



My favourite Martin

In his memoir, *Experience*, Martin Amis finds gravitas amid the turbulence of living in the old devil's shadow

Tim Adams
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Observer

Experience

Martin Amis
 Jonathan Cape £18, pp400

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Twenty years ago, there was a competition in the *New Statesman* inviting readers to suggest the least credible title for a book. The winner was Martin Amis: *My Struggle*. And here, two decades later, is the volume in question (though Amis has favoured one of his trademark blunt monikers for it: after *Success and Money* comes *Experience*). It is an almost mythic tale of lost daughters and absent fathers, of betrayal and death and dentistry. Reading it, I found a line from an old Talking Heads song looping in my brain: 'And you may find yourself in a beautiful house with a beautiful wife, and you may say to yourself: how did I get here?'

How Amis got here is for the most part all too well-known; the lives of few writers can have been the subject of as much chat as this one. His memoir archly assumes a working knowledge of the basic intrigues of his household from the outset (if you don't know this much, you can hear him thinking, where have you been?). We are thus pitched in on first-name terms not only with Kingsley but also with Hilly (the mother) and Jane (Elizabeth Jane Howard, the stepmother), Isabel (Fonseca, the second wife) and the Hitch (Christopher Hitchens, the best mate).

And it begins, as do all Amis books, already weary with itself and the world, hardly bothered to be roused to self-revelation. If it was down to him, he suggests, he would probably have kept quiet about this stuff. Still, he has no choice but to tell his side of the story: life and the newspapers have ambushed him, you see, and the tale will out. Anyway, we live in the age of 'the memoir, the apologia, the CV, the *cri de coeur*' (and the list). Everyone has a confessional in them; luckily, he knows all the tricks, and he has the nudge-nudge italics and spiralling footnotes to prove it.

Amis's extended soliloquy has been ushered in, in recent weeks, by the publication of the late Kingsley's (the king, my father's) letters: prejudice and slander and inspired harumphing from beyond the grave. Amis has the ghost of his father beside him as he writes; but if he now casts himself as Hamlet, with death everywhere he looks ('There's just the usual trouble: age, and the only end of age'), he started out, as he says, as Osric, an attendant lord, tricked up in crushed green velvet strides and snakeskin boots, 'short-arseing' along the King's Road, failing to pick up girls.

His book is punctuated with missives from this flared and speedy youth, wonderfully earnest letters to his father from his time at an Oxbridge crammer, explaining how 'Kafka is a fucking fool' and how 'I consider Middlemarch to be Fucking good'. These letters stand for innocence in the Amis universe.

Experience really started to kick in when the author was in his mid-twenties. It began with the inexplicable disappearance of his cousin, Lucy Partington, with whose family the young Martin spent idyllic childish summers, and it continued with him fathering a daughter he was not permitted to know, Delilah Seale, after an affair with a married woman, Lamorna Heath, who subsequently committed suicide. Out of these twin absences, he intuits a retrospective psychology for himself and his fiction, and the psychology is one of loss, a submerged sense of estrangement, what he calls his 'missing'.

This sublimated denial found its abrupt catharsis nearly 20 years later when it was discovered that Lucy was one of the murdered victims of Fred West, her body exhumed in Cromwell Street, confirming all of the family's worst fears; and when Amis was finally introduced to his 19-year-old daughter in a hotel bar, confirming all his best hopes. These twin revelations followed hard upon his divorce from his first wife, Antonia Phillips, with whom he had two sons, and prefigured the illness and death of his father. Taken together, and with the saga of his rotten teeth - a keenly felt mortality - thrown in, these events form the basis of a fluidly structured meditation on love and loss. In some ways, this is a survivor's story; it is also a (belated) coming of age.

Amis has always been self-consciously preoccupied with the passing of his allotted span. When he experienced the onset of what he grandly calls his 'climacteric', he responded with his midlife crisis novel *The Information*, in which the narrator turns 40 'like a half-cooked steak, like a wired cop, like an old leaf, like milk'. Now, at 50, Amis seems to see himself as having come to terms with this insistent whisper of mortality to achieve something like wisdom; 'Youth, that time of constant imposture, when you have to pretend to understand everything while understanding nothing at all', has fled. His election to adulthood is confirmed by his surrogate father, his hero and mentor Saul Bellow. When Amis phones him to tell him that Kingsley has died, Bellow remarks: 'You've changed... more gravitas. Not the kid any more.' 'God, no,' says Amis. 'The kid?'

Amis needs all of that new-won gravitas to confront some of the painful matter here. He squares up to his family's horrific involvement in the West nightmare with measured anger and intelligence. And he addresses the 'bemused, subnormalised, stupefied' hurt caused by his leaving his wife with considered emotional candour. This gravitas is not Amis's natural tone, however, and there are moments when his inky cloak seems to suffocate him.

His response to Julian Barnes's 'fuck off' letter about their famous falling-out, for example, reveals him at his most priggish. With an almost biblical sense of his own importance, believing the hype, he tells of how: 'For the first time in these pages I sense a twist of rancour in me, and my hands, as I write, feel loath and cold. But I had to assert it, to my readers, and also to my friends. It was said that I turned away - and I don't do that. I won't be the one to turn away.'

Mostly, though, he tempers his pomposity with the limber and astute voice of Amis the kid. His book is a retaliation against our culture of gossip, the culture that dispatches journalists to Quito, Ecuador, to find his 'new' daughter on holiday; that inveigles its reporters into his dentist's surgery. You want to know this stuff? Amis seems to be saying, well here it is. Thus we see our hero literally shitting himself when confronted by a roadworker in whose wet concrete he has inadvertently stepped; we are given his classmates verdict on his manhood ('tiny, no hairs at all'), and the bathetic detail of his affairs and his paranoias and his embarrassments.

But as well as being an act of revelation, this is also a book about privacy and about propriety. He ends it with an appendix assault on his father's biographer, Eric Jacobs, who wrote intrusively about Kingsley's final days in the *Sunday Times*. (He replaced Jacobs as the editor of his father's letters after communing with Kingsley in a dream). Amis's own account of the last days of the defining presence in his life is the triumph here; he reclaims his father's memory with some tenderness while at the same time wickedly raking over the unique difficulties of living in the old devil's shadow.

'Man hands on misery to man,' Larkin wrote; Amis here proves that inheritance need not always be so gloomy. 'When he made you laugh,' he writes of Kingsley, 'he sometimes made you laugh - not continuously, but punctually - for the rest of your life.' In that respect at least, Amis is very much his father's son.