

Centre for New Writing

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Latest News

- ▶ Manchester writers as cosmopolitan culture
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- ▶ MA student adapts Patrick Hamilton novel for the stage
- ▶ Claire Urwin's 'No Wonder' selected for national showcase
- ▶ Students contribute to the Shape of the Sonnet
- ▶ Poetry takes centre stage with Peter Fallon and Helen Dunmore
- ▶ Amis and Jacobson talk comedy and sanity
- ▶ JT reaches First Stage
- ▶ Centre writers tipped for success in 2009
- ▶ Writing Fellow Chris Killen published
- ▶ Fine time with Feinstein
- ▶ Amis and guests talk science
- ▶ MA alumnus: Shucked in print
- ▶ Winner of the Mulcahy Conway Prize announced
- ▶ Diski on '...the Woman Writing'
- ▶ Gaim-an for a laugh
- ▶ Double whammy for Literature Festival
- ▶ Booker nominees launch Literature Live
- ▶ Amis on Larkin's life, loves and letters
- ▶ New young poets at Manchester Central Library
- ▶ Kaye Mitchell publication
- ▶ Sarah releases Other Beasts
- ▶ Joe Pemberton's novel re-published
- ▶ Manchester writers practise what they preach
- ▶ Wigfall wins windfall
- ▶ Centre students storm Central Library
- ▶ Amis rejects heaven at latest literary debate
- ▶ Curtain call for Centre's Writers in Residence
- ▶ Horses released
- ▶ Hay Joe
- ▶ Kaye sells out
- ▶ Spotlight on the mundane
- ▶ Centre's students launch Wufniks magazine
- ▶ Poetry Review hits the north

Amis and Jacobson talk comedy and sanity

According to Professor of Creative Writing Martin Amis, he and fellow 'Literature and Britishness' panellist Howard Jacobson are the last remaining British comic novelists. If successful humour hinges on implied superiority over other groups we have become a nation terrified of referring to people collectively at all, let alone to any kind of grudge or rivalry based on national identity.

Having deliberately prompted unease among the debate's audience with examples of unfashionable humour, Amis turned to the qualities represented by Britain today. As well as tending towards heavy drinking and superficiality, he claimed that "...we now lead the world in decline", yet he remained proud to come from a nation whose literary output includes Shakespeare and an unsurpassed canon of poetry.

He detected "a strong line of sanity" in British writing and saw the comic novel as evidence of confidence in this; confidence which, in his view, was slipping away. Part of the explanation, he felt, was a sense of 'red alert' about causing or taking offense, borne of a new fragility in the self associated with the acceleration of history.

Jacobson claimed to be uncertain whether Britishness actually exists, and certainly not to believe in multiculturalism. In his view, the concept is a device of the English intelligentsia, which would hate its own country's culture if it couldn't dismiss the English aspects and embrace those from elsewhere.

Yet he spoke of an appealing English quality in the voices of novelists like George Eliot, which he described as simultaneously satirical, tolerant, aloof, and aware of its own absurdity.

He agreed with comments by Amis about the effective tradition of sexual symbolism in British writing, going so far as to say that "...the best sex in an English novel has no mention of sex". In Amis's view this is again related to British writing being unusually grounded in sanity, with a median, middle class world its traditional subject matter.

Returning to the influence of political correctness, particularly on comic writing, Jacobson suggested that it was almost always incorrect humour that made us laugh. Perhaps, though, it was necessary to be on common ground within a culture to be allowed to joke about it, as with the popularity and acceptability of Jewish jokes among the Jewish community.

The idea of a common British character was problematic for Amis, however, who identified distinct national characteristics within the UK. Certainly the stereotyped 'stiff upper lip' was long gone, Jacobson pointing to a new willingness for public grief - at everything from the death of Diana to expulsion from a talent show.

Perhaps though, as Martin Amis concluded, Britons today cry because they're no longer allowed to laugh.

- Listen to the full debate [online](#)
- Download the full debate as an [mp3 file](#)



L-R: Murray Pittock, Martin Amis and Howard Jacobson

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| ▶ Home turf hit for John McAuliffe and Matt Welton |
| ▶ New addition to poetry launch event |
| ▶ August Kleinzahler and Joe Stretch hit the town |
| ▶ Up-front and personal: Hanif Kureishi visits the Centre for New Writing |
| ▶ Everyone's talking about Boy A |
| ▶ Triumphant homecoming for Manchester alumni |
| ▶ New boy makes a big noise |
| ▶ MA alumna's birthday treat |
| ▶ Mulcahy & Viney Foster new talent |
| ▶ Demolition man |
| ▶ Manchester meets Muldoon |
| ▶ Dying for Dyer |
| ▶ Amis debates Literature and Terrorism |
| ▶ Michele Roberts meets her public |
| ▶ Centre UG named student sports writer of the year |
| ▶ Crawford and Sansom reading |
| ▶ New appointees show what they can do |
| ▶ MA novel becomes a feature film |
| ▶ Centre joins Literature Festival |
| ▶ Amis, Banville and Self debate contemporary literature |
| ▶ Mark Piggott's first novel accepted |
| ▶ Clare Wigfall publishes debut |
| ▶ John McAuliffe's poetry collection launched |
| ▶ M.J. Hyland appointed |
| ▶ New Research Fellows appointed |
| ▶ Martin Amis joins Manchester |