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The voice of experience

**At 57, Martin Amis's days as the enfant terrible of British fiction are long gone, yet he still has the unerring ability to shock. Ginny Dougary hears his frank views about love, terror, growing old and the tyranny of daughters**

Martin Amis is jumpy. He sees the secret police everywhere. His eyes dart around, starting at shadows, and his concentration is shot. For a while he's fine and we're back to the effortless flow of elegant sentences; the lazy, patrician draw – and then, arrrrgh, back comes the paranoid facial freeze, the whole body tensing and doubling over as he scrabbles to conceal what he fears his tormentors will find. So this, you might think – possibly smugly, particularly if you're one of those Schadenfreude-meisters who revels in the misfortunes of "little" Martin Amis (as he was dubbed, years ago, and with no great affection, by the "towering" Gore Vidal) – this is what comes of dropping out of metropolitan life for two and a half years to live in a house that has been built for you in the wilds of Uruguay.

"It is pathetic," he agrees. "But they're just horrible to me. They're proper little fascists about it and they know they can be really authoritarian and still have right on their side." The Amis litany of American wives, the American über-agent, the American novel, the American teeth; all of this we could live with. But the latest development is distinctly more worrying. For in America, as we all know, lighting up a cigarette is an incendiary offence and Amis, who has always reliably smoked for England, seems to be seriously thinking of giving it up. "The little fascists", you see, are the nicotine-Nazis – his small daughters, Fernanda and Clio, nine and six – and it is fascinating to see how much power they wield over their father. They must be the real reason (rather than any new Stateside enthrallment) why he's happier these days to be photographed, as he was in another newspaper, looking a bit of a wally – or "ponce", as he puts it – pert bum in the air, performing his Pilates leg extensions, than with the sagging decadence of a half-drained glass of wine and a fag.

Ah well, he's hardly the first parent to be tyrannised by the moral loftiness of his offspring. (I told him that my younger son had recently asked me whether I was, possibly, an "antisocial" rather than "social smoker", and felt a complicated flush of maternal pride when Amis said, "That's very good. That's rather penetrating.") Neither is he the first second-time round father to be struck by the new-found wonderment of a child growing up. But struck, quite palpably, he is: "It's a great pleasure to watch a growing thing, and it's more and more of a pleasure to watch my daughters. It was great to watch my boys grow [Louis and Jacob, from his first marriage to the academic Antonia Phillips; now both reading ancient history at Oxford and Bristol], but I was younger then and it didn't strike

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me as so significant.

"Now the idea of something growing... that's why people take up gardening when they're old. They want to be around growing things. I had a tiny experience of that in Uruguay where it was for a while my duty to water the garden, and there was that elderly pleasure in it... just when you play the water on a plant, how its colour gets richer and you kid yourself they're grateful for it. No, I didn't talk to them, but it is satisfying. It's really because you're shrinking and dying in the long term that it's very nice to see something that's coming up."

At 57 (incredibly! Did the père have to go, before the fils was finally uncoupled from his enduring epithet – despite that very public mid-life crisis – as an enfant terrible?), Amis has had to contend with the usual roll-call of losses, as well as the less usual – the death of his father, Kingsley, who was most definitely The King to him; followed not long after by Sally, his sister – the baby of the family – struck down by "a mysterious failure cascade" (a phrase, the closing down of organ after organ, I find attached to one of the characters in his new book) and dead within the week; Rob, his oldest friend, who is vividly present in Experience, then dying equally suddenly of cancer at the age of 51; Saul Bellow, the father-figure to whom he was umbilically attached; the ghastly late discovery, at such a long remove from the night of her disappearance, that his cousin Lucy Partington had been one of serial-killer Fred West's victims.

It is hard to move on from that last name on the list without pausing; the empathy with her family's bereavement echoing every family's worst fear. It makes you wonder whether there wasn't something in Amis's unconscious that had already divined what the writer didn't dare to contemplate; the very idea of him inventing a "murderee" (London Fields's Nicola Six); his male characters who casually boast about beating and raping and subjugating women. Writing fiction can be an unpremeditated exorcism of events that are too profoundly haunting for the surface gaze of rational examination; those thoughts that lie too deep for tears – as in the knowledge, albeit a different order of pain, that you have fathered a daughter you cannot acknowledge (as Amis did, although father and grown-up daughter, Delilah, are now, happily, embraced in each other's lives). He found it strangely consoling when another novelist, Maureen Freely – in the wake of the news, as it inevitably became – detected the number of "lost or wandering daughters and putative or fugitive fathers" who appeared in his books. It meant, he later wrote, that Delilah had been with him in spirit far more than he knew.

"You find that some things have not been written about by you and gone down to the subconscious level," Amis says, "and they belong to fiction. It's a silent anxiety... an anxiety that you don't articulate. That's where your fiction comes from. Sometimes it's stuff that you don't even know is bothering you. You think life is going on and nothing much is happening but there is... Saul Bellow has a nice sentence for it... 'The silent work of uneventful days', when great changes are happening inside you but it just seems like ordinary life."

The central subject of his fiction, he says, has been masculinity – but as ageing and its accompanying layers of loss make their imprint on him, it seems likely that his novels will come to reflect those themes in a way that might eclipse his other preoccupations. Or, perhaps, more pertinently, that he might be freed up to engage in a more direct way with the human condition. Amis has never been one of those writers who only lives in his books. We know about his enthusiasms and engagements in the business of living: the daily tennis game, the blokey world of snooker and darts; the long-lasting male friendships (with the writer and polemicist, Christopher "The Hitch" Hitchens, and the novelist Julian Barnes; their glacial rift over the agent defection finally shows signs of thawing); the pageant of glamorously

well-connected girlfriends; the importance of family. And yet, as with most serious novelists near the top of their game, surely for him what really matters, in the final reckoning, is the work? But while this may once have been true, Amis says it is no longer the case.

"I'll tell you why. It has become clearer and clearer to me that when you get into the last lap of your life, you don't really think about your work at all. What you think about is (a) how it went with the women in your life and (b) your children, and work comes very much third. There's even a hint of it in there [pointing to his new book, *House of Meetings*] when the main character says that men always die in torment because they're not congratulating themselves on their achievements in the world; they're reproaching themselves for the bad things they did." When I interviewed Kingsley, a year before his death in 1995, he was beset with those torments at dawn. He said that he still felt guilty – even more, as the years stacked up – about the break-up of his first marriage, when he left Hilly for the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard, and the effect it might have had on his children. At the time, his son was in the throes of separating from his first wife for his new love, Isabel Fonseca, whom he went on to marry – and perhaps there was an element of his feeling that it was his own example that had somehow led to this. "There's no point in agonising about it," he said, "but that doesn't stop you agonising. As you get older, you spend more time on your own, therefore you think more about your past. But there's nothing you can do."

Martin, when I phoned him then, said that he'd forgiven Kingsley long ago, and made a point of adding that he didn't know anyone who was as close to their father as he was to his. When I said that Kingsley did not appear to have forgiven himself, he said: "As you get older, you have fewer defences against those big regrets in your life, and sources of guilt. My father says that they are there all the time; you have to live with them."

Saul Bellow, too, was filled with anxiety in his final days. "You would think Saul would be in a stupor of self-satisfaction because his work was so celebrated. He didn't say it till quite close to the end when a friend came in, who was almost the same age, and asked, 'Well, what have you got to say for yourself, Bellow?' And Saul, from his hospital bed in his own house, said, 'I've been thinking. Now which is it? Is it: there goes a man or there goes a jerk?' And his friend, Karl, said, 'There goes a man.' And Saul said, 'OK. I'll take your word for it.'

"So that's what you're thinking. He had five marriages – and four children – and the last was his longest and his best. But there had been a lot of wounds and blows given and received in four divorces. It's there [he refers again to the book; its story takes the form of a letter as a manuscript from the Russian narrator to his American stepdaughter], when he says to Venus that there's a difference between men and women in the last round. Men break the habit of a lifetime and start blaming themselves; women break the habit of a lifetime and stop blaming themselves. Good news for women."

We're talking in the garden of the Fonseca family's summer residence in the Hamptons. A deer and a stag tilt through the high grass in the distance. It's really a most un-Amis-like setting, despite the tennis court at the approach of the drive. I had been told that the house was in a compound in a nature reserve, but I hadn't quite clocked that this would be a private compound, much like the Kennedy set-up, with various members of the Fonseca clan ensconced in their own expansive New England-style homes, a discreet remove from one another, divided by curving hedges and banks of blowsy white hydrangeas.

When Isabel Fonseca's name first appeared in the popular press, she was described as an American heiress, daughter of a Uruguayan sculptor and a Jewish (why the need for that prefix, one wonders?) American socialite, and I remember thinking that

didn't sound right. Surely what was most notable about La Fonseca at that time was that she had recently written a tremendous and highly praised book of her own, *Bury Me Standing*, about the gypsies of East Central Europe, for which she had devoted four years of her life, interviewing and travelling with gypsies in order to tell their story.

Well, having visited the family estate, I can see that "heiress" is probably accurate – along with "stunning beauty", and all the other gallant nods to her good looks. Still, writers are competitive, particularly couples – however much they demur – and I caught a faint whiff of it in Fonseca. This struck me at the end of the interview with Amis – when his missus had obligingly posed, despite her understandable resistance, in a sort of disgraced-Tory "happy family" shot. (The "I have resigned to spend more time with..." quips were fast and flowing.)

Afterwards, when we were chatting before she kindly drove us to the bus-stop, Isabel told me that she was working on her first novel, and said, "So you can interview me when it's published" and then, "No, of course, I'm only joking" and, after another pause, "If it gets published." And I thought however gilded your life must appear to others – and Mr and Mrs Amis appear to be very happy indeed; they still flirt with each other, for instance – it must sometimes sap your confidence to have your status as a writer relegated to "wife of".

In his study of masculinity, Amis has always maintained that one of the characteristics that defines men is their intense competitiveness. Several of his novels – *London Fields*, *The Information* – zone in on consuming rivalries between different male novelists. Looking through the large Amis file of cuttings, you notice – particularly back in the Eighties, when *Money* was widely considered to be the novel to speak for that decade – that it wasn't chick-hacks or geezer-birds who were dispatched to interview its author, but literary-minded young men, often novelists themselves. And it was to America – and the Big Beasts of literature – that Amis would turn, in the Eighties, for his masterful interviews with the likes of Mailer and Updike and Bellow.

I wonder whether Amis now feels that he is in their league? "Oh, no. No," he says. You have said, in the past, that you have to feel that you're the best at what you do, in order to do it at all. "You've got to think you're the best of your lot [by which, I take it, he means his generation of British novelists]. But it's not a wannabe thing. I think it's much exaggerated, this pecking-order stuff with novelists – particularly since Salman Rushdie. He cut through a lot of that just because it was suddenly life and death, and these little jealousies looked very petty after 1989. Also, more generally, you're not trying to write someone else's novels. And they're not trying to write yours. We're all trying to write the novel that Trollope called *The Way We Live Now* – but we're all coming at it from a thousand different directions." And then, as an afterthought: "Clearly there is a lot of ego stuff... and there must be something in it because it's such a massively established idea that novelists are... Look, you can be competitive about sales and prizes and stuff like that, but you really can't be in competition with anyone to write your next novel."

So you're not at all bothered by not getting the Booker? (The King was shortlisted three times and eventually won it in 1986, for *The Old Devils*; The Prince has been shortlisted only once for his Holocaust backwards novel, *Time's Arrow*, in 1991; among his friends and contemporaries, Barnes, Swift, McEwan, Okri and Rushdie have all been Bookered.) "No, I'm completely reconciled to the fact that my books do not unite people, and they blatantly don't unite committees. If they did, I would be a different writer. Obviously, winning the Booker simplifies things. But what's most important is feeling that you have a core of readers. And that's more important than the money, too, as long as you're not starving. The sashes and the cups and the Tonys and the Pulies..."

that's very secondary."

In our meandering conversation – we cover a lot of ground in an afternoon – I am struck by the way Amis talks about his mother. Perhaps it takes the particular skill of a novelist to conjure such a telling portrait of someone that close to him, so tenderly and yet with such forensic precision. The closing chapter of Kingsley's life – after the crushing failure of that second marriage – was spent sharing his home in Primrose Hill with his first wife, Hilly, and her third husband, Lord Kilmarnock. Martin recalls how sentimental Kingsley became about Hilly; we both remember the poems he wrote to "H" which appeared at the end of his memoirs; the girl he met in 1946 "whose eye I could have met for ever then" and how he made the mistake of looking further, since "How can we tell, with nothing to compare?"

Their son says, "I think the sentiment was real, too. But then my mother is a very extraordinary person, and he must have thought that he didn't realise how exceptional she was." In what way? "I can elaborate on this a bit. She is the only woman I've ever come across who doesn't have an atom of theatricality in her. She never says anything for effect. Takes it that what you're telling her is what you mean. None of the Byzantine stuff that we're used to. Oh, and by the way, I think women are theatrical and men are cinematic. It's the same sort of seeing themselves from the outside, but men underact whereas women overact. Anyway, she never did that. She was [striking, too, how he slips into talking about Saul and Kingsley in the present; and Hilly, who is still alive, in the past] really straight – which is very attractive and very unusual. She's also very funny – but, again, she doesn't time her funny remarks. They just sort of pop out and they're funny but she sort of doesn't intend them to be funny. Oh, she's just very unusual," he says again, his gaunt features plumped up by the sweetness of the thought. "Everyone who has met her sees it."

It is Hilly, he says, who provides the extra "lift" in Zachary Leader's forthcoming authorised biography of Amis Sr. "There's a charming bit where she's first met Kingsley – it took her a while to fall for him and then she did fall for him in a big way – and she said," he switches to the first person, "He was so unlike my own parents and brothers and sisters. We tended to accept people for what they are and be tolerant of them, but Kingsley, sitting in a café, would say [here, he scrunches up his face in a comically exaggerated look of withering scorn, somehow summoning both his father and his father's own brilliant mimicking of others], 'Look at those fools who've just come in... look at that bloody hat he's wearing', flailing out in all directions. She was very puzzled by that. Couldn't understand it. She was thinking, 'What's wrong with all these people?', as he'd be going, 'Look at that idiot over there.'"

So where does he fall between his father's punishing eye and his mother's non-judgmentalism? "I'm not inclined, unlike Kingsley, to have a category in my mind that ropes in certain kinds of people for disapproval. But as I've got older, I'm a bit harder on what I see as herd stuff. I hate the clunking initials – but the sort of PC package of moral equivalents on every issue, where no one's right about anything. The use of catchphrases which go around for a few months and then disappear. I keep seeing headlines that say that the new PLO guy is 'Arafat-lite' and my attitude to that is, well, take your hat off to whoever said it first but don't use it yourself. That sort of subtext of used novelty – that's something that Kingsley disliked."

The freshly minted expression that becomes an instant cliché? "Yeah... heading towards cliché, like 'no-brainer'. Don't yourself use those phrases because it is a sort of automatic thought – and I'm impatient with that." So do you manage to be vigilant with yourself? "You have to catch yourself and you have to forbid family members to use them. My daughter says, 'What? I'm supposed to go to bed

without ice-cream? I don't think so.' That sort of thing." He's amusing himself here, I should point out, as well as me. "You have to say, 'Fernanda, that's the sort of phrase that other people use. You don't have to use it.'" Not in our house, you don't. "That's right – so there's a bit of snobbery about that." How do you deal with the dangling question mark, the Valley Girl vault? "She's actually satirising that at the age of nine; she and her cousin do it as a joke. So I'm very pleased to see that and encourage it."

When Amis was Fernanda's age, a most blue-eyed and blond little boy, he saw some image from the Holocaust that disturbed him enough to repeat it to his mother. "And she said, 'Oh, don't worry about Hitler. Hitler would have loved you.' I don't know whether I've ever said this before, but I think that's why I wrote *Time's Arrow* in the end. I didn't want Hitler to love me. I wanted Hitler to hate me. It sort of worked away at me because I remember thinking, 'Whew.'

"And now, for instance, it's very important to me that my daughters are fully Jewish by Jewish law, which is matrimonial. So I'm pleased they'd be the first to be summoned." That's rather a peculiar thought, isn't it? "It is, but let's not mess about – that's what they are. So there'd be no shilly shallying there. Especially since what we're living through now, among other things, is a huge recrudescence of anti-semitism. And, with my two daughters, it makes me feel great solidarity with them."

He lays the blame for Israel's plight (and there is, conspicuously, no mention of Palestine's) firmly with the Brits: "For Nasrallah, it's a power play; for Israel it's survival. And they always have this hanging over them. It's our fault because we put them in it. There couldn't have been a worse place on earth than where they are. They should have been in Bavaria and then they would have had a couple of leather-shorted scoutmasters from the BLO throwing Molotov cocktails at them, from time to time... at least they wouldn't have been surrounded by millions of people who thirst for their death. So I think you've got to bear that in mind."

He and *The Hitch* were in Las Vegas the previous week, and shared their grim premonition that this could be the beginning of the end for Israel. "You can't put them anywhere else now. They can't have another country, another Homeland. It's a very chilling thought because the only thing the Islamists like about modernity is modern weapons. And they're going to get better and better at that. They're also gaining on us demographically at a huge rate. A quarter of humanity now and by 2025 they'll be a third. Italy's down to 1.1 child per woman. We're just going to be outnumbered."

"The one built-in element that works in our favour is that it's so vile and poisonous, so preposterously disgusting that it must burn itself out. They have managed to fix on a real paradigm shift – earlier, people would die for causes and for tiny religious reasons, but to convert it into this luscious, sensual paradise that you go straight to, while the rest of the poor sods have to moulder in the earth for centuries until they're kicked awake by furious angels and interrogated about their sins. The suicide bomber doesn't do any of that shit. He goes straight to the ripe wine and women."

This is the central question Amis keeps coming back to in his writing: an extended and moving review of the film *United 93*; a short story, published in *The New Yorker*, *The Last Days of Mohammad Atta* (we talk about the haunting photograph of the 9/11 leader, with his hard black eyes "full of murder... as though he couldn't contain it a second longer"); a new 12,000-word essay tackling the terrorists head-on. This last response is likely to be extremely hardline, inflamingly so, if Amis's message to me is anything to go by.

"What can we do to raise the price of them doing this? There's a definite urge – don't you have it? – to say,

'The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.' What sort of suffering? Not letting them travel. Deportation – further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they're from the Middle East or from Pakistan... Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children. They hate us for letting our children have sex and take drugs – well, they've got to stop their children killing people. It's a huge dereliction on their part. I suppose they justify it on the grounds that they have suffered from state terrorism in the past, but I don't think that's wholly irrational. It's their own past they're pissed off about; their great decline. It's also masculinity, isn't it?"

I remember reading somewhere that Atta's cell of devout Muslims had been loaded on cocktails and playing Space Invaders in the days leading up to their murder spree. Amis, in his deep research, has come across the suggestion that there were even visits from strippers and call girls: "None of that would surprise me. I think they're hugely hypocritical in their hearts. Their big beef against the West is that it's tempting them. That's just impossible. I mean, 'Sorry. We didn't know that what we were doing was creating a society for the tantalisation of good Muslims.' When Khomeini called America the Great Tempter, that's what he meant, the Great Satan. In the Koran, Satan is a tempter. So they want it, you know."

His new book circles back to Amis's old subject of Russia – which he tackled in *Koba the Dread*, with its central rebuttal of Stalin's claim that the death of one person was tragic, the death of a million a mere statistic. *House of Meetings* revolves around a love triangle between two brothers – we meet them as prisoners in the Gulag, nightmarishly conjured – and a complicated Jewish beauty, which spans four decades of post-war Russia. A description of the House of Meetings – the generic name for the buildings where prisoners were allowed conjugal visits – in Anne Applebaum's *Gulag*, was the starting point for his novel: "the atmosphere after such a visit, where everyone would be silent and very respectful of the man – no laughter, no mocking – because they knew the depth of the pain that such visits always bore." And, also, a long piece in *The New Yorker*, entitled "Is Russia Dying?"

Amis says that he had a bad time writing the book – a sentiment, I am saddened to say, I shared on reading it, and not for all the right reasons. His first problem was structural – to whom was his narrator (one of the brothers) telling his story? His solution was to make the hero's stepdaughter the recipient of his confession. "If she's there all the time, it grounds it in the present and against another mild ideology – not the ferocious ideology he had to live through – but the modern culture of forgiving."

The other problem was more existential: "I had a terrible struggle with this; a bit life and death. I'd written a book about the Holocaust, but that was fine because I was writing it from the point of view of a perpetrator. I could never have written it from the perspective of a victim. But this is about a victim. And I was writing about penal servitude above the Arctic Circle when I was living in a house in Uruguay with my beautiful daughters and wife, and having a stressless existence because that's what it's like down there – beautiful people; superb manners and civility; wonderful attitude to children; park anywhere you like; no traffic; not speaking Spanish, there were some evenings I hardly said a word and it was nice to have a vow of silence for a bit so you can just think your own thoughts..."

"And I realised when I'd done the book that I had to really suffer as a writer. I wasn't sitting around weeping about the poor sods in the Gulag – although I did have stabs of sympathy, obviously, as well – it just attacks your self-confidence. And then when I'd suffered enough and thought about suicide and not writing again..."

Are you being flippant? (My voice, here, sounds very sharp on the tape.) "No." Why suicide? "Because you're in such despair about it." But why? "I kept thinking that it was pleading with me to abandon it. But that's all it was really – doing the suffering to earn the book."

And so we are at the pass I have been trying to avoid – which is my difficulty getting on with (as his father put it; he only managed to finish *Time's Arrow*) Amis's novels. Before we met up, I tried to do the right thing and muscled my way through *Money* – I'd given up on it when it first came out – and did marvel at its vim and originality and surface dazzle, even catching a glimpse of Amis nudging at something deeper than grotesque satire, with its redemptive suggestion of love that has been offered but squandered, before the fagged-out splutter of the end. *London Fields* – although again, obviously touched with inventive brilliance – was a bludgeoning ordeal.

Amis has been bludgeoned himself by great regiments of monstrous women (but only in England, he assures me) accusing him of misogyny. When I said that those particular novels made me feel as though I was trapped in a pub with a group of men making fishy-fanny jokes, he said, sounding genuinely sincere: "Well, I'm very sorry that you felt that."

Someone wrote – and I wish I had his or her name, since it so precisely expressed my frustration – that while admiring his pure writing talent, "his books lack real emotional bite; we do not care what happens in them. You can open an Amis novel at any point and be mesmerised by the sentences and paragraphs (but you can still open them at any point). Like all standard lines, this is an exaggeration of the truth, but points at a real deficiency."

Even in the new novel, which Amis says marks his first attempt to go deeper – "I've never done a tragic situation before... it felt like new territory to me" – there is something weirdly unjoined up about the emotion; as though the big subject of the tragedy has been grafted on to the characters, rather than us experiencing it through them. When I told Amis that I hadn't quite got to grips with it, and would probably have to reread it (I tried and failed) – he told me that his previous interviewer (*Tatler* editor, Geordie Greig) had read it three times. This he took as a compliment – "Well, I do hope it takes a bit of absorbing."

And, yet, I am a huge fan of his non-fiction, and it was a joy to revisit *The Moronic Inferno* – Amis's take on America; those memorable and instructive encounters with its novelists, film directors, TV evangelists and shonkier politicians. (It was a slight comfort to be reminded of his own difficulties as an interviewer. When Vidal harrumphed that the article – which he had demanded to check pre-publication – was short on the work, Amis later informs us: "This was perfectly true. [Followed by a list of novels he tried but failed to get through] "and concluded that "I cannot get through Vidal's fiction. The books are too long. Life is too short"). But it was in rereading *Experience*, his autobiography, that I felt the emotional reach, the thrill of deep engagement drawing you into the internal worlds of the characters (who happen to be real) – that is so absent for me in the novels.

He's 300 pages into a new book which he describes as a "blindingly" autobiographical gossip novel, with real people in it: Larkin and *The King* are there, and Ian Hamilton and *The Hitch* and – of course – Saul Bellow, the inspiration for this departure from Amis's usual approach. "I realised that he's the only writer ever in the history of the world who's been able to write autobiographically – with all sorts of artistry as well – and to do it that way round. Because he stares at the real person until he sees the universal. Most of us go the other way round and arrange our characters to stand for universal things."

He tells me that he's not afraid of sentimentality – "which is defined as a coarse and unworthy emotion.



Well, we don't want any of that, but some people are so frightened of sentimentality that they don't go near the sentiments, and I think you should." He also says that he can see himself going further into that territory, "that the strange impulse that makes you think, 'Ah, here's something for me that I can write' won't alight on these dark things so much."

And what is the theme of this new, new novel? "Ageing," he laughs. "Yeah, the big one. Actually, I think ageing is a very irresponsible horror film, where they're saving the worst for last. And just when you think it's all over, there'll be the hand coming out of the grave."

We're done. Out comes the chardonnay and a lovely warm hug at the end, as we leave Amis to get on with the business of shrinking and dying and not caring all that much about the work. Yeah right, Marty, I don't think so.

House of Meetings by *Martin Amis* is published by *Vintage* and is available from *BooksFirst* priced £14.39 (RRP £15.99), free p&p, on 0870 1608080; [www.timesonline.co.uk/booksfirstbuy](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/booksfirstbuy)



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