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## Martin Amis photographs at the National Portrait Gallery

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Unseen photographs of Martin Amis taken by his fiancée Angela Gorgas go on show at the National Portrait Gallery

By Alastair Sooke

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Candia McWilliam photographed by Angela Gorgas in London in 1977

Martin Amis has a name for the Seventies: he calls it "the joke decade". "It amazes me, now, that any of us managed to write a word of sense during the whole era," he once said, "considering that we were all evidently stupid enough to wear flares."

Floral shirts and crushed-velvet trousers, however, didn't prevent him from captivating London's literary establishment and making his name as the Mick Jagger of English letters, complete with a sulky pout invariably moulded around a roll-up.

Today, a display of previously unseen black-and-white photographs documenting this early period of Amis's life opens at the National Portrait Gallery. They were taken by Angela Gorgas, for some time his fiancée, until they split up in 1981.

There are only 24 photographs in the show, but they record a crucial phase in the career of the pre-eminent British novelist of his generation – a controversial figure whose star rose rapidly, but whose influence and creative powers have arguably dwindled over the past decade. They also present a side of Britain in the Seventies not usually seen: not a country mired in recession and hatred between rich and poor, but one of beautiful young men and women, members of London's gilded literati.

Just before Christmas, I met Gorgas, now 60, in a café on the King's Road, Chelsea, where Amis used to cruise as a doped-up teenager, trying to pick up girls. Gorgas, who moved out of London and raised a family with another photographer soon after breaking up with Amis, is bubbly but guarded about her former lover, with whom she is still in touch.

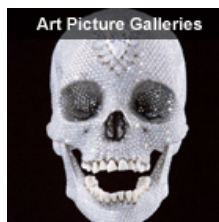
So why has she decided to show her private photographs to the world?

"They are like a family album to me," she says. "I don't know how many people would want to display their family album. But, to be honest, so many of these people have now died. And I began to get the feeling that before long, it could

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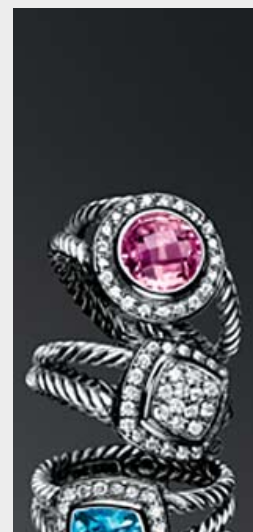
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be me..." She pauses. "I just felt that now it had reached the stage where they were of a lot more interest to people than if they had been publicised before."

The late Seventies were golden years for Amis, Gorgas and their high-flying friends. Amis had yet to publish the hefty novels that have surely secured his reputation for posterity (*Money*, *London Fields*, *The Information* – his triptych set in west London), but he had already written three sparkling apprentice works.

After graduating from Oxford, he joined the Times Literary Supplement in 1972. He spent his spare time finishing his first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, which became a bona fide hit. It won the Somerset Maugham award, just as Martin's father Kingsley Amis's debut, *Lucky Jim*, had done almost two decades earlier. His second novel, *Dead Babies*, came out two years later, confirming his position as the enfant terrible of English fiction.

By 1977, the year he met Gorgas, he had taken over as literary editor at the *New Statesman* and was working on his third novel, *Success*. "I met Martin at a house party in Holland Park," says Gorgas, who studied graphic design and photography at Hornsey College of Art.

"I was 29 and working as a freelance photographer and portraitist. He was 28. We were moving in the same circles. I saw a photograph of him before I met him and I just looked at him and thought, I'm going to marry this guy."

What were her first impressions when they did finally meet? "The great thing about him for me was his sense of humour," Gorgas recalls.

"He made me rock with laughter." It wasn't long before they were an item. They were engaged in 1978, shortly before Amis quit his job at the *New Statesman* to write full-time. "I suppose I inspired him for a while," says Gorgas. "I recognise certain elements within his novels which are me."

She continued to live in the "rather grand" house in Maida Vale that she shared with Amschel Rothschild, a scion of the banking dynasty, but she spent more and more time in Amis's Bayswater flat.

During their time together, Gorgas took photographs of Amis and his friends, some of whom worked with him at the *New Statesman*. In 1976, Amis and two of his colleagues, writer Christopher Hitchens and poet James Fenton, formed what they called the 26 Club (all three were 26 at the time). "We did think we were a hot trio," Amis has said. "Now we almost weep with embarrassment."

In the winter of 1980, Gorgas took a picture of them standing together at Sacré-Coeur in Paris, where Amis and his fiancée were living at the time while he worked on his fourth novel, *Other People*. ("Did I tell you Martin is spending a year abroad as a TAX EXILE?" wrote Kingsley to his friend, the poet Philip Larkin, in May 1979. "Last year he earned £38,000. Little s—.")

Fenton stands in the centre, stiff and sombre in black, with Amis to his left wearing a cashmere scarf that was a Christmas present from Gorgas. Another photograph, taken on the same overcast day (the cover of this issue of *Review*), is a moody close-up of Amis with scorching eyes, a halo of intellectual energy almost visibly crackling around his head. "Martin has quite a piercing look most of the time," Gorgas says. "He has a really strong view of self, and I think that emanates from [the picture]."

Most of the people in the NPG show look beautiful and blessed. They were the bright young things of their day. Aristocratic Polish historian Adam Zamoyski leans against a sumptuous 17th-century Belgian tapestry in his London flat. Gorgas's good friend Victoria Rothschild (Amschel's academic sister, later wife of the playwright and diarist Simon Gray, who died last year) poses with the cartoonist Mark Boxer on a balcony in a villa in southern France owned by the Guinness family.

They appear cocksure, cocooned. After all, the Seventies were a time when, as Amis has said, it was cool to be posh. Maybe life really did seem easy back then. In 1982, the *New Statesman* ran a competition asking for examples of fictitious books with unlikely titles. The winner was "*My Struggle*, by Martin Amis".

According to Gorgas, Amis, who turns 60 in August, has drawn upon this period in his new novel, *The Pregnant Widow*, which will be published later this year. "There is an innocence about a lot of the photographs in the display," she says.

Certainly, there is no sign in her pictures of the mangled cityscapes that so inspired Amis, of the squalid London underworld that he has repeatedly and



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exuberantly chronicled in his novels. Nor is there much sense of what the country was actually like.

A weak pound, plummeting prosperity, inflation, interminable strikes, class war: Gorgas's photographs shield us from this side of Seventies Britain. But, with the passage of time, the photographs have gained poignancy. Hindsight has lent them a kind of dramatic irony, as we compare the innocence of the sitters with how they were subsequently treated by what Amis has called "that miserable enemy", experience.

Several of the people documented by Gorgas, such as Amschel Rothschild (who hanged himself in a Paris hotel room when he was 41) and Mark Boxer, are dead. One sitter, Gorgas's old housemate Candia McWilliam, who later became a novelist, is now blind.

Even Amis, who in almost every picture appears so self-assured, has been immersed in what he calls the "mudslide of time": knocked by a failed marriage, the death of his father, the loss of close friends, sustained vilification in the media, the discovery that his missing cousin Lucy Partington was one of the victims of the serial killer Frederick West, even the disintegration of his teeth.

Amis addressed all these slings and arrows in his autobiography, *Experience*, nine years ago. Looking through Gorgas's photographs on her laptop, I was reminded of a passage from that book: "How long it lasts, youth, that time of constant imposture, when you have to pretend to understand everything while understanding nothing at all. You understand nothing about time."

Martin Amis and Friends is at the National Portrait Gallery, London WC2 (020 7306 0055), until July 5.

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