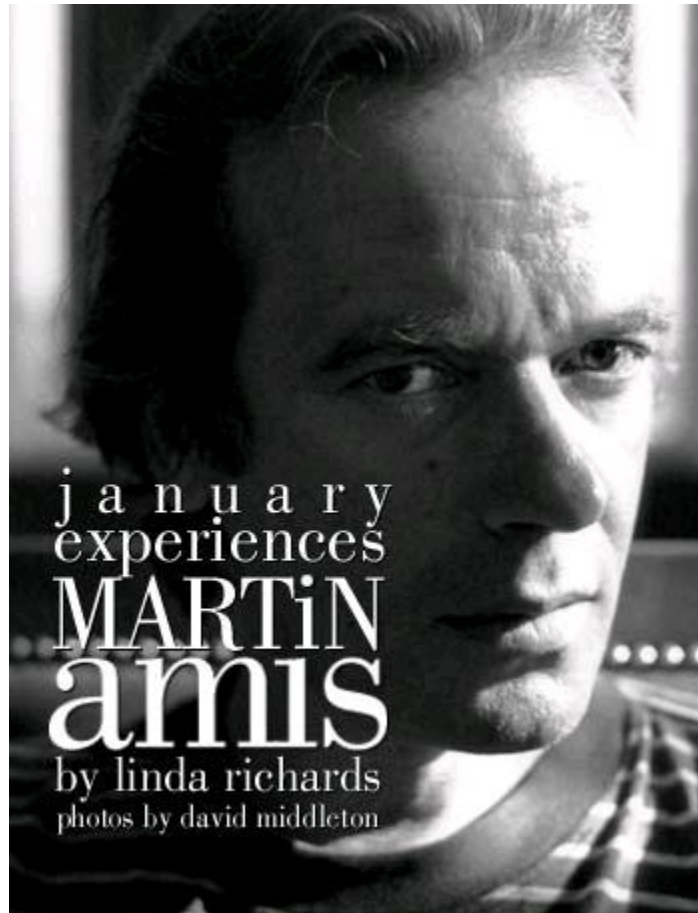


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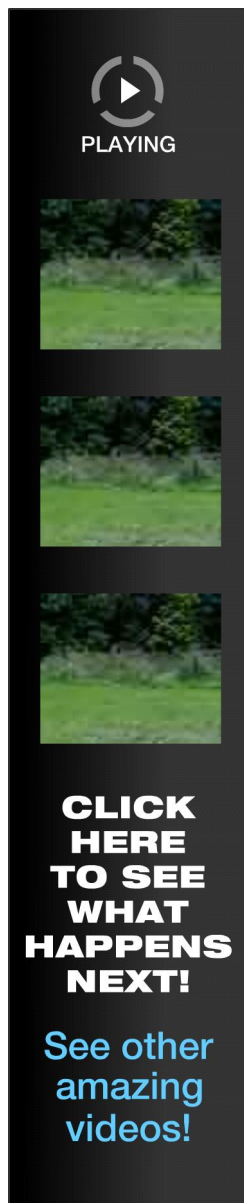
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Johns Hopkins University - MD & DC School of Arts & Sciences - Nights



Martin Amis is tired. Near the end of a 30 city tour promoting his new book, the memoir *Experience*, Amis exudes and embodies exhaustion. A diminutive man with an appearance that is somehow surprisingly frail in a writer of this stature (as though a writer should somehow be as large as his reputation. Were that the case, Amis would be as big and imposing as a country manor). In fact, his appearance is surprising in all ways. There is more to his mien of aging rock musician than world-class author.



The rock star analogy may have been enhanced by the challenges of not only getting this interview, but of getting to keep it. To arrange the interview, numerous telephone calls and e-mails to the literary capitals in several countries were necessary. To keep it, the *January* crew arrived for our 4:45 interview to be met with the smallest view of bedlam. The television interview that preceded us had gone way over time, resulting in a phalanx of journalists and photographers lining the hotel corridor outside the special smoking suite where Amis was trapped with the TV people. The TV cameras were still being packed up when Amis was ushered down the hall to a photo shoot and then back to the suite to talk with me. A talk that would, of course, end in our own photo session which would lead to a short rest period before he was trundled off to meet a sellout and standing room only crowd at a local literary hangout to give a reading. In *Experience*, Amis writes, "You arrive in each city and present yourself to its media; after that, in the evening, a mediated individual, you appear at the bookshop and perform." He's been down this road before.

Taking a seat across from me and graciously acknowledging the tape recorder and permitting its use, Amis' collecting himself was a visible thing. This, as well, is not surprising. Now 50, Amis has been a novelist since the publication of [The Rachel Papers](#) when he was just 24. *Experience* is his 15th book. And, if an adult lifetime of similar roads weren't enough, Amis is the son of the noted British author Kingsley Amis, the larger-than-life writer who provided much of the impetus for *Experience*.

A journalist recently described Martin Amis as the most celebrated and vilified novelist of our time. The celebration has come through the wide acceptance, but not always understanding, of his work and a background and talent that casts him easily as one of the princes of the British intelligentsia. The vilification has been largely through his public falling out with his ex-friend, the novelist Julian Barnes over the firing of Amis' former agent Pat Kavanagh -- who was also Barnes' wife -- and replacing her with hot shot agent Andrew "The Jackal" Wylie who then got him a huge advance for [The Information](#). Around the same time, he replaced Antonia Philips, his wife of 11 years, with

Books by Martin Amis:

Fiction

- *The Rachel Papers*
- *Dead Babies*
- *Success*
- *Other People*
- *Money*
- *Einstein's Monsters*
- *London Fields*
- *Time's Arrow*
- *The Information*
- *Night Train*

- *Heavy Water*

Non-Fiction

- *Invasion of the Space Invaders*
- *The Moronic Inferno*
- *Visiting Mrs Nabokov*



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Isabel Fonseca, whom he has since married and with whom he lives in London.

The British press had a party with both items and matters were not helped by what Amis thinks of as his less-than-sterling handling of the media. "I think that part of the trouble with the press has always been that I've never taken them seriously and don't give a bugger what they say on one level," Amis says now. "I certainly haven't done a good job of PR, have I?"

Another public point of contention happened when Kingsley Amis died in 1995 and Martin replaced his father's appointed biographer, Eric Jacobs, with someone he likely thought eminently better qualified for the job: himself. It was a move that Amis explains in *Experience* but that, at the time, was largely seen as highhandedness by an author completely filled with his own self-importance.

With all of this bad press, there is only one thing that has kept Martin Amis out of the public doghouse: his work. As *Experience* reveals, Martin Amis is a man who truly never considered a career or life that didn't involve writing. It is partly this passion that displays itself so prominently in books like his much-acclaimed novel *Money* or the quirky-but-compelling *London Fields*. John Updike described Amis' most recent novel, *Night Train* as having a "post-human" quality and while that may or may not be the case, when the likes of Updike think such a thing is noteworthy, the rest of us pay attention, as well.

One-on-one, Martin Amis is charming, soft spoken and willing to talk: the perfect professional. And more. As the chat progresses and we touch on things near to his heart, the world-weary -- and interview-weary -- veneer slips away. Little by little it is replaced with the passion he seems to always have for his work.

I've enjoyed *Experience*. No. That's not right. I was humbled by the book.

Well, thank you.

The transitions are amazing. Echoing precisely the way we think, more than a standard



"Then I just thought: Well, let's do the memoir now. Let's do Kingsley now. It didn't feel that it was a book about him. And then almost it once it was about him and me. Then, before I knew it, all sorts of other things and other feelings were

chronological narrative would have.

Yeah. More than a succession of diaries. I once reviewed Isaac Asimov's [biography]. Two enormous volumes. They made the average show biz memoirs look like *Speak, Memory* [Nabokov's memoir]. It was just clunking day after day after day. I'm sure I had that in the back of my mind when I started: it wasn't even my decision. It never occurred to me to sit down and write: I was born on 25 August 1949 and so on. The linear approach. So I had some sort of novelistic freedom. Because if you don't do it chronologically you can leave stuff out without saying why and make your own emphasis. It's kind of like quoting, in my opinion. Because you only quote the bits you remember. That's why you remember them, because they were good.

Memorable.

Memorable. Yes. [Laughs] That's right.

Was it difficult writing a memoir?

It's a great surprise to some, because people think that writing is a cerebral business but, in fact, your whole body is involved. That really came home to me when I was writing *Experience*. I thought I had suddenly succumbed to some ravage of age, because while I was writing the book my sleep patterns changed completely. I suddenly needed about 14 hours of sleep a night. I was like one of my teenaged sons on a weekend, staggering out of bed at four o'clock in the afternoon and wanting more sleep and finding that dozing state incredibly delicious. So, I thought: I'm really slowing down, soon I'll be up for a couple of hours a day and then be going back to bed again. But the minute I stopped writing the memoir, I went back to how I was before. My whole metabolism switched. Because it was front brain emotion rather than the novel which is much more subliminal. You're using a different part of the brain.

With the novel you're creating. With the memoir you're sort of dredging.

Yeah. And you're also writing directly about the things you really care about. I suppose it partly was also a cognitive stretch of grieving for the father. But

presenting themselves. It certainly got longer than I thought it was going to be. And it came fast. It came at more than twice the rate of a novel. A novel that length would have taken me four years. That took 18 months. Because I'd done half the work by living it."

it wasn't just that.

Why a memoir? Why now?

For the reasons given in the first chapter, really. It was all public already, so I didn't feel I was revealing anything. I was just trying to get rid of the stuff that had coagulated around me and my family. It wasn't to get your own back, as a few journalists have suggested. What's in the papers forms a kind of film in people's minds. They don't read it very carefully, they just take away a sort of gist. And I didn't like the gist and I knew it wasn't a fine-tuned thing. Since it's been in the papers that I might one day be moving to America, it's almost the first question people ask me: So you're living in America? Or: You're just back from America? They think I'm in America because: Martin Amis is in America. And I thought: God, are they thinking that about everything? I mean, my readers. So that was a very minor reason for doing it. It certainly wasn't a reply to journalists.

No. That wasn't the sense I got.

Some journalists think it is and some are angry that it isn't because it doesn't accord them centrality. I think that part of the trouble with the press has always been that I've never taken them seriously and don't give a bugger what they say on one level, because as a child I saw that my father was getting a bit of that and it seemed to be part of the job. He didn't worry about it, or not visibly to me. So I have perhaps been a bit brisk with journalists and I certainly haven't done a good job of PR, have I? [Laughs]

And thus, you've been referred to as: perhaps the most celebrated and vilified novelist in the English language. That's quite an honor, really.

It is, really. And the celebrated bit is all right. But then, death of father and then this weird drama around my daughter and my cousin which made me a bit wary of the idea of going on with fiction, although I had a novel on the go. Which, again, has this theme of threatened child; threatened daughter. But I'd always known I could write the book. So I wrote a few short stories and as I was starting to write I was feeling not very urgent about work. That may be just short stories, which are always the biggest joy to

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write because you write them and they're gone. They're out.

Instant gratification and not the slog of a longer work?

Right. Not the great slog of a long novel.

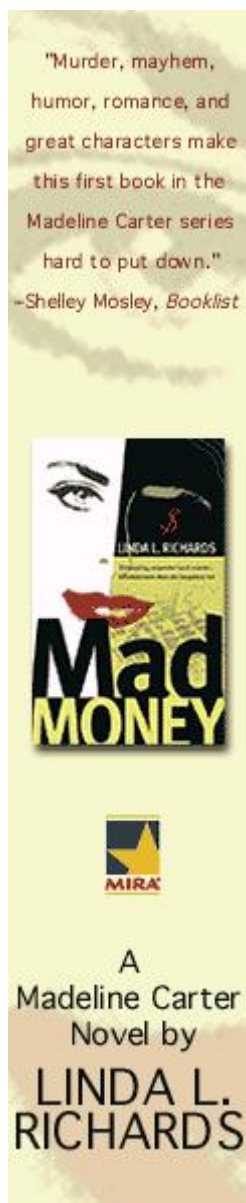
Yet many writers say that they find short stories to be more difficult, because you have to compress your thoughts more economically.

You have to, but I think that's a slight myth, actually. I think that a lot of the difficulty is closely related to size. As in all things, the amount of stuff you have to keep in your head is the crucial thing in all life. The politician who can remember 5000 people's names and what they do is going to do better than the one who can remember 1000. You know, the business man who has got 58 little bits of compound deceit going at the same time is going to do very well. And the one who can only do six, you know.

So it works both ways.

Yeah. In crime and in everything. You'll really stretch when you're finishing a long novel because you have to keep the 500 things in your head. The best short stories are the ones that not a word is wasted and it's the perfect length for the perfect cargo. The perfect *weight* for the perfect cargo. But they *are* easy. You don't have this mass of stuff to keep in your head.

Then I just thought: Well, let's do the memoir now. Let's do Kingsley now. It didn't feel that it was a book about him. And then almost at once it *was* about him and me. Then, before I knew it, all sorts of other things and other feelings were presenting themselves. It certainly got longer than I thought it was going to be. And it came fast. It came at more than twice the rate of a novel. A novel that length would have taken me four years. That [*Experience*] took 18 months. Because I'd done half the work by living it. [Laughs] And I didn't have to make anything up. I couldn't hope to pattern it like you pattern a novel. I patterned it a bit. Natural symmetries just presented themselves and I followed the novelist's instinct, stringing things together by theme rather than by chronology. But it came fast. And although I'd have these little crying



jags, it was actually enjoyable to write on the whole. I didn't get stuck.

In an interview you gave prior to writing *Experience*, you said you were looking forward to writing the memoir as you expected it would clear the path.

Clear the path for what?

That's what I wanted to know.

For further fiction. It does feel as though the house has been sort of spring cleaned. But it's also created an appetite for the form. The next thing I'm writing before I properly get down to my novel [is something I felt an] urge to write, so I started it. I went through the usual thing of thinking: Well, I'm under contract at *Talk* magazine, so would they be interested in it and can I pin it on anything? There was some doubt about whether they would be interested and I thought: Well, I'm going to write it anyway. Because I really had the urge to write it. And it's quite odd.

It's loosely a political memoir. My father, you know, used to be a Communist and then became rather annoyingly right-wing and very anti-Communist. One his great friends was Robert Conquest. He's a poet and historian. Still alive. Very, very good shape. And he's outlived my father. He's become my friend now, which is nice continuity. But he was described in the plenum of the Central Committee in Moscow in the late 80s as: Anti-Sovietchik Number One. [Laughs] And he's not a modest man, Bob. And he's quite proud of that. But he wrote the pioneering truth-telling stuff about what the Soviet Union was like at a time when people like Edmund Wilson were still completely star struck. Not by Stalin, but by Lenin still and giving the Soviet Union the benefit of the doubt. You know, you remember, in those days the world was very left, after the War. It continued for decades.

The other biographical link is that in the old days at *The New Statesman* -- which is still there but is sort of obsolescent now -- my two great friends there were -- and are -- Christopher Hitchens and James Fenton, the poet. Both of whom were proselytizing Trotsky at the time and would spend a Saturday morning selling

Socialist Worker on the insalubrious London high streets and would come in and try the old proselytizing on you. Reminding one of the old joke: What's the difference between a Communist car and a Communist proselytizer? And the answer is: You can close the door on a Communist proselytizer. [Laughs] It was like that at Oxford, too. You'd be closing the door on these steely guys who were trying to get you. And the argument then was whether the Soviet Union was better than, not Nazi Germany, but better than America. So we've come a long way.

Then I got incredibly fascinated by Bolshevism. It was kind of a millennial event for me because I spent millennium night at the Millennium Dome with the Queen and Tony Blair and others and an amazing selection of Joe Shmoes and backpack artists. I was incredibly happy to see them, but it was a weird occasion. The whole evening was like an eight-hour stopover in a second rate German airport. [Laughs] It was a dog. A real dog. I was expecting to feel something. And I didn't. You were already worrying about how you could get home and then it just passed. It was such an anticlimax. But then over that New Year I was reading Conquest's latest book, *Reflections on a Ragged Century*, which is about Nazism as well as Communism and I suddenly thought: Well, all right. The first item of business in this century is to get the Russian experience more up towards the Holocaust and open a debate -- sort of stimulate a debate -- about this.

Wow.

Yeah. But it's a great lacuna I think. So little taint is attached. No one has ever been tried for what happened there and many more deaths and there's no taint attached to it.

In the way of...?

Well, the amazing example is, [a Russian politician] says that he's going to make coins with Stalin's face on them, and he has tea with the Queen. And then [Joerg] Haider in Austria says that one employment policy of Hitler's wasn't too bad and Europe spits him out like a rotten oyster. That's the difference. There are huge imbalances in the consciousness of the West. So I got going on this and I'm about half way

through. It'll be about 70 pages or something. A pamphlet; it'll be a pamphlet. Then the novel. But it's been fascinating, to get really interested in a historical period.

It'll be sort of a long essay?

Well, it's a site memoir. Some memories came back of funny things. Also, another great theme of it is that we joke about the Russian experience. We laugh about it. And I don't know any Holocaust jokes, do you?

No.

And what does that say? And what does it mean? And what is all this about the earthly paradise, which -- if you think about it for 10 minutes or 10 seconds -- is a horrible notion. An inhuman, alien notion. Everyone being happy all the time. What could be creepier than that?

[Laughs]

It's appalling. And for this 30 million died. They deserve more reverence than they got. And that's really the basis of it all.

Is this something you're working on now?

Yeah. And it brings up this question of why we laugh at certain things and that's part of the difficulty here. I'm going to be quite personal about some of it. I'm guilty of this too. I think that's a funny joke about closing the door on a Communist car and there are other jokes that I think are pretty funny in the same area.

My baby daughter just turned one over the last weekend. Her nickname in my house is Butyrki. [Pronounced bah-turk-ee] B-U-T-Y-R-K-I. And this is because -- she doesn't do it so much now, but -- when she used to have screaming jags it wasn't as if she was crying because she had colic or anything. It was as if you were torturing her in the most ingenious way possible. And one day I said: Her screaming wouldn't disgrace the deepest cells of the Butyrki Prison in Moscow in 1937. And she's called Butyrki and her three-year-old sister says: Where's Butyrki? And she's called the Butyrkster and lots of variations

on it. I thought: You wouldn't make an equivalent joke about a concentration camp. I mean, Butyrki is not an extermination camp but, they used to -- I don't think it was the Butyrki, but equivalent scenes -- they'd stack 120 people in a cell meant for two.... Unbelievable what they did. People would die at the rate of 10 a day and they'd still be upright. Can you imagine the nightmare of that? Anyway, Butyrki's real name is Clio -- the muse of history -- so I'm going to dedicate it to her, this little thing. I shouldn't *really* call her Butyrki. [Laughs]

[Laughs] It's going to stick, you know.

It's going to stick. When she's 18, we'll be calling her Butyrki. In [Eugenia] Ginzburg's memoirs, *Into the Whirlwind*, there's a chapter called "Butyrki Nights." And we've had many Butyrki nights.

Are you researching that now?

Yeah. I'm researching it and writing it.

Do you work in longhand or on the computer? Typewriter?

There's been a sinister move away from longhand and straight on to the computer. I thought I'd never do that. I certainly won't do it with fiction. I found I composed a lot of [*Experience*] straight onto it.

Hence the 18 months. It makes rewriting easier.

Yeah. It does. It's very nice to be able to correct.

Just pretend it's not a computer. It's a special writing machine. You have to type a lot less.

Well, it cuts out a stage. And what I feared would happen is that, as a friend warned me, the trouble is that since you can always go back and fix it, you never actually finish a sentence with complete justice and finality because it's so fluid, you can go back. But I'm not really finding that. I don't think that's true. I work at the sentence until it's right and when you get through you realize later -- as you often do anyway on a typewriter -- that it's not quite right. Then it's just wonderfully smooth to fix. I used to do an awful lot of retyping as well. You know: I think this page won't do, there are eight things wrong with it. And I'd

retype those pages. It saves typing.

Because now you don't have to do that. It's sort of tempting.

It *is* tempting. I won't do it for the novel, though, because it would feel wrong. There is something sensual about writing fiction [in longhand] that has to do with a slightly painterly feel -- I mean, you *can* do this with a computer -- but it's that you can see your crossings out and with a computer you've erased them. When you cross it out, that word is still there, and maybe that word was the right one. I do a lot of arrows and I like to write on the left-hand side of the page [the] things I've got to get into the scene, so longhand seems right for fiction. But for these essays and memoiristic things it's fine. That gives you an impetus too. You can feel you've got momentum. But I started the novel before I started that.

I had wondered about the footnotes in *Experience*. I really enjoyed them. Anyone who read the book and didn't read the footnotes would have missed out on a lot. But I wondered if you added them late in the process or as you wrote.

No, that was another instant decision that I thought: Yeah, let's have footnotes; it'll make it fun to write. Long brackets are very cumbersome, I find.

Intrusive.

Intrusive, yes. It would have been horrible if I'd put the footnotes in brackets. It means that this isn't quite of primary interest; this is of secondary interest. But...

By the way...

By the way, I do want to follow this thought through. Or call up another memory that doesn't actually belong in the real text. It gives you a sort of grading system. Also it provides a bit of relief, I find, from the main text. There are some scenes where you're doing quite a heavy bit and the footnote -- while not necessarily jokey -- is somehow a relief. Then when you come back to the main text, it feels effective looking back on it, having had this cleansing footnote. So it was a way of letting off a bit of steam. Letting the temperature drop for an instant and then getting back to it.

The classic example is the row you had with Salman Rushdie. And then, the footnote: you're playing video trivia with a friend the next day and a question pops on the screen that seems intended for you: Who wrote this book? A. Your father. B. Salman Rushdie or C. Someone else who I can't remember.

William Golding.

Right. And your father had written the book. I loved that. As though the question were intended for you and gave you a segue to tell your friend about the row with Rushdie. The footnote gave you the perfect place to tell this story. The classic aside.

Yeah. And you couldn't have put that in brackets. And it's nice to have that, really. That pairing off of some other thought.

Have you ever reread [your first novel] *The Rachel Papers*?

I read it I think last in about 1975.

So you've got that to look forward to.

Hardly. [Laughs] Hardly an unqualified pleasure that would be. Though I had to look something up in it for the Russian piece. I was hoping I'd find it quickly so I wouldn't have to read too much. And I did find it *reasonably* quickly.

It has its moments, I suppose. I less and less reread myself. Maybe every couple of years sit up with a joint and reread the last book, but one. Kingsley did that. He'd read his old stuff again. I should have asked him more about why he did that. [He pauses thoughtfully] I said: What are they like? And I think he liked some better than others and I think he found some of the early stuff amazingly unfocused. And actually, looking back on them, I'm not sure mine aren't the same. But he was learning his trade. There are bits that seemed rather lackadaisical. Not locked in enough with the whole book.

Be he once said to me -- we were talking about this oddity of being father and son writers -- he said: It's

something, the two of us (which is the highest compliment he ever paid me, really) both of us have some nerve. From his mouth. | *June 2000*

[Linda L. Richards](#) is the editor of *January Magazine* and the author of the Madeline Carter novels: *[Mad Money](#)*, *[The Next Ex](#)* and, coming September 2006, *Calculated Loss*, all published by MIRA Books.

