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Time's arrows

We know that British novelist MARTIN AMIS is arrogant, acerbic, and annoyingly talented. Now, with the publication of his new memoir, we can add emotional, vulnerable, and even fallible. CHRIS WRIGHT asks: is it time to give literature's luckiest bastard a break?

IT'S HARD NOT to hate Martin Amis. If you're a writer, it's very hard not to hate him. You'll be chugging through a sentence -- stalling, grinding gears, breathing in the fumes of your own exertion -- and Amis will go breezing by, sunroof open, one hand on the steering wheel. While most writers are content to get from point A to point B, Amis will be doing fishtails, flying leaps, hairpin turns. As if the job of writing weren't tricky enough, he once wrote a book -- *Time's Arrow* (a novel of the Holocaust, no less) -- in which the narrator lives his life backward. He makes writing look easy, and it's easy to hate that.

In Britain, Amis has come to be seen as a sort of Lucky Bastard Laureate: son of the renowned novelist Kingsley Amis, Oxford grad, a *Times Literary Supplement* editor at 23, *New Statesman* literary editor at 25, bit of a lady-killer in his time, now married to a beautiful heiress . . . the list goes on, but it ends, always, with his prose. Amis's 15 books to date have established him as perhaps the most brilliant stylist of his generation.



On top of all this, Amis enjoys extraordinarily high visibility, particularly in England, where he is a bona fide celebrity, the object of unprecedented -- for a novelist -- media scrutiny. The only problem is, a lot of the press Amis gets is negative. Negative bordering on vindictive. He's lambasted for being arrogant and aggressive (Amis has, indeed, engaged various antagonists in some very public squabbles over the years). He's hounded over his personal life (in 1995, the press had a field day

with Amis's divorce, his decision to drop his agent, his huge advance for the novel *The Information*, and some very pricey dental work). He's even taken to task for the way he looks; not long ago, a reporter mocked Amis for wearing an "unfashionable suit." And he is constantly criticized for his work.

The London *Independent* recently devoted two pages to a collection of opinion pieces penned by up-and-coming young authors on the subject of Amis's prose. With one or two exceptions, the opinions were dismissive, even derisive. Ironically, some of the more scathing pieces were written in a style suspiciously similar to that of Amis himself.

But Amis probably shouldn't complain: when he first came onto the literary scene, 27 years ago, Amis displayed a similar penchant for iconoclasm, a similar delight in duking it out with his elders. Even then Amis had the swagger, the attitude, the air of aristocracy about him. And even then he was seen as the consummate Lucky Bastard. As several reviewers have recently reminded us, back in the early '80s the *New Statesman* invited its readers to come up with the most unlikely book title imaginable. *Martin Amis: My Struggle* took the prize.

Rack and ruin

I'D WRITTEN UP a little certificate:

I, MARTIN AMIS, HEREBY
ACKNOWLEDGE THAT
CHRIS WRIGHT BEAT ME AT POOL,
FAIR AND SQUARE.

SIGNED _____

DATE _____

A bit presumptuous, maybe. But I did, I meant to beat him. A lot rested on it.

Amis is, of course, a very successful writer. He is also a very competitive pool player, and a good one. "Earthquake Amis," he calls himself.

I myself am not a very successful writer. But I'm not a bad pool player. Then again, I'm not a good pool player: I'm a flighty pool player, able to miss the sitter and sink the triple-bank combo with equal facility. But I'm usually a more successful pool player than I am a writer, so it was very important that I beat Amis at pool.

TWENTY YEARS on, Amis's candid, comprehensive, sometimes rambling memoir *Experience* comes pretty close to being that book. The successes are there in abundance, but so are the pickles, the catastrophes, the cock-ups, the angst. He comes across as sensitive, vulnerable, even fallible. Does this mean we'll have to start liking him? Well, not entirely. The book also has plenty of the famous Amis saltiness and scrappiness. If Amis feels he's had a hard time with the press, *Experience* soon makes it clear that he won't be extending any olive branches. It takes him all of six pages to take a swipe at his old foes -- and, as always, he's not averse to hitting below the belt. "[W]hat was the extent of your hopes for your prose," he writes, addressing literary journalists, "bookchat, interviews, gossip?" And then, in a butter-wouldn't-melt tone, he turns his attention to us: "Valued reader, it is not for me to say this is envy. It is for *you* to say that this is envy."

Needless to say, the journalists have not been amused. One of the more spirited attacks came from Julie Birchill, who, writing in the *New Statesman*, frothed: "[A] lightweight mind attempting to grapple with heavyweight matters is one of the most wretched spectacles metropolitan life has to offer." You can almost see her,

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myself for the big match: Earthquake Amis v. Flighty Wright. Single game, straight eight ball, winner take all.

Having won the toss, Flighty got the break. *Tink*. The cue ball approached the other balls tentatively, reluctantly -- like a shy person at a party. It didn't so much break the balls as jostle them. In the silence that followed, Amis stood there, chalking, appraising the table as if it were a chess board.

I told him my situation. I *needed* this one.

"I'll see what I can do," he said.

What he could do, it turned out, was play extremely well. Oh Jesus.

People have told me that when I am lining up a pool shot, the expression on my face is one of severe constipation -- all grimace and scowl. Earthquake didn't look that way at all: his expression was solemn, intent -- a gunfighter's face. No mercy.

The first few minutes of the game were a blur of super-pristine shots: plop, clack, plop-clack, clack-plop, *plonk*. I don't know -- four, maybe five balls went down before my turn came. Stay cool, I said to myself.

I stayed the opposite of cool. I stayed jittery. And I seemed to

have pioneered a new style, one where you swing the stick rather than stroke it. Amis, meanwhile, remained extremely gracious, saying "Good shot" every time I came within a foot of a pocket.

staring into the fog of Amis's exhaust, shaking her fist out of the driver's window: "Road hog!"

Yet the "lightweight" charge is nothing new. One of the more enduring criticisms of Amis is that he uses his facility with language to mask the facile nature of his work, that he is all surface and no depth. *Experience* should go a long way to defusing this idea. The book is not only tremendously complicated in its arrangement -- with its scrambled chronology, its latticed themes 1 -- it is also remarkably astute emotionally and philosophically. For once, you get the sense that Amis isn't playing games. If he (and we) were 30 years younger, we might say Amis was keeping it real.

It's no surprise that *Experience* is entertaining. We expected the celebrity gossip (Salman Rushdie once challenged Amis to a fight), the literary criticism (*Finnegans Wake* "reads like a 600-page crossword clue"), the comedy (a newborn baby resembles a "howling pizza"), and the rancor (Kingsley Amis's biographer, Eric Jacobs, is given an appendix-length drubbing). The fact that we also get such a tender, nuanced exploration of life and death, love and loss, family and friendship, innocence and corruption -- *that's* the shocker. But maybe it shouldn't be. As many a recent profiler has commented, Amis is a changed man. He has, as they keep saying, mellowed.

IT'S A chilly Wednesday afternoon, and Amis arrives at the *Phoenix* offices in Boston looking a couple of notches below mellow -- as if he'd just been through the spin cycle of a washing machine. The previous night he'd been at a cocktail party in New York, thrown in his honor by *Talk* editor Tina Brown, and he looks -- we'll give him the benefit of the doubt -- tired.

Amis is past 50 now, no longer the bad boy of British fiction. The hairline's waning and the eyebrows are waxing. He's a little crinkled, a little frayed. In fact, if Amis

The only bright spot was that the cue ball, in its chaotic journey around the table, tended to settle in positions that made it difficult for Amis to get a clear shot. We plodded on with this game of hide-and-seek for what seemed like months. Maybe I would simply wear him down, bore him into submission. And then . . .

It's hard to describe what happened next. It was like the climactic scene in *The Karate Kid*, where Ralph Macchio taps into latent reserves of strength and courage. It was like a miracle. *Chariots of Fire*. Like Lazarus, like Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign. It was a full-fledged return from the dead.

In slow motion, bathed in a blaze of golden light, Flighty began sinking balls. If there had been a crowd, it would have been on its feet. If there had been music, it would have been a crescendo of strings. And then, when it came down to the eight ball, everything would have gone quiet. Beads of sweat would have formed on Flighty's brow.

Well, we had the sweat all right. Plenty of perspiration. And the odd "Good shot" from Amis. And me going: "Oh God." And Amis muttering. And the PR person fidgeting. And me again, lining up the eight ball, looking like I'm taking a crap.

It was not an easy shot. The eight ball was on the cushion, about a foot from the pocket. It was not an easy shot. Not with Martin Amis looking on. I toyed with the idea of asking him to leave the room. But no. I took it. I took the shot: gently, gently . . .

As I write this, I can see the little certificate hanging above my desk: I, MARTIN AMIS, HEREBY ACKNOWLEDGE THAT CHRIS WRIGHT BEAT ME AT POOL, FAIR AND SQUARE, signed and dated by Amis, with a slight amendment. The words BEAT ME have been scratched out. The words LOST TO ME have been scribbled in.

were to hold out his hand and ask for some change right now, I'd give it to him.

But don't get me wrong: I am not a hater of Amis. I am a big, lolloping, quivering fan.

In *Experience*, Amis captures the journalist/fan's dilemma with hilarious precision. "This business of writing about writers is more ambivalent than the end-product normally admits," he writes, warming up to an interview with his literary mentor Saul Bellow. "As a fan and a 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."

What you don't want is tired. What you don't want, under any circumstances, is mellow.

Amis and I retire to the Boston Billiard Club, the pool hall downstairs from the newspaper offices. I've invited Amis here ostensibly to talk about his book, but what I really want is a game of pool (see "Rack and Ruin," above). But first things first. He orders a spicy tomato juice -- "Very spicy" -- and pours himself into a chair. Something tells me I won't be getting the full-scale nervous breakdown. Amis seems resolutely, unassailably happy.

"I count my blessings," he says, sipping his juice, puffing on a roll-your-own cigarette, "and they are considerable."

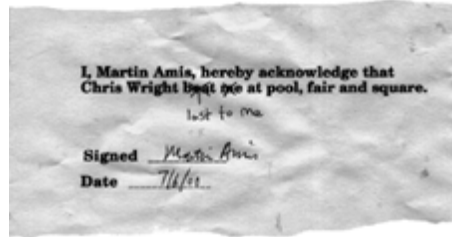
Whoa: *I count my blessings?*

"I've been able to earn a living doing what I love most, and there's not a day that goes by without me thinking how lucky I am for that. And having a full quiver of kids, all of whom seem to be very charming, it gives you a feeling of luxury."

Indeed, Martin Amis has become the kind of person who, unbidden, whips a snapshot of the kids out of his wallet. Where's the cutthroat sarcasm, the puffed-up

After Amis had shaken my hand -- "Good game" -- and left, when I was all alone, I set it up again: the black on the cushion, about a foot from the pocket. There was nothing to be gained this time, and nothing to be lost. In the calm, quiet room I lined up the shot, took it, missed.

-- CW



self-promotion? Where's the man who could whip his interviewers into fits of sputtering disapproval?

"I definitely, self-evidently, haven't been successful in my dealings with the press," Amis says in a rare moment of understatement. "I made a few semi-jokey boastful remarks, arrogant or maybe just ambitious remarks. I once said something like, 'In 500 years I want them to be talking about Shakespeare, Dante, and Martin Amis.' I didn't mean that literally; I was just exaggerating an impulse that all writers have."

FOOTNOTES:

1. The book is also strewn with footnotes: asides and observations litter the bottom of almost every page and often creep perilously close to the top. ([back](#))

Page 1 | [2](#) | [Next](#)

Chris Wright can be reached at cwright@phx.com.

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