LITERARY

fiction

Excerpt: *The Last Refuge*

journalism

What, Me Worry? Nathan Englander and his Years-in-the-Making Novel

Martin Amis and the Women

Excerpt from *The Last Refuge*, finalist for the Doris Bakwin Prize

Georgia Trevor wakes in a bed not her own and the man beside her is not her husband. At five in the morning, it's already shaping up to be a bad day.

It started yesterday, all happy-happy at Lourdes' wedding. It ends here somehow with her own little honeymoon. As the middle bits come together for her, Georgia decides sticking around is not an option.

She shimmies out of the bed she has shared with Trevor Barrow– his first name, same as her last name, what a coincidence -- and a stranger until they met fourteen hours ago. She is almost free, just unwrapping the tether of cheeseclothy sheet from her ankles when he sits up. Georgia holds her breath. Busted.

Trevor says something like, Gravlax, then lies back down. He shut his eyes, his lips part and she hears the soft, wet sound of mouth breathing. From awake to asleep, just like that. Like a puppy. Like a narcoleptic.

She throws on her clothes, steps into her shoes – the stupid satin bridesmaid's pumps that stained her feet blue. She picks up her purse. But because there are no clean getaways, she turns away from the door and back to the sleeping man. She comes back to the bed, to the sagging mattress, to study the bump on the bridge of his nose. It messes up his face, it makes him more human. She bends to kiss it. His lips curve into a smile, but he doesn't wake up. That's when she bolts.

Or tries to. She turns down the long hallway, heels tapping on the bare concrete. She winds up at an ice maker and soda machine that sells only Orange Crush. Somewhere here is a stairway, a stairway with carpet no thicker than the bedsheet. Above the sweet scent of must, she can smell the tang of the river but she cannot find her way out of this place, this

creaky fishing lodge at the last lost place on earth, Everglades City.

A door bangs shut behind her. She whirls. Trevor?

No, just two guys loaded down with fishing rods, tackle boxes, six packs, yawning and scratching their bellies. They freeze when they see her.

“Morning,” one of them murmurs.

She nods.

From twenty feet away, they can’t smell what’s on her -- sex and self-loathing – but they can see her just fine. They look her up and down, take in her rumpled red hair, her crumpled taffeta bridesmaid’s dress the color of Windex, the matching shoes. Pale anyway when she wakes up, she feels bloodless now in the mousy haze of dawn.

The fishermen nod in return and back away with slow determination. Like they’re veering around a Rottweiler. Georgia gives them eleven seconds, then follows them down the hall. They know things she doesn’t. They know the way out of here.

There’s the stairway. She catches a heel on that scrap of carpet and lurches down three steps at once. She grabs for the railing and rights herself, heart pounding, a clumsy idiot, but she has not tumbled onto the fishermen, so there’s that.

The lobby’s pine floor is almost black now. There’s the Christmas tree in the corner, its tinsel garland winks at her. There’s the screen door out. There is the Barron River, its depths impossible to gauge, its far bank lined with twisted mangroves, the mangroves clotted with egrets.

She gets in her car, pulls out of the scraggly grass and out of the parking lot. She is on her way, on the only road in and out of town, but she can’t help but look behind her. Like Lot’s wife. In her rear view mirror, Georgia watches Kismet Fishing Lodge recede.

It is not much, a two-story building curved out toward the water, its white paint peeling off the wood siding like a bad sun burn. Five plastic life-sized light-up snowmen are assembled on the roof. They’d been standing guard on the sidewalk when she arrived yesterday afternoon. They watch her with hard black eyes.

She is the only car on the road, which calls itself Broadway, but she keeps to the speed limit – twenty-five miles per hour. She moseys through the roundabout, passes the trailer park, crosses the bridge, but when she comes to the intersection of Broadway and Tamiami Trail, she makes a right and hits the gas. Georgia speeds the entire ninety miles back to Miami, trying to outrace what she’s done.

It’s not as though life was always like this. In fact, Georgia’s life was never like this. There’s the married thing for starters and the fact that shelter work does not lend itself to wild nights with strangers.
In the morning stillness, the Refuge could still be what it once was, someone’s private home, with coral rock courtyard and arched doorway. It’s clung to its 1927 stateliness as the neighborhood got worn down and torn down but eighty years of history don’t mean anything in a city that worships the new. Dwarfed by scaffolding and girders for in-the-works high rises, the Refuge has a hunched, cowering look, like a dowdy matron among lanky supermodels.

Across the street, standing at her usual post outside the construction site, is Baldy. Georgia rolls down her window.

Her fingers, so clever last night with Trevor, when they shouldn’t have been, are slow and fumbling now. “Good morning,” she signs, and it seems to take an hour.

From her spot on the cracked pavement, Baldy gives a you’ve-got-to-be-kidding roll of her eyes.

“Come have some breakfast,” Georgia signs.

Baldy adjusts the blanket around her shoulders with a model’s blasé grace, then shoots off her response, all swooping, darting gestures. It takes Georgia a moment to read her answer -- “Do I look hungry?”

Yes, she does. Her soft blue eyes –librarian eyes -- are bloodshot. Her street-aged skin, like her blanket, is blurred, frayed, mottled, gray in some places, red in others. Baldy is one of Georgia’s failures.

“Well, think about it. You’re welcome, you know.” Georgia signs the words, sculpts air and brings it toward her heart.

Baldy turns away to fuss with the cardboard that makes up her home and bed, presenting Georgia the back of her head. She has strands of gray hair above her forehead, otherwise, she is what she answers to, and her scalp is raw, patchy, hairless.

The first time Georgia saw her, she thought the woman might have some sort of skin disease from living rough. But she’s watched Baldy pluck at her head, her blanket. Georgia’s found a word for it -- trichotillomania – a compulsion to pull out hair.

Naming an illness doesn’t cure it, though, and she’s never gotten Baldy to come to the Refuge. Even Miami-Dade Human Care wants nothing to do with her. “Baldy likes the street, and when you like the street, ain’t nothing we can do,” says Margaret, the only sensible soul Georgia’s ever talked to there.

Georgia pulls into the alley behind the Refuge and pops open the trunk. As she grabs her overnight bag, two men crabwalk past, each holding the end of a kingsize mattress they’ve probably stolen. They say hey as they maneuver past. If they’ve committed a crime, it doesn’t seem bother them.

Georgia, on the other hand, would take a year off her life if she could rewind the last twenty-four hours and start over. This time yesterday, the only thing on her mind was being in Lourdes’ wedding and worrying about being too near the water. Who she was just a day ago seems quaint now. Yesterday, she had nothing to regret.

Her heart is racing, her brain is racing so Georgia stops in the Refuge’s courtyard to study the scarlet milkweed. With long green leaves, tiny red berries and sprays of yellow and red flowers, they can be beautiful. More often, though, they look the way they do now, leggy stems bare, stripped, as though left for dead.

The only sign of life are the dots of yellow on the stems – not fungus, butterfly eggs. Scarlet milkweed is the preferred chow of monarch butterflies. They have eaten the milkweed down to stalks, laid their eggs and slunk off somewhere to spin their cocoons.

In a week or two, the milkweed will boast new green leaves – it’s proof you can get chewed up and still come back, still live, still be beautiful. And the air will be hectic with monarchs. The mystery is how the black and white striped monarch caterpillars find the milkweed in the first place. It must be the same way women find their way to the Refuge from other towns, other states.

Georgia opens the Refuge door, breathing in the place’s own smell of sweat, ammonia and Ivory soap. She smiles. Every time she passes through the door, it’s like passing through an x-ray or an MRI, both of which she’s done plenty of times. She wishes she, too, could see inside people, including herself. The Refuge is as close as she’s ever come. The Refuge is where you get stripped down to who you really are.

Georgia locks herself inside and has time for a quick shower upstairs – six minutes, just like the Refuge women get, not long enough to shower off what she’s done. Afterwards, Georgia stands on the damp, gray tile and plows through her overnight bag. She wriggles into bra, panties, jeans, T-shirt. She wads the bridesmaid’s dress and shoes into her bag, and stepping into her sandals, sees the Ivory soap hasn’t taken the blue off her feet. Maybe no one will notice.

She goes downstairs and wrestles with the folding tables and chairs, doles out the cereal, loads the coffee urn, and with set jaw, sends out the media e-blast about the Refuge's Christmas party. This was Lourdes' old job.

It was Lourdes' job because Lourdes knows how to charm the media. She can be funny, she can be light. Georgia, on the other hand, reads over her own message and though she's gotten the facts right (over one hundred women being served, the donated food, the donated tree, the donated gifts), her message comes off sounding the way her husband David does when he breaks bad news to a patient. Still, it must be done. Georgia sighs. She hits SEND.

At eight, she unlocks the front door. Two dozen women have appeared, hovering like crows in the courtyard. They look up at her, they shuffle in. Dead last, Reverend Wanda John, her pale hair a wild nimbus around her head, her black dress crumpled and stained, the whites of her eyes stained, too.

Something else is different, too -- the usuals tend to cluster around her but they abandon the reverend now, like a litter of pups snubbing a runt. A mantle of space surrounds her. Whatever's happened to Wanda John, the other Refuge women don't have the energy to be part of it.

Georgia welcomes the newcomers, lays out the rules -- no using, no dealing, no buying, no fighting while you're here. She helps them set up the folding tables and chairs in the hall, then she leads them to the kitchen, to the Styrofoam bowls of cornflakes, the jugs of milk, the cartons of cheap watered-down juice. The women form a ragged line and when Wanda John comes through and picks up a bowl, Georgia murmurs, "You all right?"

The Reverend Wanda John just says, "God bless," and won't meet her glance.

While the others shovel it in at the bow-legged folding tables, Wanda John brings her hands together. "Magnificent Father, we thank you for your blessings, for this food before us, for Your strength to see us through this day. Amen." Her voice is steady, her hands are not. Gripping the plastic spoon, she scatters cornflakes like confetti. She stops trying, wipes her hands on her lap and bows her head for prayer or privacy.

Min eyes Wanda John, eyes her cereal, then slides the bowl over and downs it. Even though she runs nearby Del's Ribs and Brew with her husband Antoine (there was a Del, but he got killed in a shootout), Min still eats like she won't get another chance. Which is how her weight ballooned and why she goes by Min now, rather than the name she was given at birth – Mignonne.

Beside her, Annushka is talking to Sara and laughing, they're both laughing, like the girls they are. Georgia tears up and looks away -- tears are not allowed here. She remembers not so long ago Annushka could neither laugh nor speak, just showed up one morning hunched over, her curtain of hennaed hair not quite hiding a black eye and a split lip, blood seeping onto her mouth like lip gloss.

But she could look Georgia in the eye and when Georgia asked what happened, the girl almost smiled and shook her head. "My English is --" She batted the air down with one hand.

"That's okay." Georgia drew her own hand through the air as though playing a harp. "It's okay. Try. Show."

"I. He --" said the girl, then balled her hand into a fist and punched herself in the face.

But that was two months ago and her face and broken ribs have healed. So has her English, as though her language skills have recovered from some trauma, of their own.

Sara speaks no Russian and ought to be focusing on other issues including getting her two kids out of the system and out of foster care. Still, Georgia's noticed Sara likes to act as Annushka's translator.

"Some bitch on the street asked Annie why she wasn't working on her resume," Sara says.

"I ask-- " Annushka dissolves in laughter. "I ask lady if she want my job."

“Annie, my God, oh my God, stop.” Sara’s voice high and tight

between giggles. “I’m going to pee my pants.”

“Why do you call her Annie?” Georgia says.

“Because Annoooooshka sounds like an STD.” Sara and half a dozen other women laugh. Annushka smiles, unsure. Sexually transmitted disease may not be in her vocabulary yet.

“Okay, showers.” Georgia sets the clipboard by the coffee urn. The regulars get there first – they know the ropes. The others, the new ones, follow like a stream of ducklings. Georgia comes up behind Sara and murmurs, “Meds.”

Sara rolls her eyes, flashes open her shirt pocket. Georgia sees the pill pack of Depakote -- anti-seizure meds which do double-duty as anti-mania, Sara’s problem. One of them, anyway.

“Good. Did you take it?” As much as Georgia wants to stand over her and make sure, she gives Sara some space. She goes to the foyer, parts the curtains --old cut-up sheets she and the Refuge women stitched together. The whine of construction has already begun. Baldy is still out there, blanket draped over her head as the concrete dust rises around her. Her hands are active, alive, as she signs to herself.

Georgia, whose ASL skills never got beyond what she learned her freshman year at college, squints as Baldy folds her fingers over her palm. It looks like she’s spelling out ASSHOLE.

Georgia turns back. She is alone except for one woman -- Wanda John, who runs her ministry here at the Refuge and in the parking lot of Del’s Ribs and Brew a block away. She is still at the table, rocking back and forth in her seat.

Georgia slips in beside her and picks up the scent coming off her as layered and complex as perfume. Yes, there’s the sharpish tang of alcohol, but also top notes of something sweet, fruity – cough syrup. She’s been robo-dosing.

“How are you doing?” Georgia says, and gets her second you-must-be-crazy look of the day. “You’ll be okay. You knew to come here.”

The other woman shrugs. “Where else m’I gonna go?” She slides deeper into her folding chair so she’s eye-level with Georgia’s arms. “You all goose fleshy. You cold?”

Georgia rubs her arms. “A little.” It has nothing to do with the temperature outside. It has nothing to do with what she’s wearing – she could be wearing polar fleece and flannel and she’d still be cold. She gets chilled when she’s stressed, when she’s overtired, when she’s afraid. Georgia can’t even tell which one she is now, maybe all three. Min calls these chills soul-stealers.
“I’m fine.”

“You sure? You got you some interesting blue feet, too.”

The reverend never misses a thing. Not even now, when life would be easier if she did.

“It’s a long story – but let’s talk about you. I’m worried about you,” Georgia says, then flinches. Too confrontational. If you’re going to show love or concern here, do it like you’re slipping someone a tab of Ecstasy.

“Well, bless your heart,” says the reverend.

“You know, I never knew quite what that meant,” says Georgia.

And Wanda John, who is forty or maybe sixty, smiles at her lap. “That’s the point of it. Means what you like. Something I

learned from Mama June."

Georgia sits up. Wanda John doesn't talk about her foster parents much, either from denial or survival, so Georgia gathers snatches when she can and tries to piece it all together. "What'd she say?"

"She said, 'bless your heart,'" says Wanda John, like Georgia might be thick or hard of hearing. "Said it sweet to everyone at church, even said it to Daddy John after she caught him with me. Said it to me every day after that."

And then she goes silent. When she speaks again, her voice is hard. "At first I thought it was all that Baptist love-thy-neighbor crap in her, but then I figured out that's what she said because Jesus wouldn't want her saying 'I want to slap you something senseless.'"

Georgia opens her mouth but all her reassuring phrases seem right up there with "Bless your heart." She studies the gray surface of the table, still life with Styrofoam and plastic. Wanda John's bowl sits empty but for a few clinging cornflakes Min decided weren't worth the effort. A clear plastic cup, never used by the looks of it, has fallen over. A fuzzy rainbow plays across it, a bit of magic from the sunlight coming through the living window.

And then Georgia remembers, the realization so potent it brings her to her feet. "My God, I almost forgot -- we're closing on the Refuge today."

"For true?" Wanda John looks up, her tumble of fair hair framing her pale face. She's always pale-featured, but today is different. She looks extinguished.

"Of course." It is proof, or at least the scrap of belief things will turn out all right after all. Months in the works, and they're finally buying it from the county so Human Services can't hold them hostage anymore, can't deny funds for everything the Refuge needs -- new roof tiles, new wiring, new plumbing. It needs fresh paint. It needs love, and Georgia is going to love it back to life.

The reverend's jaw trembles. "I wasn't sure. I thought --"

What? That Georgia wants the place for herself? She'd love to see David's face – guess what, hon, we're moving.

"Come on, you're the reason Lourdes and I wanted to get this place. You're why we formed this fancy corporation."

Miami Refuge, Inc. sounds like another monster conglomerate, but Al says it's no big deal. Georgia trusts him because he's a developer so he knows these things, because he's on the Refuge board and because he just married Lourdes. Beneath its upmarket name, Miami Refuge, Inc. is just Al, Lourdes and Georgia.
"You can't just talk about something, you've got to do it, too," Georgia says as much to herself as to Wanda John. "You gotta walk the walk. What's the scripture thing you said?"

The reverend sighs. "James 2:14. 'What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but doesn't have works?'"

"Right. Isn't that what made you start preaching?"

"Part of it." Wanda John gives a sulky nod. "Didn't know nothing about preaching when I started."

"I didn't know about running a shelter," Georgia says. "But you stuck with me, anyway."

"Yeah, but you learned."

Georgia shakes her head. "Still learning."

"Me, too. Thought I had it right but I'm still figuring it all out." The reverend's voice cracks.

"Same here." She nudges the reverend's knee with her own, feels the hard bone. "We's twins."

Wanda John surprises Georgia by laughing. "Well bless your heart."

Georgia thinks back to the time before she left for college, when she went with her father to apply for a car loan. The guy behind the desk looked them over, leaned way back in his tippy executive chair and said, "What can I do for you good people?"

They were good people. But the bank manager didn't know that. He didn't know anything about them. So Georgia said, "We'd like all your money, please."

He blinked and laughed like a car that wouldn't start – heh. Heheheheh. Heh. Then he tilted back in his chair again and looked at Georgia's father.

"So. What can I do for you good people?"

And that started her wondering. Good people --what do they look like? She's come up with different answers different times but right now, Georgia thinks they look like Wanda John.

"So," she says, "What color should we paint it?"

"Blue," Wanda John says, dreamy-voiced. "Light, light blue." The color of her eyes.

And Georgia, who'd wanted, who'd assumed a crisp white, instead of what they have, yellow paint peeling off in curls, now sees the house misty blue, soft, cool, the color of refuge. "Perfect."

"I always wanted me a blue house." When Wanda John lets go a sob, Georgia turns to her, but the reverend just sniffs and juts out her jaw like after all she's been through, she'll be damned if she'll give in to tears.

This is the part Georgia hates. She always wants to say, don't cry, don't be afraid, don't give up, but these women have every reason to do all three, so she says, "You want to lie down in my office, hon?"

Wanda John shakes her head. "I want to go to Beluthahatchee."

"Is that where you're from?" She's heard of it, maybe. Somewhere up in the panhandle?

Wanda John laughs her rusty laugh. "Not hardly. It's something else I learned off Mama June. Told me Beluthahatchee's where every low-down, rotten thing you've done is forgiven."

"Oh, God," Georgia says, pulled under the weight of what she's done, by something she doesn't even understand, let alone forgive. "I want to go there, too."

The reverend wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. "Thing is, place doesn't exist. 'Cept in a bottle."

* * * * *

return to top

Interview in March/April Pages:
What, Me Worry? Nathan Englander and his Years-in-the-Making Novel

Nathan Englander is worried. Not about anything in particular. He just worries. "Everything's so overwhelming to me,"

says the author of the acclaimed 1999 short story collection, *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*. “I could pick socks for hours or worry about eating the wrong breakfast,” he says. “I love to worry.”

The one thing Englander doesn’t worry about is his work. He’s obsessive, he admits. His story “The Twenty-seventh Man” “I wrote and rewrote about 10,000 times.” But he did it happily and with purpose. And if his much-anticipated novel *The Ministry of Special Cases* took a decade to write, so be it. “I was going to work on the book and that’s that,” says the author, speaking from his home in New York. “I’m single-minded that way.”

Due out in May, *The Ministry of Special Cases* takes place in Argentina during the 197os. Englander was there 20 years later, and his memories of that time were enough, he says. He didn’t feel the need to go back and research. “Writing is about ownership,” he explains. “It becomes my world, my Buenos Aires.”

Englander’s Buenos Aires is in the grip of the Dirty War, when up to 32,000 people were abducted by state security forces, tortured and killed. Though the aura of fear he depicts happens in another time and place, it feels both familiar and contemporary. Englander wrote some of it in New York, after September 11 and some of it in Jerusalem.

“Jerusalem changed me forever,” he says. “I watched the country I moved to for peace change around me in horrifying ways.”

The country is changing for Englander’s protagonist, Kaddish Poznan, too. Buenos Aires in the 1970s is a place, writes the author, “where a guilty man can’t get himself killed. Only the innocent need to watch out.”

Kaddish does not, at first blush, seem like an innocent. He’s the son of a whore who works in a Jewish cemetery chipping the names off headstones, eradicating for the living all traces of the past. Nor does the novel’s premise, involving terrorism, kidnapping and murder, seem to offer much in the way of yucks. Englander surprises on both counts.

These are hard times in Argentina. Not only is it the time of the disappeared, Kaddish’s clients are strapped for cash. One, a plastic surgeon offers Kaddish something else – free nose jobs for the whole family. As Kaddish tells his wife Lillian and son Pato, “We look different and this is our chance to look like everybody else, to look better than everyone else. We can, with this, fit in.”

If only. “It was always like this for Kaddish Poznan,” writes Englander with typical deadpan humor, “always something gone wrong.”

Chipping off names, shaving off noses, they’re both an effacement of self, an erasing of identity, a subject Englander has explored in his short stories. Another carry-over from the author’s debut collection is his deep, abiding compassion for his characters. What’s different is his depiction of Jews. In *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, he wrote about Orthodox Jews, Hasidic Jews, devout Jews. With The Ministry of Special Cases, “I didn’t want to be so Jewy,” he says. His characters Kaddish and Lillian are Jewish, but when their son Pato is “disappeared,” religion is the least of their worries.

It is also the least of Englander’s. He was raised Orthodox, went to yeshivah, the whole nine yards, but ultimately went secular. He’s okay with that, his family’s okay with that. The media, however, couldn’t seem to let it go, anointing him the Great Young Jewish Writer.

The greatness is a given. Englander’s debut earned him a PEN/Malamud Award and the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction. You can’t quarrel with young, either. Englander was 29 when *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges* came out, with a ‘do that called to mind Roger Daltrey circa “Tommy.” But great, young, Jewish, it doesn’t matter. “I’m resistant about any label, including the Jewish Writer label,” says Englander, a graduate of the Iowa Writers Workshop. “That’s distancing and limiting.”

On the page, he is silky, filigreed and funny. Each idea flows into the next, all born along by story. He’s funny on the phone, too, but with an energy that snaps and sparks. He interrupts himself endlessly. He takes a tangent and runs with it.

Perhaps it's the logical consequence of growing up hearing nothing but "eastern Europeany crazy stories, side stories on top of side stories, told me as holy. All the apocrypha, the back-of-the-book stuff. That's what they told us as truth." Englander laughs. "It stretches your brain in a good way."

Indeed. The apocryphal stories that delighted him as a child didn't hold up under scrutiny as he got older. Englander wanted answers. "I'm tortured by the idea of the gray," he says. "I'd like things to be clear. Part of having left religion was because life is not like that." The whole thing makes him worry. But it makes great material. Englander takes the ambiguity of life and pours it into his work. It is possible in *The Ministry of Special Cases* for someone to be dead and yet not dead, to be both innocent and guilty.

What makes his character Pato dangerous? Nothing, really, but he is arrested because of his books. Books are, Englander says "a subversive form – wonderfully so. They're easily transportable, and ideas can get past the eyes that try to censor them. I love literature for that."

He loves it so much he'll gladly take however long it takes to create it. "It's a life investment," he says. In fact, time may help a book. "It makes a difference in terms of layering. You get your ideas and write. That's an act of will." But at some point, he says, "the book better make its own demands and that's how it changes in amazing ways. You can want everyone to die in the end, but if they want to live happily ever after, you have to listen to that."

During the decade of writing, his novel evolved considerably from his original idea for it. "It was always Kaddish's book, it was Argentina, but there were three generations and four continents and it's half the length I handed in."

Englander has changed, as well. He's 10 years older, for one thing. Now 37, he's trimmed his luscious locks, and in the last frantic weeks of finishing *The Ministry of Special Cases*, "I had quite the beard thing going -- there's gray there," he says, not without pleasure.

If you want to obsess about Englander's fading youth, his religion or lack of it, even his hair, hey, that's your worry. "All I care about," he says, "is the story." ###

return to top

Cover of January/February Pages:
Martin Amis and the Women

Martin Amis 1973
"I wished she would go. I couldn't feel anything with her there."
The Rachel Papers

Martin Amis 2006
"We were very late, you see, to develop a language of feeling."
House of Meetings

So what happened to Martin Amis?
"I live with women," he says, sounding both proud and amused.

Lots of 'em. There's Isabel Fonseca (wife #2), their daughters Fernanda, 9 and Clio, 7 and "a very sweet nanny/housekeeper," says Amis. "The only bloke I've had in the house is Diego the dog, and he was an asshole."

Well, that's what blokes are, aren't they, and that's what Amis has written about. *The Rachel Papers*, published when he was but a lad of 24, launched his distinct style, a blend of startling insights, razor-sharp comedy and a Gonzo,

voracious, manic, macho voice – self-absorbed, self-aggrandizing, with self-loathing nipping at its heels. He is the gold standard of blokedom.

"I had read and re-read his work obsessively - particularly *Money* - while writing *Criminals*, because I was trying to capture a certain kind of male voice," recalls novelist Margot Livesey (*Banishing Verona*).

Some of Amis' prose pyrotechnics comes from pure will and a dedication to craft. Some was just floating around in the gene pool. Daddy was noneother than Kingsley Amis, comic novelist extraordinaire, Booker Prize-winner (*The Old Devils*, 1987) and notorious womanizer.

Martin's literary debut came 20 years after his father's, the seminal *Lucky Jim*, which, one could argue, marked the start of lad lit. That stuff that's tried to pass itself off as lad lit these past few years? Please. No one has beat Amis father and son at the game.

In addition to an almost preternatural literary talent, the two have in common crumbled first marriages, bad teeth and, says Amis, not much else.

"I get more from my mother," says the author, who's about to pop over to visit his mum, Hilary Kilmarnock. "I get a very great deal from her. She's an extraordinary woman. She finds it impossible to disapprove of anyone."

And Amis thinks the same holds true for him? He laughs. "I enjoy human folly and weakness," admits the author. "But I'm not a judger in the way my father was. I'm somewhere in the middle."

In the middle sums up much of Amis' life at present. He is in the middle of moving from one London flat to another. His new novel *House of Meetings*,

dedicated to his mother, is just out here, but he's well into another, the first of a four-book deal with Knopf, an autobiographical novel to be called *The Pregnant Widow*. At 57, more than 30 years after he assumed the mantle of Literary Bad Boy (complete with pout, tight velvet trousers and tousled Mick Jagger hair), Amis is in the middle of a literary resurgence.

With a dozen novels to his credit and half as many works of nonfiction, he was never a slacker, but *House of Meetings* seems to mark a turning point. It has all the classic Amis hallmarks – taut, edgy prose, sucker-punch humor where you don't expect it, elegant language, a story featuring two opposing men, but something else. Dare we say it? Sure we do. Tenderness.

In his 2000 memoir *Experience*, Amis wrote, ""Love has two opposites. One is hate. One is death." Hate here is embodied in book's unnamed narrator, "a political" whose rage helped him survive life in a Russian prison camp half a century ago, but has since leached any happiness from his life. Death is played by Lev, the narrator's brother, imprisoned in the same gulag but fortunate enough to marry Zoya, the woman the narrator has loved all his life, a woman possessing, as Amis writes, "an outrageous allocation of physical gifts . . . When she walked, everything swayed. When she laughed, everything shook. When she sneezed – you felt that absolutely anything might happen."

This is the second time Amis has made Russia the focus work, the first being his 2002 nonfiction study of Stalin, *Koba the Dread*.

"I absolutely loved his Stalin book," says Knopf editor Gary Fisketjon, who edited *House of Meetings*. "For me, it's an astonishing work of empathetic history that opened doors I hadn't even realized were closed. The interstices of the personal and the political are veins that few writers explore as courageously as he does, and *House of Meetings* seems to me nearly a summation of this." "What is the historical novel for if not for that?" says Amis. Though he's been reading more nonfiction than fiction lately, this time, he felt the gulag experience should be presented through the lens of fiction. "You bow and take on historical facts but you also have particular situation within in, in this case two brothers in love with the same woman and sequestered for 10 years helplessly above the Arctic Circle. It's not just the gulag that's

going on, it's the relationship within it."

Amis is unafraid of taking on big themes. Once the glow of his bloke books began to fade, sometime around the mid-1980s, he realized it is not enough to be 1) talented and 2) a guy.

Since then, he's written about nuclear holocaust (*Einstein's Monsters*), the other holocaust (*Time's Arrow*), AIDS (*London Fields*) and had even been working on a satire on Iraq called *The Unknown Known* (the title comes from a Donald Rumsfeld remark). "I gave it up," says Amis. "You can't write satire about very serious things that could become much more serious overnight." So he said good-bye to satire and the Middle East and wrote instead about love and Russia.

"I could come up with a rational explanation for my fascination with Russia," says Amis, who got a D in logic back in school. "But you never decide to write a novel -- that's the wrong verb. You just realize you can. That's attractive enough. I do think the gulag experience is woefully under-acknowledged and under-honored. There's some satisfaction in getting people thinking about all that again."

Amis' friend Christopher Hitchens, the leftist journalist who made a hard right turn, hasn't weighed in on House of Meetings yet. "I'm impatient for his response," says Amis, despite the fact Hitchens was vociferous (as he is in all things) regarding *Koba the Dread*. He didn't like it.

House of Meetings takes the form of a letter the narrator writes to his multicultural, politically-correct Americanized stepdaughter Venus who is innocent of the past. No one, he believes, can afford that kind of luxury, that kind of ignorance. There is no escaping the past. Even as he writes about his experience in the gulag, Russian schoolchildren in Beslan have been taken hostage.

"It would suit me very well if I could easternize your Western eyes, your western heart," he writes, and must also set himself to the harder task of easternizing the eyes and heart of western readers, of making them care about the narrator. "My behavior is perhaps easily explained: in the first three months of 1945, I raped my way across what would soon be East Germany." He is both a victim of war and a perpetrator of violence, a bitter, brutalized man who nevertheless holds dear a 36-year-not-so-secret passion for his sister-in-law.

While earlier Amis works like *The Information, Success* and *London Fields* have two characters embodying polar opposites, good and evil, Lev and his brother each have complexity, facets. They speak of what it is to be human. "This is a love story," announces the narrator. "All right. Russian love. But still love."

It might quell some of Amis' bloodlusting critics to know writing House of Meetings was agony. "It was like nothing else I've experienced," says the author, still vaguely stunned. "I felt a terrible inertness and loss of confidence and the sense your subconscious isn't helping you as it usually does. Just as I was finishing, it lifted."

Amis believes the dread came from what he calls a search for legitimacy or what might also be called a case of How Dare He? "It's presumptuous, embarrassing to be writing about penal servitude above the Arctic Circle when you're living in Uruguay, writing on the shore, hearing the waves lapping, sitting with your adorable wife and painfully adorable daughters," he says.

"There's a western phenomenon called the mid-life crisis," observes the House of Meetings narrator. "Very often it is heralded by divorce. What history might have done to you, you bring about on purpose: separation from woman and child. Don't tell me that such men aren't tasting the ancient flavours of death and defeat."

Amis himself ate a lot of death and defeat in the mid-1990s. His marriage to Antonia Phillips died (he left her and his two sons for the above-mentioned adorable wife), his father died, he sacked longtime agent Pat Kavanaugh, hired another (uberagent Andrew Wylie aka the Jackal), and in so doing, lost a friend (author Julian Barnes, Kavanaugh's husband). Most men would have bought a sports car and been done with it.

His first marriage might have been falling apart, his teeth definitely were. After years of choosing toothache over a dentist's chair, Amis had no choice – he succumbed to pain, humiliation and expense. He got new teeth. This seemed to bother people a lot. According to the hype, "I had abandoned my sons to go and live with an heiress in New York, the better to squander my advances on a Liberace smile," he writes in Experience.

"It was very unpleasant to feel a lot of hostility directed at you," says the author. "The skewers started to become so violent that it became repellant. You don't get tougher. You're at your toughest when you're 30 not when you're 57."

"Let's be clear, not everyone has it in for him," says Tibor Fischer (*Voyage to the End of the Room*). "I was a fan from the first book." It's the latter ones he's had a problem with. In reviews for the Telegraph, he panned both *House of Meetings* and Amis' previous novel, *Yellow Dog*. Call it a case of tough love.

"Amis gets six-figure advances and huge publicity budgets, but his sales simply don't justify it," says Fischer. "I know of first-rate novelists who either can't get their work published or who can't get any attention for it, and one of the reasons is Marty soaking up the gravy."

The grievance isn't just Fischer's and dates back to 1995, when Amis, courtesy of the Jackal, demanded a $795,000 advance for *The Information*. Jonathan Cape, which had published 10 Amis titles, wouldn't pony up, so Amis jumped ship and went with HarperCollins, racking up a fair amount of bad will, all for a novel, which according to Bookwatch, only sold 40,000 copies in paperback.

Another reason for the press' vitriol, Fischer admits, may be professional jealousy. "The British don't like success."

"It's England." Amis agrees and sighs. "It's fine in Scotland, Ireland and Wales. I have a very good relationship with the press in those other countries, just not in England."

Viewed from this side of the Atlantic, the attacks on Amis seem just odd. "He's always seemed to me a lightning-rod of sorts," says Gary Fisketjon, who's known Amis for 20 years. "Our first professional encounter came when I was bidding – unsuccessfully, as it turned out – for *London Fields*, which still strikes me as one of the most powerful novels of our time."

And that's what matters in the end, he says. "I've never cared much about a writer's personae, as opposed to his work."

Amis has never sought approval from others. Just as well. His father tossed aside Amis' 1984 novel *Money* at the point where his son interjected a minor character into the book whose name is . . . Martin Amis.

"I think I'm a bit unusual in that children of writer parents tend on the whole to write a couple things and then not stay with it. That's because the impulse is to show the father they can do it. Having done that, it's off the list," says Amis. "I never felt that. I was always completely sure I was in it for the long haul. There was nothing personal in it, it was a vocation. "

Nor did he write for the fame and glamour. "There was no possibility of that when I started out, there wasn't that commercial atmosphere at all," he says. "It was unobscured by these extra things that have sprung up. No book tours, no author interviews, no photo ops, none of it. That all started around 1980. Now many people start writing for what I would say are the wrong reasons. It's not their fault -- these flashy rewards are available but no one of my generation could have started with that in mind."

What made him a writer was an abiding belief in literature. What's kept him writing is a striving for literary posterity that no author advance can even touch. That's been more than enough to sustain him. Until now.

In addition to the adorable wife and daughters he lives with, there are also women Amis doesn't live with who are nevertheless very much a presence in his life. There's the one he found, Delilah Seale, his recently discovered, much beloved illegitimate daughter, and there's the two he lost; his sister Sally who died in 2000 at the age of 46, after

struggling with depression and alcoholism, and his cousin Lucy Partington, who disappeared in 1973. Her body was recovered in 1995, after a police investigation revealed Partington had been a victim of England's notorious serial killer Frederick West.

Amis keeps on his desk a photograph of Lucy, to whom Amis dedicated The Information and one of Delilah. "I had always wanted a girl," Amis writes in his memoir, "and suddenly there she was."

Though Amis is still 30 years away from being, as the *House of Meetings* narrator is, "in the high eighties," he's in the midst of a reckoning that makes a mid-life crisis look cozy.

"I miss being able to look in the mirror without feeling I'm on an acid trip gone wrong. Getting old is like a low-budget irresponsible horror film, a video nasty where they're saving the worst for last," says Amis. "And of course sexual regret is the great theme this time of life." This from the author who's said literary posterity is the only thing that counts?

"I've always cared how it went with women and that's taken up much of my free time." Amis laughs. "It's an intimation that by the end, that's what we'll be thinking. Even powerful figures start to dismiss what they've done in the public sphere. It's the personal stuff at the very end that's important and it gives them agony and regret and remorse," he says. "It's a man thing."

It's more than a man thing, it's an Amis thing. "It's only half a life without women," Amis' father Kingsley told him shortly after his second wife, novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard, left him. Kingsley was, by this point all the things he'd never imagined possible in gilded youth – sick, old, abandoned and impotent.

He was taken in again by wife #1 some 20 years after they divorced. This was no tearful rapproachment, it was a business deal brokered by Martin and his brother Philip who saw their father had money but needed care and their mother, though happily married to Lord Kilmarnock, lacked a hefty bank account. It sounds impossible. It lasted 15 years, until Kingsley's death in 1995. Nah, you can't make this stuff up.

Amis would prefer not to follow in his father's footsteps. He's worked hard to maintain a good relationship with his two grown sons from his first marriage and is a smitten daddy to his daughters, including Delilah, now 30.

"She's tremendously frank with me," he says with pride. "There's nothing we can't say."

The author went to great lengths in his memoir to protect the women in his life, revealing no more about his relationship with them than he needed to. "I didn't think that was the book for that," says Amis. "I wanted to do that in fiction. There's something gross about doing it in nonfiction. You can't do any dirty stuff in nonfiction, can you? But you can in fiction."

Can and will. His in-the-works autobiographical novel *The Pregnant Widow* takes on feminism, a touchy topic coming from a former literary bad boy. Hasn't he had enough controversy? Enough attacks?

Amis laughs. "You can be feel slightly poisoned by a lot of hostility but it shouldn't have anything to do with what you're going to write."

Like it or not, Amis was in the midst of the sexual revolution as it was happening. "1970 was my date for it," he recalls. "*The Female Eunuch* and great feminist works. I just sort of remember it was in the air and it was coming and -- this sounds a bit weird -- women were dispensing sexual favors to sweeten the pill. There was toplessness, short skirts and the sudden willingness to have sex. It was very much a signal power was about to be redistributed and they were making it as nice as they could for us. Women would sleep with you who didn't want to but were pressured by their peers."

The sex was very nice, but it messed up the revolution. "I think it's charged on but it's also been hijacked by pornography," says Amis, who did a porn expose for the Guardian a few years back. "Sex education comes not from the classroom but Ron Jeremy and these other grinning mannequins of pornography."

Sex also messed things up between the genders. “My daughter Delilah says the boys have run all over again. Women have either to behave like men themselves or disguise all their tenderer feelings. Any talk of commitment or love is completely impossible now.”

This is not what Amis wants for his daughters. And it is not what he wants for feminism. “When women got this power, in a velvet revolution really, they accumulated the wrong things, the wrong power. The thing to have done was to put your foot down about men helping more about with the house and the children. Women have done everything, they’re over-subscribed. Men who have had a lovely holiday are now having to bestir themselves and take up some more duties, but they’ve forgotten how to assert themselves,” he observes. “It’s a strange phase in the whole process.”

It’s even stranger hearing this from Amis’ lips. Of all the big topics he’s tackled, feminism may be the dodgiest. “I’m allowed one novel where I take that on,” he says, already spoiling for a fight.

The women in Amis’ life will no doubt keep him in check, though. “Living with women makes you prissy and girlish yourself – I’ve just noticed that,” he says. “You get that as you get older – more feminine. It’s made me more used to a kind of a feminine universe. There’s not so much dissociation of reason and sensibility. That’s the main difference between the sexes.”

Amis hasn’t totally refuted blokedom. His concept of his ideal reader is still a guy in his twenties. Still, it’s hard to detect male swagger in a man who says, “Feminism is only in its second trimester. I’m an ardent believer it will work out.” Amen, sister.
###

return to top