voyage to the End of the Room*). "I was a fan from the first book." It's the latter ones he's had a problem with. In reviews for the *Telegraph*, he panned both *House of Meetings* and Amis's previous novel, *Yellow Dog*. Call it a case of tough love.



"Amis gets six-figure advances and huge publicity budgets, but his sales

simply don't justify it," says Fischer. "I know of first-rate novelists who either can't get their work published or who can't get any attention for it, and one of the reasons is Marty soaking up the gravy."

The grievance isn't just Fischer's and dates back to 1995, when Amis, courtesy of the Jackal, demanded a \$795,000 advance for *The Information*. Jonathan Cape, which had published 10 Amis titles, wouldn't pony up, so Amis jumped ship and went with HarperCollins, racking up a fair amount of bad will, all for a novel that, according to Bookwatch, sold only 40,000 copies in paperback.

Another reason for the press's vitriol, Fischer admits, may be professional jealousy. "The British don't like success."

"It's England." Amis agrees and sighs. "It's fine in Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. I have a very good relationship with the press in those other countries, just not in England."

Viewed from this side of the Atlantic, the attacks on Amis seem just odd. "He's always seemed to me a lightning rod of sorts," says Fisketjon, who's known Amis for 20 years. "Our first professional encounter came when I was bidding-unsuccessfully, as it turned out-for *London Fields*, which still strikes me as one of the most powerful novels of our time."

And that's what matters in the end, he says: "I've never cared much about a writer's personae, as opposed to his work."

Amis has never sought approval from others. Just as well. His father tossed aside Amis's 1984 novel, *Money*, at the point where his son interjected a minor character into the book whose name was . . . Martin Amis.

"I think I'm a bit unusual in that children of writer parents tend on the whole to write a couple things and then not stay with it. That's because the impulse is to show the father they can do it. Having done that, it's off the list," says Amis. "I never felt that. I was always completely sure I was in it for the long haul. There was nothing personal in it. It was a vocation."

Nor did he write for the fame and glamour. "There was no possibility of that when I started out. There wasn't that commercial atmosphere at all," he says. "It was unobscured by these extra things that have sprung up. No book tours, no author interviews, no photo ops, none of it. That all started around 1980. Now, many people start writing for what I would say are the wrong reasons. It's not their fault-these flashy rewards are available, but no one of my generation could have started with that in mind."

What
made
him a
writer
was

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an abiding belief in literature. What's kept him writing is a striving for literary posterity that no author advance can even touch. That's been more than enough to sustain him. Until now.

In addition to the adorable wife and daughters he lives with, there are women Amis doesn't live with who are nevertheless very much a presence in his life. There's the one he found, Delilah Seale, his recently discovered, much beloved, illegitimate daughter, and there's the two he lost: his sister Sally, who died in 2000 at the age of 46, after struggling with depression and alcoholism, and his cousin Lucy Partington, who disappeared in 1973. Her body was recovered in 1995, after a police investigation revealed Partington had been a victim of England's notorious serial killer Frederick West.

Amis keeps on his desk a photograph of Lucy, to whom Amis dedicated *The Information*, and one of Delilah. "I had always wanted a girl," Amis writes in his memoir, "and suddenly there she was."

Though Amis is still 30 years away from being, as the *House of Meetings* narrator is, "in the high eighties," he's in the midst of a reckoning that makes a mid-life crisis look cozy.

"I miss being able to look in the mirror without feeling I'm on an acid trip gone wrong. Getting old is like a low-budget irresponsible horror film, a video nasty where they're saving the worst for last," says Amis. "And of course sexual regret is the great theme this time of life." This from the author who said literary posterity is the only thing that counts?

"I've always cared how it went with women and that's taken up much of my free time," Amis laughs. "It's an intimation that, by the end, that's what we'll be thinking. Even powerful figures start to dismiss what they've done in the public sphere. It's the personal stuff at the very end that's important and it gives them agony and regret and remorse," he says. "It's a man thing."

It's more than a man thing; it's an Amis thing. "It's only half a life without women," Amis's father told him shortly after his second wife, novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard, left him. Kingsley was, by this point, all the things he'd never imagined possible in gilded youth-sick, old, abandoned, and impotent.

He was taken in again by wife number one some 20 years after they had divorced. This was no tearful rapprochement; it was a business deal brokered by Martin and his brother Philip, who saw their father had money but needed care and their mother, though happily married to Lord Kilmarnock, lacked a hefty bank account. It sounds impossible. It lasted 15 years, until Kingsley's death in 1995. But you can't make this stuff up.

Amis would prefer not to follow in his father's footsteps. He's worked hard to maintain a good relationship with his two grown sons from his first marriage and is a smitten daddy to his daughters, including Delilah, now

30.

"She's tremendously frank with me," he says with pride. "There's nothing we can't say."

The author went to great lengths in his memoir to protect the women in his life, revealing no more about his relationships with them than he needed to. "I didn't think that was the book for that," says Amis. "I wanted to do that in fiction. There's something gross about doing it in nonfiction. You can't do any dirty stuff in nonfiction, can you? But you can in fiction."

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Can and will. His in-the-works autobiographical novel *The Pregnant Widow* takes on feminism, a touchy topic coming from a former literary bad boy. Hasn't he had enough controversy? Enough attacks?

Amis laughs. "You can feel slightly poisoned by a lot of hostility, but it shouldn't have anything to do with what you're going to write."

Like it or not, Amis was in the midst of the sexual revolution as it was happening. "Nineteen-seventy was my date for it," he recalls. "*The Female Eunuch* and great feminist works. I just sort of remember it was in the air and it was coming and-this sounds a bit weird-women were dispensing sexual favors to sweeten the pill. There was toplessness, short skirts, and the sudden willingness to have sex. It was very much a signal power was about to be redistributed and they were making it as nice as they could for us. Women would sleep with you who didn't want to but were pressured by their peers."

The sex was very nice, but it messed up the revolution. "I think it's charged on, but it's also been hijacked by pornography," says Amis, who did a porn exposé for the *Guardian* a few years back. "Sex education comes not from the classroom but Ron Jeremy and these other grinning mannequins of pornography."

Sex also messed things up between the genders. "My daughter Delilah says the boys have run all over again," Amis says. "Women have either to behave like men themselves or disguise all their tenderer feelings. Any talk of commitment or love is completely impossible now."



Photo by Michael Birt

This is not what Amis wants for his daughters. And it is not what he wants for feminism. "When women got this power, in a velvet revolution really, they accumulated the wrong things, the wrong power. The thing to have done was to put your foot down about men helping more about with the house and the children. Women have done everything; they're over-subscribed. Men who have had a lovely holiday are now having to bestir themselves and take up some more duties, but they've forgotten how to assert themselves," he observes. "It's a strange phase in the whole process."

It's even stranger hearing this from Amis's lips. Of all the big topics he's tackled, feminism may be the dodgiest. "I'm allowed one novel where I take that on," he says, already spoiling for a fight.

The women in Amis's life will no doubt keep him in check, though. "Living with women makes you prissy and girlish yourself-I've just noticed that," he says. "You get that as you get older: more feminine. It's made me more used to a kind of feminine universe. There's not so much dissociation of reason and sensibility. That's the main difference between the sexes."

Amis hasn't totally refuted blokedom. His concept of his ideal reader is still a guy in his twenties. Still, it's hard to detect male swagger in a man who says, "Feminism is only in its second trimester. I'm an ardent believer it will work out." Amen, sister.

Contributing Editor Ellen Kanner lives in Miami, Florida.

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