The Martin Amis gossip will go away.
His work won't
The mischief he gets up to on the page is the really fascinating thing about him

At Jonathan Cape's launch party for Martin Amis's autobiography Experience (he'd had some 50 years' worth of it then -- everything has come early for Martin) his editor prophesied that this was "a book which would be read in 200 years time". Just like Ben Jonson said of Shakespeare.

Brave words, even with a bellyful of dry sherry. Will Amis Jr "last"? Time, as Orwell said, is the only critic whose opinion matters. I (sherrylessly) prophesy that a couple of books of Amis's will be in the electronic Oxford Companion in 2209, and -- less palpably -- his voice, that unmistakable "Amis" -- will have left a lasting, tonal, impression on British fiction.

One other thing can be prophesied with even greater confidence: our distant descendants will not give a toss about who shaggiy young Martin shagged in the 1980s -- much as it seems to preoccupy us nowadays, as the man himself enters the Viagara years.

Amis is our grand master of "I narration", Henry James, fiction's great legislator, distrusted these fictional ego displays. It was, he believed, too primitive: like the immature child's "me, me, me". Amis's fiction suggests the opposite. In the right hands me-ism can be very subtle, and no hands are more right than Amis's.

What are the greatest "I" works in our literature? My list would include: Robinson Crusoe, Tristram Shandy, Jane Eyre, Great Expectations, Midnight's Children, Remains of the Day and -- putting my own money where John Sell's mouth is -- Money.

No one, as far as I know, has ever satisfactorily explained the magic by which small black marks on a white surface become a "world". Does one "see" a novel? Some (Henry James's for example) one certainly does. But Amis's novels one hears. Take the opening sentence of his first published work, The Rachel Papers:
My name is Charles Highway, though you wouldn't think it to look at me.

One can't but hear that cocky-ruelful adolescent voice. More importantly, the reader's ears prick up. One is not just hearing, but listening. You could do a little anthology of Amis's hook-in-jaw opening lines. My personal favourite is that from his least admired novel, The Information:

Cities at night, I feel, contain men who cry in their sleep and then say Nothing.

It's Edward Hopper's Nighthawks in 16 words. It looks easy, until you try it yourself.

Sometimes the Amisian opening doesn't come off. That in his trickiest novel, Time's Arrow (the only one of his works to be shortlisted for the Booker – what a national disgrace that is) is itself rather too tricky for my taste:

I moved forward, out of my blackest sleep, to find myself surrounded by doctors ... American doctors.

The joke is that the narrative is actually moving backwards. By the time readers have worked out that counter-intuitive fact they're all over the place.

I'm in two minds about the opening to Amis's last published novel, House of Meetings, partly because the author seems to be in two minds himself.

My little brother came to camp in 1948 (I was already there), at the height of the war between the brutes and the bitches ....

Now that wouldn't be a bad opening sentence. But then he decides it would be a bad opening sentence: and sets off on an entirely different tack.

"Where does Martin Amis's narrative voice come from?" asks Neil Powell in Amis and Son. Not, he thinks, from dad, but – all too obviously – Holden Caulfield. "If you really want to know" hangs, like a career motto, over all Amis's fiction.

I can't wait for the hook to go through my jaw with the opening sentence of The Pregnant Widow – advertised for next September. As for what it tells us about who he slept with – I really don't want to know.
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