

HOME &gt; CULTURE &gt; BOOKS

## Martin Amis: me and my 'terrible twin'

Dashing, brilliant, best friends – yet their lives could not have been more different. The novelist tells Harry de Quetteville about his tragic muse

By Harry de Quetteville

Published: 7:00AM BST 19 Jun 2009



Martin Amis - his former close friend, Rob Henderson, is the inspiration behind his new novel  
Photo: BBC

You almost certainly won't have heard of Rob Henderson. He is not a celebrity, although he wanted fame and certainly had the looks: long, elegant features bolstered by an intoxicating, often intoxicated, charm, that made him very attractive to women.

He could sing, too, and worked in film. He hung out in the right place, Chelsea, at the right time, the late Sixties and Seventies, with the right set – Clive James, Christopher Hitchens et al. But unlike them, he did not leave his cultural mark.

### Related Articles

- [The End: interview with Nicola and Teena Collins](#)
- [The bohemian life of Robert De Niro, senior](#)
- [Help Aga owners, not just the car industry](#)
- [Celebrities make me want to club a seal](#)
- [Imogen Robertson](#)

Yet you almost certainly will have read about Rob Henderson: "My name is Charles Highway," Martin Amis writes in *The Rachel Papers*. "There's something oddly daunting about my face. It's angular, yet delicate; thin long nose, wide thin mouth – and the eyes: richly lashed, dark ochre with a twinkle of singed auburn..."

Then there's Gregory Riding in Amis's *Success*, with his "narrow face" and string of girlfriends, past which his unwillingly celibate flatmate Terry is forced to troop to make it to the kitchen.

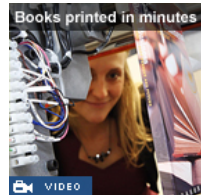
Now, thanks to Amis's former lover, Julie Kavanagh, whose astonishingly candid memoir about the novelist and his vivid love life was recently published in *The Daily Telegraph*, we know that these characters did not spring fully formed from the writer's imagination.

"Rob bore a strong resemblance to Gregory," Kavanagh revealed earlier this month. Moreover, the flat that Rob and Amis shared in Chelsea in the early Seventies was "exactly that of *Success*... getting to the kitchen took you a couple of feet from the bed Rob shared with his girlfriend Olivia".

For Amis ("Mart" to Rob), Henderson's influence does not stop there. The writer's latest novel, *The Pregnant Widow*, is due out early next year. Rob Henderson is dead now. But he is set to live again in the new book. "Rob," Amis tells me, "is a catalyst figure in the novel, which I've just finished. He was himself the son of a pregnant widow."

Apart from that, however, little else is known about Amis's muse; for a man so written about, he is surprisingly anonymous.

He was born Robert Guy Kenrick Henderson, on July 29 1950, into a military family. His mother, Barbara, was the daughter of Brigadier Frederick Gillian.

[Email this article](#)[Print this article](#)[Share this article](#)[delicious](#)[Digg](#)[Facebook](#)[Fark](#)[Google](#)[Newsvine](#)[Reddit](#)[StumbleUpon](#)[Yahoo! Buzz](#)[Mixx](#)[Twitter](#)[What are these?](#)[Books](#)[News](#)[Culture](#)[Features](#)

### MUST SEE

#### Films



The week's must-see films chosen by Sukhdev Sandhu and Tim Robey.

#### Music

#### Theatre

#### Art exhibitions

#### Dance and Comedy

#### CULTURE MOST VIEWED

TODAY

PAST WEEK

PAST MONTH

#### TELEGRAPH DATING

MEN

WOMEN

SEARCH FOR FREE

Over 25,000 members. Join for FREE



leapjf

I'm enjoying the freedom of retirement...

[View profile](#)

johnnnyboy\_3...

I have a good outlook on life, treat people...

[View profile](#)

JJ\_2009

I'm easy to get on with, like doing th...

[View profile](#)[Search more Kindred Spirits](#)

#### SPONSORED FEATURES



#### 40 free prints with Photobox

New customers registering today will receive 40 prints for free. Order now.

family. His mother, Barbara, was the daughter of Brigadier Frederick Giles, CB, OBE, Indian Army. His father, the man who left his mother a pregnant widow, was Ian Guy Kenrick Henderson, and won the MC in Malaya during the last year of the Second World War while serving with the Royal Artillery.

Quite what his forebears would have made of Rob “mincing up and down the King’s Road in skintight velvets and grimy silk scarves and smoking hash and trying to pick up girls” (as Amis describes him in his memoir, *Experience*) is hard to imagine. What is sure is that he felt the absence of his father keenly.

“His mother did the best she could on her own with Rob and his elder sister Jane,” says Alex Dingwall-Main, who was one of his closest friends.

The family lived in what Jo Cruikshank, another friend, describes as a “little mews house in Tite Street”, which runs off the Chelsea Embankment. From there Rob was dispatched to Westminster School, joining as a day-boy in January 1964. It did not prove a success. Like Amis, who was not exactly knuckling down to his studies either, Rob saw school as a drudge. “We played football and hung out at a coffee shop smoking cigarettes and getting more delinquent,” says the artist Simon Harling, a schoolfriend who was part of the Tite Street crowd.

Tite Street became every schoolboy’s dream: “Rob’s mother went off at weekends and would leave us – Jane, Rob and me to smoke dope, get wrecked and go to parties,” says Harling. “What more could you want?”

Rob left Westminster in July 1966, and was sent to the crammer where he met Amis, who arrived, “late in 1967... aged 18 and averaging one O-level every other year”.

Both small, good-looking and charming, the two quickly became friends. “They were the terrible twins – what they didn’t do isn’t worth recording,” says Dingwall-Main, who was also at the crammer and is still friends with Amis. “They were both 5ft 6in tall. It was Tweedledum and Tweedledee.”

According to Amis, he and Rob spent their time “bunking off school and going to betting shops”, but the lives of the terrible twins were about to take a crucial turn. “Mart went off to university. I went off to design gardens,” says Dingwall-Main. “Rob went off to get drunk.”

Getting into Oxford would be the making of Amis, but friends say that failing to emulate his partner in crime was the breaking of Rob. “He tried to follow Martin into Oxford but couldn’t. It was a huge blow to him,” says Jo Cruikshank. “That’s where his life started to unravel. He started doing absolutely nothing.”

Instead he plunged his inheritance, which he received aged 21, into what Amis calls “a small but fancy maisonette” in Pont Street, off Belgrave Square.

It was there, after Amis graduated, that the pair lived together with a certain debauched panache in the early Seventies. And to begin with, it seemed that with his looks and charm, it would be Rob’s career, at a film-production company in Soho, that blossomed.

“Rob’s career would seem to me, for a while, to be horrifyingly meteoric,” notes Amis, who was jobbing as a journalist and working on *The Rachel Papers* while Rob landed himself a job on the Joan Collins film *The Bitch*. With the publication of Amis’s first novel in 1973 however, the real pecking order was revealed. It became clear that, as Simon Harling says, “one of these guys was on an upward curve, and one of them was on a downward curve”.

In the Pont Street flat, with a “magnum of whisky”, they celebrated Amis’s maiden publication with Christopher Hitchens and Clive James. Rob was there, wearing a “dagger-collared flower shirt and green velvet flares”, but while Amis’s trajectory headed in one direction, Rob’s went in another. Booze played a bigger role, making him unreliable at work and unpredictable with his friends.

“There was a famous scene in which Rob came into Drones club and found Olivia with two guys,” says Simon Harling. “He assumed the worst and stormed right over, hitting one of the guys, who described a perfect parabola across the room.”

As the 1970s blended into the 1980s, Rob began to lose his way. Bitterness and violence infused his relationships, with Amis (who chipped a tooth when Rob flung a poker chip at him) and with his mother. “Rob was very abusive,” says Alex Dingwall-Main. “His chums had lost control of him.”

None was, or would ever be, closer than Amis. “You would not know, gentle reader,” Amis wrote in *Experience*, of Rob’s “ordeals of park bench, of winter coal hole, or shelterlessness, and prison.”

Wormwood Scrubs (“for a domino of drink-driving offences”) was just one point on what appeared an irrecoverable dive. There were others. In the late Nineties, according to Jo Cruikshank, “he was in a hotel in Earls Court and woke up to find the floor covered with Special Brew tins.” (According to Amis, Rob thought “that Special Brew has restorative powers rivalled by no other drink – indeed, by

perfect  
resource

Quantity  
Surveying  
Jobs

Head of  
Engineering -  
Threat Mitigation

#### SPONSORED FEATURES



##### The new Range Rover Sport

High performance and refined finishing. Test drive or order a brochure.



##### Abbey eSaver: hassle-free savings

Earn 2.50% gross/AER (variable) with instant, penalty-free access 24 hours a day. Apply online in minutes.

no other substance".)

Friends drifted, or were actively pushed, away. But Amis, now flush with career, money and status, still made time. In the first years of this decade "Rob was a complete mess," says Jo Cruikshank, "but even then Martin would meet him." Amis admits that he would "pay for everything. He never had any money."

By then Rob's "Nureyevian" good looks had, as Amis says, become "medieval". "He turned out to have a talent for suffering," he reveals. "But right to the end we instantly relaxed in each other's company. He appealed to my frivolous, time-wasting side. We'd play scrabble, darts, snooker, cards."

When Rob died seven years ago the end came very quickly. He had stopped the drinking, but "the body simply waved the white flag," says Dingwall-Main.


"He thought he could dodge his way through life, but he couldn't dodge death," Amis says. "He was a completely unliturgical figure. I don't even think he read my books, but he told me all I know about being in prison, sleeping rough, getting beaten up." Indeed, by the end, the writing and the friendship were hard to tell apart.

Amis once described him as "my only friend" "Rob," he notes, "lives very close to what I write.

"I was tremendously upset when he died. You're stuck with friends after a while, and I realised he was part of me."

#### MORE ON

##### Books

 [Get feed updates](#)

##### News

 [Get feed updates](#)

##### Culture

 [Get feed updates](#)

##### Features

 [Get feed updates](#)

#### PERSONAL FINANCE ▶



##### Savings rates nudge 5pc

Providers are starting to raise rates on savings accounts.

#### TRAVEL ▶



##### The weird world of pet travel

The great lengths that animal lovers will go to indulge their furry friends.

#### FORMULA ONE ▶



##### No-loss bet - British GP

Formula One no-loss bet of up to £25 for Telegraph readers.

#### MOTERING PICTURE GALLERIES ▶



##### Post-apocalyptic vehicles

Cars, bikes and trucks from cinema's visions of dystopian future.

[Back to top ▲](#)



[More Telegraph.co.uk](#)

[A to Z](#) [Announcements](#)

[Blogs](#)

[Comment](#)

[Crossword](#)

[Culture](#)

[Dating](#)

[Earth](#)

[Education](#)

[Expat](#)

[Fantasy Football](#)

[Fashion](#)

[Features](#)

[Finance](#)

[Food and Drink](#)

[Football](#)

[Gardening](#)

[Health](#)

[Horoscopes](#)

[Jobs](#)

[Lifestyle](#)

[Marketplace](#)

[Mobile](#)

[Motoring](#)

[My Telegraph](#)

[News](#)

[Obituaries](#)

[Personal Finance](#)

[Promotions](#)

[Property](#)

[Science](#)

[Sport](#)

[Style Book](#)

[Sudoku](#)

[Technology](#)

[Travel](#)

[Video](#)

[Weather](#)

[Widgets](#)

[Archive](#)

[Contact us](#)

[Reader prints](#)

[RSS feeds](#)

[Subscribe and save](#)

[Syndication](#)

[Today's news](#)

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2009

[Terms & Conditions of reading](#)

[Commercial information](#)

[Privacy and Cookie Policy.](#)