

The living V-sign

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Martin Amis, the most stylish author in Britain, describes himself as an insult to egalitarianism. But, he tells Lewis Jones, he hopes the film of his novel *Dead Babies* will be popular

'THIS business of writing about writers,' wrote Martin Amis in 1983, interviewing Saul Bellow, 'is more ambivalent than the end-product normally admits. As a fan and reader, you want your hero to be genuinely inspirational. As a journalist, you hope for lunacy, spite, deplorable indiscretions, a full-scale nervous breakdown in mid-interview. . .'



Familial care: Martin Amis with his wife, Isabel Fonseca, and two of his daughters, Fernanda and Clio

For much of his life [Martin Amis](#) has been caught up in the relationship between writers and fame. His father was the famous novelist Kingsley Amis (and his stepmother, Elizabeth Jane Howard, a less famous novelist), and since the publication of *The Rachel Papers* in the early Seventies he has been famous, too. In the Eighties, in interviews with such globally famous figures as Hugh Hefner, John Travolta and Madonna, he anatomised the modern publicity machine.

Martin Amis is a fame expert, then, and today he's playing by the rules, granting a strictly timed hour in a public place, with a vigilant PR holding the stopwatch. In a drawing-room at the Charlotte Street Hotel, a hip new establishment in what used to be called Fitzrovia, the PR attempts to tell our photographer exactly what he may and may not do - 'ten minutes, no poses' - then ushers us out, so she can install Martin Amis, who can then receive us sitting down.

To observe that a writer is bookish is to risk tautology - it's like noting an athlete's athleticism - but Amis is relentlessly literary. In long sentences, looped with parentheses and nicely judged conditional clauses, with frequent writerly hesitations, he devotes our allotted hour not to deplorable indiscretions about his ex-girlfriends (Emma Soames, Tina Brown and Mary Furness among them) or his drug-taking (dope, acid, mdma) but to books, his own and others'. As it happens, our meeting is preceded by a horribly personal event: yesterday's paper has reported the death of Sally Amis, his only sister.

It would be understandable for him to cancel the interview, but he doesn't. It would be unacceptable for me to take the obvious journalist's line ('How do you feel?'), so I don't. We simply get on with the business of publicity - in this case for [the film of Amis's early novel *Dead Babies*](#). Perched in a large armchair, Martin Amis is wearing a grey suit, a blue shirt with button-down collar, well-worn Chelsea boots. His face is long, with slightly brutal planes, lined by scowls and smiles; in recent years he has grown to resemble Saul Bellow, his adoptive mentor (on the day Kingsley Amis died, Martin telephoned Bellow and said, 'You'll have to be my father now').

He asks almost as many questions as I do ('Are you a tidy-desk man? Or a messy-desk man?'), and seems genuinely interested in the replies. He's a novelist, after all, and a journalist, but he's probably also keen to divert attention from himself (he's a messy-desk man, by the way). Amis's first professional involvement with the cinema was in 1963, when he was 14 and played ('talentlessly', he now recalls - and there are few harsher words in his vocabulary) one of the children in the film of Richard Hughes's novel *A High Wind in Jamaica* (Alexander Mackendrick, the film's director, was a friend of Elizabeth Jane Howard). 'Oh yeah,' he says in his upmarket drawl, 'it's usually on every third Christmas.'

At that time he was notionally a pupil at a rough grammar school in Battersea: 'Sir Walter St John's was a violent school,' he writes in his memoir *Experience*, 'with violent pupils and violent staff.' 'It's so drenched in terrors for me, that place,' he says, dragging on a droopy roll-up, 'although I managed to have a survival strategy, largely by giving cigarettes to anyone who came towards me. . . How I wept,' he says with breezy irony, 'when I was taken away from it!' Amis's literary approach owes more to Oxford (where he took a first in English) than Battersea, but there is in his fiction a rich vein of 'troggery' - his term for loutish criminality - which owes more to Battersea than Oxford.

In *Experience* he confesses to suffering from a syndrome he calls Tramp Dread, the fear of becoming poor and homeless. He also seems to have a bad case of Trog Dread - a topic he consistently addresses in his novels (most notably in his fifth and best, *Money*), perhaps in the hope of exorcising it. *Dead Babies*, his second novel, is a conventional country-house murder mystery, albeit an exceptionally depraved one. Written when he was 24, it features what are now recognisably his subjects: the Jekyll-and-Hyde aspects of success and failure; joyless, perverse, and frequently botched sex; drink and drugs; pornography; suicide.

And the style is there, too, slick and fizzy, mixing high rhetoric with low demotic, insidiously knowing. 'In fairly crude form,' he concedes, 'riddled with little influences - indeed, plagiarisms. I had a look at it [the novel] when I saw the film for the first time, and for a while I thought, "This is pretty good," and then, as I always feel when I look back at the early stuff, I began to wince a bit. It's a cartoonish novel, in a comedy of humours way. Not subtle. Plenty of crude vigour, but the craft is really? gawky, I thought. It's a horribly transparent diagram of my early influences, shamelessly in the spirit of Burroughs and Ballard, and a ridiculous mixture of Dickens and Nabokov, all completely out of control.'

Martin Amis is nothing if not self-conscious. Seven of his nine novels read like comic projections of his anxieties - about sex, success, money - and this is especially true of *Dead Babies*. Its four male English characters seem to be exaggerated aspects of the author: Giles with his terrible teeth, Andy the sexist oik, Quentin the literary wit, and Keith the tormented dwarf. 'Um, yes, in retrospect it sort of looks that way. And at 24 you're still very much trying out personae, and various aspects of your physical being are hugely exaggerated in your mind. . .'

The film, like the novel, is set in an indeterminate future that offers a satirical take on the present, although the present in question has been updated to the Nineties. It's otherwise extremely faithful to the book, although the women are rather more attractive. Diana, for example, is quite spotty in the novel. 'Yes, she is rather spotty. . . I was astounded by the actors and actresses, in that they seemed to fill exactly the same dimensions and mass that I'd imagined.' (Amis is hopelessly addicted to the language of physics: 'I may not know much about science,' as he puts it in a prefatory note to *Dead Babies*, 'but I know what I like.') 'Keith - the Keith character [played by Andy Nyman] - came up to me and said, "I'm Andy", and I thought, "No you're not. You're Keith." I thought, "This is an incredibly small guy!"

Though of course he's not. You know he had these shoes? He was wearing these deep brick shoes, and his feet in fact go down to the bottom of the brick, and painted on the surface is this pathetic little fake shoe. So the device that in the book makes him a foot taller, in the film makes him a foot shorter. Ha ha! 'Did you know they had to fire the first Keith? He was too nice, too cute. I told Salman Rushdie, and he went [mimes thigh-slapping mirth]. The idea of Keith being fired! Everyone liked the first Keith, but the director and producer said, "We need a crueller Keith." The director said, "It's too cruel to fire him," so the producer did it, and Keith was in tears, with his face in his hands.

The rest of the cast was very solid with Keith. "It's so unkind!" they said. But then the new Keith arrived - he'd been the runner-up - and each member of the cast went to the director and said, "We're much happier with this Keith." The cruel Keith. Heh heh heh! The defiantly unappetising title, *Dead Babies*, is left unexplained in the film. 'In the book it's used as a disparaging epithet for old-fashioned ideas [love, morality, that sort of thing]. I think it was quite a risk calling the film that. How're you going to get it on at Whiteley's [a west London multiplex] if it's called that? But they stuck to it. I imagine that they expect a sort of frisson that would be balanced out by being by a writer not known wholly for writing sicko farces - that somehow that'll create an interesting mixture of respectability and, uh, unrespectability.'

Did they show Amis the script? 'No. . . I got the impression that they were doing it as cheaply as they could. It's a very low-budget film, though it doesn't look it, and all the actors were taking half the Equity minimum - which is not nothing, actually, it's a few hundred quid a week. But it's interesting to discover that there are certain things they can't economise on, so at the set there were Jaguars and Mercedes dropping off the actors. They said, "There's no way round that: if it's minicabs, they never show up." Also the grub - something like a quarter of the whole budget was food. Everything else they did on the cheap, including buying the rights, but I was happy to enter into the spirit of the thing. No one else was going to make it - a 25-year-old book. But it was great fun, the little I had to do with it.'

If the film is a hit, Amis will presumably sell a few more copies of the book. The edition I bought last week is the 1984 Penguin. I expect they'll reissue it, with 'Now a major motion picture' on the cover. 'Yeah,' says Amis, 'actually I got sent the cover this morning.' He descends from the armchair (in *Experience* he says he's 5ft 6in, but he looks more like 5ft 3in, about the same height as Picasso) and crosses the room to find the cover, noting dubiously that 'It doesn't look like a film tie-in to me.' It features a row of Jellybabies, in what seems to be a reference to the *Trainspotting* posters. 'Is it?' he asks. 'They usually have a still from the film, don't they?'

Martin Amis, a master of ridicule, has always attracted a certain amount of ridicule himself. In the Seventies, for example, the winning entry for a competition in the *New Statesman* - where he was precociously literary editor - on the theme of unlikely book titles was *My Struggle* by Martin Amis. But, to look on the bright side, he has been a literary star for nearly 30 years, a cult figure. 'Yeah, well, "cult" is a euphemism for low sales.' The film, though, might make him a cult among non-literary types, people who don't read books. He repeats the phrase, 'People who don't read books, mmm?' with the wondering air of one who speaks of 'men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders'.

'Well, that's certainly the achievement of Irvine Welsh [the author of *Trainspotting*], to bypass the critics and just go straight to the mass.' Though deplorable indiscretion may not be on the cards, in the hope of eliciting some mild spite I ask if he likes Welsh's work. 'Sort of. I mean, it's vigorous. . . Have you read, or seen, or heard tell of that anthology of writing called *The New Puritanism*? I read a piece about it, and heard something about it on the radio. Anyway, they've got these rules. No references to literature. No flashbacks, for some reason. It's all got to be brutally linear and straightforward, and in the present and so on.

Now I'd imagine I won't get on very well with these writers, because I do like to feel - very much contra Irvine Welsh, I guess - I like to feel a lot of reading. . . behind. . . the prose.' There's certainly a weight of that behind Amis's prose. He has already mentioned Nabokov, an obvious and enduring influence - the fastidious and audacious stylist, with his cold eye and cruel wit. 'And high euphony,' adds Amis, reverentially. 'But he's a dangerous influence. They all are, the great writers. Joyce had a disastrous effect on many thousands of minor talents, I would have thought.' The same could be said of Amis, whose style is groan-makingly emulated in dozens of forgettable laddish novels and magazine articles.

Martin Amis still writes journalism, mainly for American magazines edited by Tina Brown (*Vanity Fair*, the *New Yorker*, and now *Talk*). 'I've just done a long piece about pornography. Went to California. I was sitting on the porno deck, by the porno pool,

with a porno mogul called John Stagliano, a 38-year-old Chippendale and now a big director - Buttman, that's his thing. And I said, "Tell me, John, what is this incredible emphasis, not just in your work but in the industry in general at the moment, with anal sex?"

The pornographer's reply, hideously anatomical and quite unfit for these pages, reduces Amis to spluttering hilarity. (Anal sex is an enduring topic in the Amis oeuvre - in *London Fields*, for instance, it serves as a portentous metaphor for nuclear warfare.) 'I like to have a rule. If I want to look into a certain aspect of reality, for a novel, then I write a piece about it - I did that years ago with darts, the world of darts [darts feature fleetingly in *Dead Babies*, and extensively in *London Fields*, probably the only darts novel ever written]. The piece is about the primary meaning of the phenomenon, and you hope that something secondary will embed itself. . . There's going to be pornography in my next novel.'

Will it be published this year? 'No.' Will it be a long one? 'I don't think so, but I've gone off on this ridiculous tangent. It's couched as a memoir, but really it's just amateur historiography. It's about Bolshevism - a hundred pages, a pamphlet, really - mostly about Stalin: an attempt to get the Russian holocaust up a bit closer to the Jewish holocaust, where it belongs. Not in any way to lower the Jewish one [which Amis wrote about in his 1991 novel *Time's Arrow*], but to raise up the Russian experience, which I thought didn't have a name, but the Russians call it 'the Twenty Million', which is a very low figure - if you include the civil war, it's immediately 35, probably more like 45.

Yet in the popular imagination it's nowhere near the Holocaust. And no shame attaches to having been sympathetic to it! There's something reassuring (to the middle-aged, at least: it's horrifying to the young) about the way writers start out as radicals and become, in time, conservatives. It happened to Kingsley, and it seems to be happening to Martin - by the agency, in this instance, of Robert Conquest, the poet, Sovietologist, and friend of Kingsley. A corollary of this is that heartless young satirists eventually turn into tub-thumping old moralists, and since *The Information* (1995) Amis's fiction has moved steadily away from 'sicko farces' towards the 'dead babies' (morality and so forth) he mocked so energetically in his youth.

In the mid-Nineties Martin Amis went through a series of uncomfortably public break-ups - with his first wife, Antonia Phillips; with his great friend and fellow-novelist Julian Barnes; with his agent Pat Kavanagh (also Barnes's wife). At the same time his new agent - Andrew 'the Jackal' Wylie - secured him both an advance of £500,000 for his novel *The Information* (which turned out to be a turgid portrait of broken literary friendship), and the public scorn of such less well-paid novelists as AS Byatt. At the same time he was pilloried in the press for spending £20,000 on American dentistry.

In *Experience* Amis deals with the dentistry in exhaustive and excruciating detail, explaining that he was prompted by necessity rather than vanity - and it is worth noting that *Dead Babies* begins with a teeth nightmare, so the subject has clearly exercised him for a long time. In the hope of steering him away from books and politics, I tentatively raise the matter of the Teeth and, without meaning to be cruel, mention recent reports of a new kind of dental implant, which costs half as much as the old sort, takes a matter of minutes, and is much less painful. Amis holds his jaw and howls indignantly.

The PR re-appears at this point and firmly terminates our interview, but Amis sportingly agrees that we need more time, and subsequently invites me to his house in Regent's Park Road ('my father's street', as he calls it in *Experience*). It's a big house, and intensely bookish (piles of them in the hall, walls of them practically everywhere else). Dressed in jeans, jumper, and a huge pair of very white very new trainers, Amis leads me down to a large family kitchen appointed to American standards, and offers me 'the house cocktail', a bracingly strong negroni (Campari and vodka).

He's much more relaxed than he was at the hotel, and chats about football and his children. 'Louis, 16 today, supports Liverpool, and Jacob, 14½, supports Newcastle, so what that comes down to is the older one's saying, "Alan Shearer's crap!" Ha ha! . . .' (His sons are by his first wife; he has two young daughters - Fernanda and Clio - by his second, Isabel Fonseca, a writer; and a grown-up daughter, Delilah Seale, whom he did not meet until she was 19, and he was 47.) 'I last went to a match at QPR, and I thought, "I'm never going to go to a football match again."

I was startled by the ugliness of it. Then the other day I went and watched the match through a glass booth, at a party for a friend, and thought that was a bit more like it. And I did take the boys to that Manchester United-Bayern Munich game, where United scored two goals in the last two minutes, and although I'm not a United supporter there was no one happier in that stadium than me, that I didn't have to drag my children through 50,000 steaming hooligans. They were already stripped to the waist, and crying, by the last five minutes - and ugly, ugly, ugly.' Trog Dread, again.

Like pornography, games are an enduring Amis obsession. In his novels and journalism he has written lovingly of snooker as well as of darts (with all their attendant troggery), as well as of the more genteel tennis and badminton, and (the odd one out) chess. 'I've just done my collected book reviews, and there are four pieces on chess? I used to be interested in the theory bit of chess, but I play all these things much less now. When I play darts with my oldest friend, Rob, it's just embarrassing how long it takes to get that double. If you threw them at random, you'd probably get there quicker.'

He has taught his boys chess, but has not yet had the Oedipal experience of being beaten by them, although, he says, 'there was a very tense game last summer. But I wouldn't mind. I beat my father when I was about nine. He co-operated in a fool's mate, then got up from the board, shook his head ruefully, and went back to work. He just wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible. Too much like hard work.'

It is snipingly said that Martin Amis is apt to sulk when he loses at games. Would he describe himself as excessively competitive? 'No. . . I. . . don't think I am. . . I don't know quite how to define it, but I think a truly competitive person feels real horror when they lose, and the pleasure they get from winning is not very great. Whereas I quite like winning, I'm pleased when I win, but it's rather greater than the depression I feel when I lose. I sort of shrug it off. But that's what we're all supposed to be, isn't it? Competitive.'

What about in literary terms? Does he see himself as the Champ? 'Well, a few minutes a day one should be thinking that, because you have to push yourself, but you do a good imitation of not thinking that, and that it isn't a contest. And all those

things like prizes, and books of the year and so on, I no longer look at? And I've lost interest in reviews. I used to think it was kind of poncey not to read reviews, but now I don't read them, or don't read all of them by any means. At the risk of sounding completely, satanically arrogant, at a certain point you think the only really interesting question is whether you're gonna be read when you're gone. . .

There's a beautiful symmetry, because the only thing that really matters is the stuff you're not gonna be around for.' Amis interrupts this meditation on immortality to bang open a recalcitrant sash window, so we may smoke. 'It's an impatience to be judged by the only critic who is never wrong,' he continues, 'which is Time. I think it's a weird inheritance from my father, in that although he claims not to be at all interested in posterity - "It's no f-ing use to me!" he used to say - I think he did care a bit. But he's right that it's no use to him, and that's what's so great about it, that you have to look upon it disinterestedly, you have no share in its outcome. So it sort of keeps you honest.'

The conversation turns to [his 'other father', Saul Bellow](#), and a recent biography of the American novelist by James Atlas, which Amis disliked. 'Yeah. F- off out of it. It looks to me like a dramatised inferiority complex running to 670 pages.' At last, some uninhibited spite seems to be in the offing. 'And his terrible use of adverbs! That bit where he says, when Bellow's son Daniel is off to Paris at the age of 21, "What'll he do there?" said a friend. "'Probably f- his brains out,' said Bellow dismissively." No! "Lovingly" or "affectionately" or "enviously", but not "dismissively".

Constant tendentious use of adverbs, in this gratuitous seething way.' (In Experience, incidentally, Amis recalls Kingsley asking him about his youthful sexual experience 'almost gloatingly'.) 'The little prick [Atlas] thinks he's a writer. Have you met him?' No. 'He's a weird-looking guy: Woody Allen without the shoulders was how I described him? But he did make a good point, that it often comes down to some friend of Bellow's had his feelings hurt. And Atlas says, "Well, OK, his feelings were hurt, but what we got out of it was some great literature." What does it matter, in the end? We're not all equal.

'There's a kind of insidious democratisation,' Amis says, warming to his theme, with what some might see as satanic arrogance, 'which in my view is the most powerful force at work in society now. . . Gore Vidal put it very well when he said this new democracy is based on the idea that "I have feelings, OK?" And the Americans say that no one's feelings - even Beethoven's feelings - are more important or have greater depth than mine. And from this spreads a great notion of equality, where it doesn't exist. The internet is a great dramatisation of that. Everyone a critic. Everyone a contributor?' It could be deduced from this that the only feelings that matter, really, are the artist's. And if the artist hurts other people in the execution of his art, then that's too bad. No one's feelings, to turn Vidal's proposition around, are more important than his.

Amis excuses himself. It's time to watch the England v Italy football match on television with his sons. I am permitted a last question, which is one I've been asking occasionally during the hours we've spent together but getting no answer to. Martin Amis is a prince of the media; at the same time, for understandable reasons, he does not like the media, does not like to appear in it. Will he comment on this, please? 'I finally defined it to myself, the media hostility. . . ' I interrupt to ask if he is sure he doesn't mean adulation? 'Yes, there's plenty of nice stuff written, but it's always been anomalous. Salman Rushdie has it in completely nuclear form, but I'm singled out in the Newtonian universe.

It's because I'm a genetic elitist, a living V-sign to democratisation - or better say, single finger, because there's only one of me. If all that "It's been easy for me" stuff were true, then there'd be a lot more little AS Byatts and JG Ballards.' So you belong to a literary super-race? 'Exactly! Yes!' he says. (At last: the voice of lunacy!) 'A master-race! With a stranglehold on fiction!'

- 'Dead Babies' is released on Friday

- ▶ [11 November 2000: When Martin met Keith \[report on Martin Amis and the film of his book, 'Dead Babies'\]](#)
- ▶ [13 May 2000: The new Amis \[interview with Martin Amis\]](#)
- ▶ [25 July 1998: Fathers and sons \[interview with Martin Amis and Saul Bellow\]](#)
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