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SEND TO A FRIEND



# MARTIN AMIS

INTERVIEW BY JAMES KNIGHT  
 PORTRAIT BY TARA SINN, WITH A PHOTO BY ALEX STURROCK



*Martin Amis is one of the great writers of contemporary fiction. Even if he'd given up putting pen to paper after his third novel, Money, this would be an irrefutable fact. Period. Sorry. He writes grippingly of ugly characters consuming for the sake of consumption, blind to their own greed. His hideous, and occasionally hilarious, creations have always been both of their own time and chillingly in line with whatever is going on outside your window on any given day.*

*Amis gives interviews rarely and has a reputation for being spiky and guarded. Having read all of his work and been more than a little bit into it, actually picking up the phone to talk to him had me shaking like a wee little leaf on a tree. Luckily, Amis ("Marty" to his buddies) was kind, willing, and open. He also has the most mesmerizing way of emphasizing words*

NEWSLETTER

## DOs & DON'Ts



I'm no fag, but imagine having this guy lying between your thighs totally nude and covered in butter with his delicate pink boner gently resting on your calves? Man, there's something about dark facial hair and pink that makes EVERYONE melt.  
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## DOs & DON'Ts



Don't feel sorry for bums. They have shitty genes and you don't. Instead of crying about it, you should be singing Katrina and the Waves in midair.  
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*midsentence. Go watch him talk about his book House of Meetings on Charlie Rose on YouTube right now and you'll hear what I mean.*

**Vice: Having grown up with the towering novelist Kingsley Amis for a father, was there a point where you made a conscious decision to be “a writer,” or was it always sort of a given?**

**Martin Amis:** At around 13, a certain self-awareness came over me as I was writing prose and poems in notebooks and diaries. What you are doing at that age is communing with yourself in a new way and becoming articulate within yourself. I think that everyone goes through that state and the people who end up becoming writers are simply those who never grow out of it. I never did. I also have to admit my father as an early influence. I read his stuff, but I also felt like it was an independent decision that I made to be a writer. I knew that it wasn't a case of just writing a single novel and thinking, “I've done that now,” or that I'd impressed my father and purged the influence. I had the feeling that it would be a long-haul thing—in a good way.

**What other novelists were early influences on your writing?**

Well, I'd not read Bellow by the time I had written my first novel. I read a lot of Austen early on but I fail to see how anybody could be influenced by her, she's simply too *lucid*. I'd read some Nabokov too, but I suppose the biggest early influence was Dickens. His stuff was just nuts and wild, which is beguiling at that age. It's impossible to imitate Austen, as it is all understatement, whereas with Dickens the prose is so hairy and muscle-y; you can really gorge on it.

**Early on you seemed preoccupied with the present—its excess and its vacuity—both in the rampant consumerism of *Money* and the Thatcherite capitalism of *London Fields*.**

Certainly during the early period, yes, but there comes a point where you're not really *in* the culture any more. You become removed from it. My father put it well to me once. He said: “At a certain age you think it's not like that anymore—it's like *this*. But you are not quite sure what *this* is.” I think it would be insane to harbor the idea that you can remain plugged-in forever.

**You've also spoken of being “addicted to the 20th century.” Has the 21st proved not quite as compelling so far?**

Possibly that was the point where, for me, *that* became *this*. The novel I am coming to the end of now is set in 1970, so perhaps I am clinging to the 20th century.

**London has always had a looming presence in your novels. What was it about the city that fascinated you?**

I always felt grateful to be in one of the world's great cities. It would have been completely impossible to write anything like the novels I wrote if I were living somewhere like Cambridge. It was very much a case of being in it again—living, breathing, and swimming in it. And as we all know, the fish doesn't ask about the water. You just sit there, run your nerve endings up against it, and it all comes out of the other end of your pen.

**At times you have written in forms outside of fiction to reflect on society in the same way you have within your novels.**

Fiction utilizes a different part of the mind and you can see it in action and see the difference when you produce nonfiction. I studied Stalinism and Russian history extensively when working on *Koba the Dread* [nonfiction] and then *House of Meetings* [fiction], and due to the formal differences, similar feelings were expressed in different ways. Fiction acts like a slow zoom lens, it allows you to go deeper in and say something else. It took three years to get from the brain to the back of my spine, and then I felt ready to say something.

**Even when not dealing directly with politics, your novels exist in an atmosphere of political threat. Over time the threat has shifted from Soviet Cold War to the axis of evil, but always with a sense of potential Armageddon.**

I was very apolitical as a young man. I was left of center, but being surrounded by Trotskyites like Christopher Hitchens made me seem moderate in comparison. I was unattractively proud of not knowing a great deal about politics. Literature was what I had and it was my thing. Despite writing about nuclear weapons in *Einstein's Monsters* and the Holocaust in *Time's Arrow*, I only really gave myself a political education when I began to study Russia. Suddenly I could see the categories and the precedents. It all came alive to me. When September 11 came along, I wasn't prepared for anything as interesting as that to happen in my lifetime. If I had to explain what my novels were about in one word it would be masculinity, and here was masculinity in a whole new form. It takes the essence of what it is to be a man straight back to violence, and really the political history of man is the history of violence. The social history of man is simply sex. Those have always been the most interesting questions to me: What is it that makes man put himself about in such a way and what is it that makes him treat women in the way he does? When I have chosen to speak out about topics in nonfictional form it is with these concerns in mind.

**Are you talking about *The Second Plane*, your collection of pieces about Islam?**

Yes. I felt I had something to say and nonfiction was a very immediate way of saying it. So I did.

**The plot devices that you became infamous for using came to be classified as postmodern. Were they conscious, formal decisions or were they subconsciously demanded by the story?**

Postmodernism wasn't really this grand bandwagon that it may have seemed at the time. It was in the air and if you were of your time you saw the point of it. In the end it proved not the rich vein some had hoped and something of a dead end, but it was very predictive in terms of life itself becoming very postmodern, what with buildings having their piping on the outside and politicians talking openly about “the plumbing.” There was a whole new level of self-consciousness that developed, as well as an interest in one's own age that would have been unknown in, say, the 18th century. History is still speeding up and I want to reflect that, so when I sit down to write I want to push the form of the novel and play so that there is a conscious and

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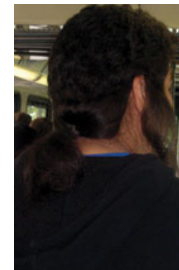
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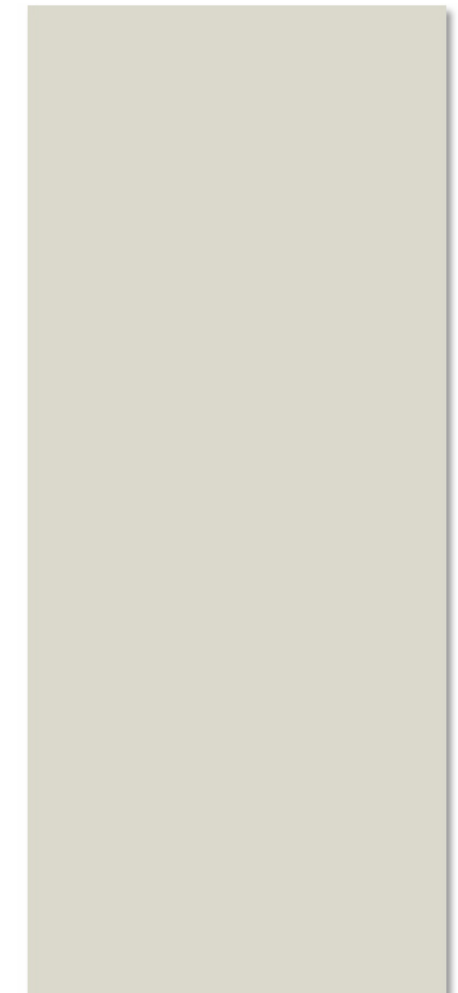
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## DOs & DON'Ts



Mullets are comedy kryptonite but this guy added peyos so it's less mullet and more a weird *Star Trek* character that implies Jewish lesbians will play hockey in outer space someday.

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deliberate sense of pushing the form. If anything, though, I am now returning to realism with a modernist sensibility without that tricksiness of postmodernism.

**How do you feel about the current state of fiction?**

It will always be produced; I worry more about it being read. Poetry is already dead in those terms. Poetry requires that you stop the clock. When you read a poem the writer is saying, "Let's stop and examine this writing." People don't like solitary reflection anymore, so poetry no longer has a place in the culture. This will eventually seep out to include the novel. The day of the long, reflective, discursive novel, such as the great Saul Bellow novels, which were eight-month best sellers in their time, are over. The novel now is streamlined and sped up. It is a reflection of the age.

**Are there any young novelists working now who you admire?**

The truth is that I don't read my youngers. It seems a terribly uneconomical way to organize your reading, by studying those unproved by time. I read my friends, so I take in Will Self and Zadie Smith with great interest. It all seems healthy out there but I can't make any broad statements about "where" the novel is now. Sorry.

**In conversation with Self you have said that "the middle classes are underrepresented in my novels." You also seem to have a recurring preoccupation with the lower classes.**

I like extremes. There is a certain latitude necessary to be a character, often in a repulsive way in the case of the upper classes, but it gives you the freedom to be a little more extreme and extravagant at either end of the social scale. The pressures at the lower end of the spectrum are very intense and that leads to characters becoming interestingly twisted into strange shapes. The middle classes are written about by everyone. They shan't whimper with neglect because I am not writing about them. All fiction is essentially kitchen-sink. It is just that some kitchen sinks are more expensive than others.

**You mentioned a novel that you are working on now. Can you tell us any more about that or will you get in trouble?**

I hope not. It is a novel set in the social revolution, and the main character is 20 years old. Its title is *The Pregnant Widow*, which comes from a remark by the wonderful Russian thinker Alexander Herzen. He said that when political or social orders change by revolution one should be pleased that the old is giving way to the new, but the trouble is that you get the death of the new order and no heir apparent. You are left not with a child but a pregnant widow, and much grief and tribulation will take place between the death and the birth. I would say that even now the baby of the social revolution is yet to be born 30 years on.

**Like London, America figures often in your novels. In *Money* you portray the country as the unbridled consumerist paradigm that London strived to be, but lacking that British inhibition.**

America is a wild place, an awesome place, and like Henry James I very much believe it to be a world rather than a country. As a place it is very difficult to generalize. Having watched the last eight years with horror I am of course thrilled about the election because the potential to go wrong in America is so huge and here at last is someone genuinely impressive as well as someone who can help heal that great wound in American life. I think we could be entering a great era.

**Perhaps an era in which we see the baby of the social revolution born?**

Perhaps.

**There was talk at one point of David Cronenberg making a film of *London Fields*. Was there any truth to that?**

There was. I met him a couple of times and he rewrote the script a little but he would only have got a sliver of the novel and not the whole book, so it was left. The project is still alive, though. They did *The Rachel Papers*, which was fun, and *Dead Babies*, which was sort of fun. They are making my novels in order—just at 20-year intervals. I have never had a great time with writing for cinema, though. I did a terrific script for an adaptation of *Northanger Abbey*, which was picked up by Miramax and then sat on. I'm not sure what happened to it. I should probably check on that, actually. Cinema is a wonderful form, though, and a young form. As Bellow said: Film is about exteriors whereas the novel is concerned with interiors. So there are many possibilities yet to explore.

**What caused you to move to Uruguay for two years?**

My wife is half Uruguayan and half New York Jew—a heady mixture. She has about 25 first cousins out there. We visited it for a winter and liked it very much so we stayed. We eventually left as our girls outgrew it and needed better schools. The landscape is fantastic but it was too quiet politically to have any impact on my writing. It is a real anomaly in terms of how gentle and sane it is in the context of South America.

**Recently you began teaching at Manchester University. Why, of all places, Manchester?**

Quite simply: They asked me. My father taught and by all accounts was fairly good at it and I felt that I might do all right at it as well. I enjoy it very much and I like my colleagues, which is rare for a job. All I do is teach novels. What could be more agreeable than that? I don't guide my students' elbows while they write. In fact I don't even see what they write. We talk about it a little and I talk a lot about Nabokov, Kafka, and Dostoyevsky, all of whom are the people I like to talk about anyway. So I'm rather happy with myself.

**Is it true that you were a mod and then a hippie during the 60s and 70s?**

I was a mod but that all ended after my fifth scooter crash. And then, yes, I was a rather opportunistic hippie. All that free love

and music sounded fun, but I was never particularly pious. Mod was more about having the right pink socks on the right day anyway. The hippie thing was a coherent idea, but there was a very dark side to it. Like John Updike said, it was a "fascinating dark carnival." All this optimism with a dark underbelly where, if you rooted around in it long enough, you'd find Charles Manson.

The Second Plane by Martin Amis is published by Vintage and available now.

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## COMMENTS

**Anonymous**, on Feb 3, 2009 wrote:

brotherjohn, it has no depth. It is one of the most shallow (supposedly) literary novels I have ever encountered. It is all style - poor style, at that - and no substance. Take this, a very minor point but amusing nonetheless: the protagonist is someone who apparently never reads and yet the book is loaded with erudition and esoteric vocabulary. Yeah okay Amis, get out from under the lamp.

**Anonymous**, on Jan 28, 2009 wrote:

bullshitter bullshiting

**Anonymous**, on Jan 20, 2009 wrote:

How the fuck did you manage to get Amis?



NEW USER

**brotherjohn**, on Jan 12, 2009 wrote:

To say that 'Money is shit' is really such a childish comment. It obviously isn't shit because lots of people, including myself, find it a work of depth and value. Don't confuse who you don't like with what you don't understand.

**Anonymous**, on Jan 10, 2009 wrote:

'Money' is shit, really. The narrator is about as believable as you telling me Amis has talent. He never stops talking about what authors he likes, as if we'll somehow equate his taste with his talent. He's not fit to shine Kafka's shoes.

**Anonymous**, on Jan 9, 2009 wrote:

Amis in Vice. Of fucking course.

**Anonymous**, on Jan 8, 2009 wrote:

how is amis "too good" for vice? he must not think so.

**Anonymous**, on Jan 8, 2009 wrote:

most young writers aren't worth a steaming pile of shit anyway. with the older ones, you have a better chance of them being good because the rejects have fallen to the wayside.

**Anonymous**, on Jan 7, 2009 wrote:

You can't deny that it looks like a BNP recruitment poster.

Anyway 'Titanic' came out in 1997 so I dunno what you're talking about, m8. It was a golden time for narrative fiction, Joyce's spanner notwithstanding.

(good interview, by the way. I always enjoy reading Amis' writings on literature, and he evidently speaks exactly as he writes.... like a right brainbox)

TAH

**Anonymous**, on Jan 7, 2009 wrote:

those kids probably have great-great-grandchildren by now, you twat. it's not like arabs were exactly spilling into england in the titanic era.

**Anonymous**, on Jan 7, 2009 wrote:

no arabic faces in that crowd of chiddlers behind him - COINSCIENCE?

**Anonymous**, on Jan 7, 2009 wrote:

some people just prefer the old stuff. just ask my wife.

**Anonymous**, on Jan 6, 2009 wrote:

amis and bloom are both great interview subjects, that's why.

**Anonymous**, on Jan 6, 2009 wrote:

First the Bloom interview, now this. What is with Vice's newfound love affair with the reactionary fossils of literature? Why are we still wrapped up in fawning over Dickens and Austen, here in the 21st century? Did Joyce never happen? In other news -- supporting Obama and having racist tendencies are not mutually exclusive possibilities.

**Anonymous**, on Jan 6, 2009 wrote:

"Amis is far too great for Vice..." ughhh, have you been looking at this issue asshole? it's kind of overwhelmingly good.

**Anonymous**, on Jan 5, 2009 wrote:

Amis is far too great for Vice, probably parallel to McEwan or Rushdie getting interviewed by Nuts or Zoo...

**Anonymous**, on Jan 5, 2009 wrote:

is he saying that today's novel is more about the story and the style than the art of it's structure?

**Anonymous**, on Jan 5, 2009 wrote:

i've read some of "the second plane" and it left me feeling frightened for our own country. not because of possible future attacks as much as that for a while there we were getting much closer to mixing religion and politics than we should.

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**Anonymous**, on Jan 5, 2009 *wrote*:  
what's with the creepy immigrant kids in the collage?

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**Anonymous**, on Jan 5, 2009 *wrote*:  
lol... i looked up dead babies on amazon and the first result was amis's book. the second result was a grateful dead onesie.

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**Anonymous**, on Jan 5, 2009 *wrote*:  
i'm beginning to think nabokov is the most well-loved writer of writers. everybody loves him.

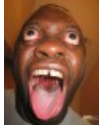
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**Anonymous**, on Jan 5, 2009 *wrote*:  
all the hubbub about his "racism" was little more than the liberal british media making a mountain out of a molehill.

---

**Anonymous**, on Jan 5, 2009 *wrote*:  
I still believe The Rachel Papers is his finest work. However, I've yet to read a few of his, and I hear Time's Arrow is superb.

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**garbage dick**, on Jan 5, 2009 *wrote*:  
doesn't this guy have a book about killing babies or am i way off base?

---



**poozer**, on Jan 5, 2009 *wrote*:  
you can definitely gorge on dickens' prose. each sentence takes half a page i think. the dickens i read, not much admittedly, bored me. the stories themselves were great, but i found his sentence structure a bit rambling. granted, this was in middle school and being forced to read something is never pleasant.

---

**Anonymous**, on Jan 5, 2009 *wrote*:  
what is this british inhibition? i thought they were pretty much as bad as us americans when it came to unbridled spending. no?

---

**Anonymous**, on Jan 5, 2009 *wrote*:  
damn, amis has been on charlie rose like 20 times or something.

---

**Anonymous**, on Jan 5, 2009 *wrote*:  
he mentions saul bellow twice in this short interview. my opinion of amis just got even higher.

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**Anonymous**, on Jan 5, 2009 *wrote*:  
it's funny how a year ago some reporters were charging amis with being racist because of his thoughts on radical, militant islamic groups and now he's voicing his support for barack obama.

---

**Anonymous**, on Jan 5, 2009 *wrote*:  
Amis' "Money" is a great (and fitting, considering our financial times) read. He recently did an interview with the BBC about our current financial situation. The audio is on the BBC site - [news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_7795000/7795145.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_7795000/7795145.stm)

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