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MARTIN AMIS

Working-class monster

Relatives say Martin Amis' new memoir exploits his murdered cousin, and they're right -- but not in the way they think.

By Graham Joyce



"Experience," Amis devotes great attention to Lucy's fate. The book flap trumpets Martin's relationship with his father, Kingsley (a literary giant of the post-War period), and his kinship to Lucy equally. The author tells us he keeps two photos by his desk: one of Lucy and one of Delilah, his 20-year-old daughter, whom he had never met until 1995.

Now Lucy's family -- particularly Lucy's sister Marian Partington -- has gone on record saying that Amis barely knew Lucy. They claim that Amis has capitalized on his slender relationship with his cousin in order to peddle

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"Experience." Marian says, "The story of Lucy is being used to sell this book."

The Sunday Times of London recently took up Marian's cry. Being pilloried in the press is nothing new for Amis -- the British media has been air-guitaring a "greedy Martin" riff ever since he once had the temerity to hold out for a good publishing deal. He has even been accused of making money out of Auschwitz with his Holocaust novel, "Time's Arrow." But the complaint this time is that the tragedy of Lucy's killing has been annexed into Amisworld, and the family is resisting his version of the truth.

Marian has contacted Amis and his publisher to complain about inaccuracies and "betrayals," but what seems to have upset her most is the sense in which Lucy's life has been made over by a famous author's inauthentic account. This work, she claims, is presented as straightforward autobiography when fictional speculation often usurps the facts of the case.

Amis is dismayed. Of Marian he says that he is "distressed that she's distressed. But I'm writing about my life and Lucy is a part of my life." But there's the rub: How much was Lucy a part of Martin Amis' life?

Not much at all, according to Marian, and Amis admits to meeting Lucy on only a few occasions before her disappearance in 1973 (when Amis was 24). Yet so strongly does Lucy feature in "Experience" -- in tender portraits of the two suggestive of endless country-garden English summers as childhood friends -- that it's shocking to hear claims that Amis knew the family only remotely.

Let it be said: Martin Amis has never been served well by the critics and the literary establishment in Britain. As for the tabloids, they lick their lips and their hatchets when this stuff goes down. The pyrotechnic brilliance of his style is envied and his wintry reserve is resented. But one thing generally agreed upon even by admirers is that his work is a compassion-free zone. The fashionable cynicism and frigid irony of the '80s, during which he made his mark, are out of vogue now. He knows this.

One reads "Experience" with mounting excitement because Amis seems at last to have discovered this missing element. The memoir contains some of his best writing to date --



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middle-aged professional goe from unenlightened zero to sensitive superhero in 30 days or less. By Heather Havrilesky

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except for this vexed subject of Lucy, where there is a dose of too much lyricism, a splash of too much manufactured sentiment.

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