

Amis needs a drink

HEADLINE: After his crucifixion over *YELLOW DOG*, Martin Amis needs a drink. Specifically, a negroni.

BYLINE: Kate Muir

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I'm having martinis with Martin in Claridge's Bar. I offered Amis an evening's dog racing at Walthamstow---knowing his fondness for the seedy---but he preferred the pun on martini. Besides, all bets are off after his public crucifixion over *YELLOW DOG* in the past few weeks, and he needs a drink. Specifically, he needs a negroni, a mix of vodka, Campari and red martini. I have plain champagne, because I'm working.

That's better. We find Art Deco armchairs in a dark corner. I thought Martin might stand me up, since my own paper mauled him today with "Amis stands in the shade of his younger self". But that's nothing to Tibor Fischer's comment that "it's not-knowing-where-to-look bad". As the Herald Tribune noted gleefully, "London's Literary Knives Are Out". Despite this, one critic hailed Amis's "unruffled brilliance" and *YELLOW DOG* has made the Booker longlist. But elsewhere the bloodbath continues: "It's like clubbing a seal", said one lit ed.

Despite the clubbing, Martin looks tanned and healthy, and is displaying no obvious nervous tics. He carries a canvas shopper, which I hope does not contain any current newspapers.

"Have you, um, been looking at your reviews at all?"

"I've been glancing at them out of the corner of my eye."

"The way you open exam results?"

"Yes. It's exhausting. It's like that moment in *STAR TREK* where all the energy goes into creating a protective shield." He grins. Perhaps you were hoping for a reference to Henry James or Saul Bellow, but no. "It feels as though you have permanent flu."

His wife, Isabel Fonseca, to whom the book is dedicated, is still in the Hamptons, so Martin's home alone with no one to put the critical cuttings into perspective. Perhaps another drink will help us.

That's much better. Martin is fighting back now, on rapid rebuttal. He says the book is "among my best three", and detects "a new low in decorum" in the literary world. "Look how poetry, apart from Heaney maybe, has disappeared from our lives compared to 20 years ago. No one wants to read a difficult literary novel or deal with a prose style which reminds them how thick they are. There's a push towards egalitarianism, making writing more chummy and

interactive, instead of a higher voice, and that's what I go to literature for.

I'd read Amis any day, and always have since *THE RACHEL PAPERS* aged 14, just for his language and the ridiculous names he gives his characters: "If they're going to appear 50 times, the name might as well say something."

Plus there are disturbing insights like this from *YELLOW DOG*: "After a while marriage is a sibling relationship, marked by occasional, rather regrettable, episodes of incest." So given all that talent, and tonight's ability to amuse a hard-nosed hack, why does he excite such loathing? Why the obsession with his teeth (which look very ordinary)? Why is Amis not a National Treasure? If he were American, I say, he would be grandly feted there.

"The Americans needed to take their writers more seriously because they were defining a new world fiction: visionary, garrulous, filled with crazy, scary guys. We're more confident, more ruthless."

He shrugs, and drags on his cigarette, frustrated. He's served up a literary pastiche of 21st-century sleaze, instead of the social realism now wanted---"it's a generational problem". It just goes over our heads, mate, might be the response of his younger readers. There are various references in the book to September 11 and Iraq, "and the moral shift in the atmosphere. It's no longer a blue planet, or a grey planet, but a yellow planet."

But crude, ugly comedy was Martin's delayed response to the world shifting, to watching Bush afterwards floating in a "sea of illegitimacy". "So many writers sat at their desks and felt ridiculous, but then your fighting spirit gets going and you think fuck 'em. What makes Osama laugh? It's unimaginable." Comedy is a weapon, but not of mass destruction. "In the end, I can no longer look at my children with unalloyed pleasure. I'm ashamed to meet their eyes as my estimation of the world is reversed."

One of the anti-Amis lines is that having children has caused him to lose his edge. (The protagonist, like Amis, has two families.) "The book is better for them being there", he says robustly. "They're a great study, your children. My mother once said to me that people who don't have children are by nature childish, and she's right. You can get twee and whimsical without them."

It's time for another roll-up. (That's what previous generations did with their hands before texting.) Being a tennis player and Pilates fan, Martin pops a teeny white filter in the cigarette paper. Well, he's 54. "It tastes better", he lies. Like me, Martin is a firm believer in exercise, followed by what he calls "retox afterwards". Another round? That's much, much better."