



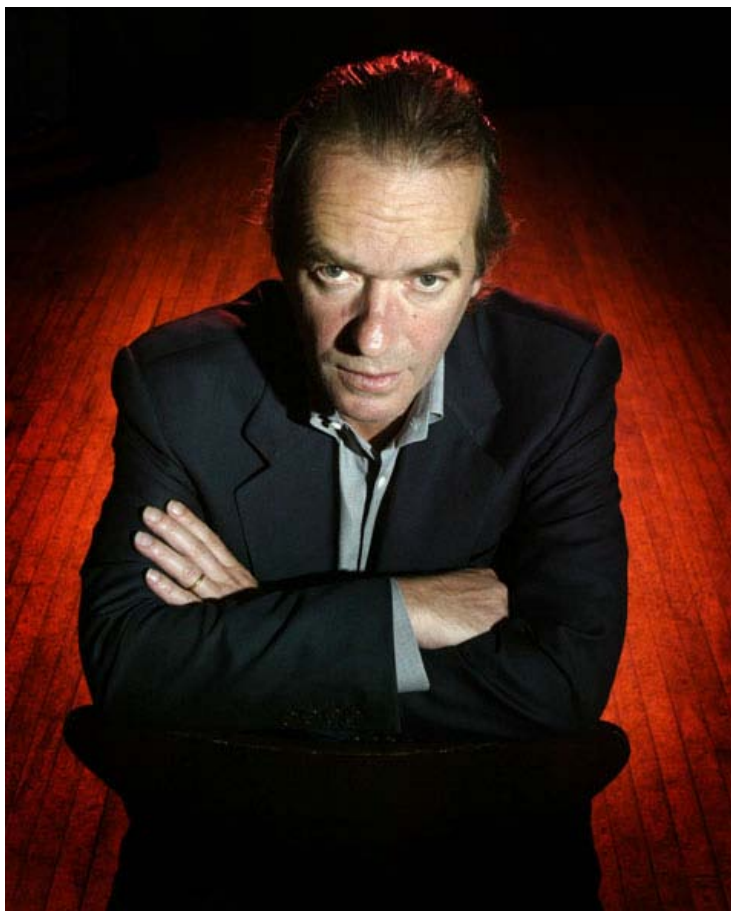
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Martin Amis and Me: Tales from The Humber School for Writers

Posted: July 17, 2009, 4:10 PM by Mark Medley
[Martin Amis](#)



Prologue

It began with an ambush.

I paced outside the faculty lunchroom, in the basement of one of the building's of Humber College's scenic Lakeshore campus, waiting for Martin Amis to finish his meal. The goal was modest: I wanted a brief, 15 or 20 minute interview with the renowned British author of such books as *The Information* and *Money*, to discuss his thoughts of teaching creative writing. I was at The Humber School for Writers' Summer Workshop for the week, researching a story, and Amis was this season's star instructor. Amis had been my target [since it was announced he was joining the faculty last December](#).

My first attempt at contact ended in failure earlier that morning; earlier in the week, the school's artistic director Antanas Sileika advised me that, if I sought an interview with Amis, the best time to approach him was early in

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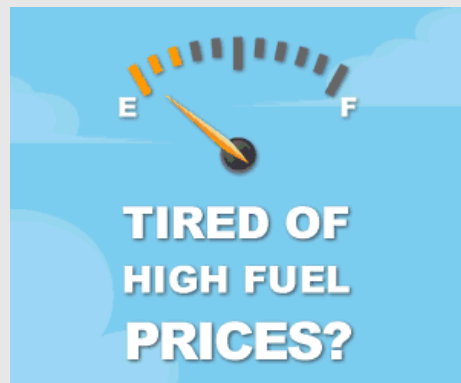
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Buy It or Skip It?

the morning, before class, while he was enjoying his customary cigarette. He almost always could be found outside his classroom, around 9 a.m., I was told, however on his morning, a warm Tuesday, he was nowhere to be found. It was my last day on campus, and I was growing more and more desperate to get a few minutes of his time, so when lunch hour rolled around I found myself employing paparazzi-style tactics, lying in wait outside the lunchroom. When he emerged, trailing two other men, holding a cigarette in his fingers and heading for the exit, I struck.

"Excuse me, Mr. Amis?"

He looked up at me -- "Yes?" -- but kept walking down the hall. I followed, and delivered my spiel: I was a reporter for the *National Post*, and wondered if he had a few minutes to chat?

"What's your story about?" he asked. We were at the stairs now, heading to the ground floor. From there, it was only about twenty feet to the door, where he'd be free. I explained that I was doing a year-long series on the publishing industry in Canada, and that for my article on creative writing programs I'd been invited to spend the week at Humber College and immerse myself in the program; I wanted to find out why the students were here, what they thought of the program, and that I was also interviewing many of the instructors (though I wasn't nearly as articulate as this, and probably babbled a lot more). In any case, I said that I wanted to get his thoughts on teaching creative writing.

We were outside now. He had not brushed me off, a good sign I thought, so I asked him if he had 15 minutes to chat, knowing full well his day was finished and he was likely heading back to his hotel, the Park Hyatt, for the day. This, I figured, was my last chance.

He stopped to light his cigarette. He said that tomorrow I could sit in on his class and that at each of the two 15-minute breaks he could talk. I had spent Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday here already, and had everything I needed for the story. I was due back in the office the next day. I had tons of work to do before going on vacation. I said yes, of course.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then," he said. I slinked away before he could change his mind.

The Lesson

I arrived on campus early Wednesday morning, almost an hour before classes were scheduled to start, convinced that Amis would change his mind. Why, I don't know? I ran into Alistair MacLeod, my instructor for the week, who told me where I could find Amis. I found him having a cigarette near the driveway where Sileika -- who was standing with him -- greeted the instructors each morning. He extended his hand and greeted me warmly. The offer, I learned, still stood.

"Let's kick off with a casual thing," Amis said, sitting down at the front of the second-floor classroom about an hour later.

It was a sparse room, with five rows of desks facing a whiteboard, off-white walls, and windows whose blinds were mostly closed. It did not scream creativity. The classroom assistant, [Andrew Clark](#) There was a bottle of water and a cup of coffee in front of him, and he opened a file folder filled with the student's work. The first topic of the day? Ritual and superstition.

Amis began with a brief lecture about his own work habits, saying he had "no lucky charms" when it came to writing. While he is, of course, a full-time writer now, he related tales from early in his career, when he juggled writing and work -- when he worked at the Times Literary Supplement he wrote "secretly" at his desk during the day, plus in the mornings and evenings.

"In the old days," he joked, "I felt like I should get the Nobel Prize for Typing."

Now, he said, he wrote using a combination of long-hand and the computer ("I use about six fingers for typing, with an average of one mistake per word," he said). The benefits of long-hand, he said, were that when you scratch out a word, it still exists there on the page. On the computer, however, when you delete a word it disappears forever. This is important, Amis stressed, because usually your first instinct is the right one. When one student asked if there's a minimum number of words he sets out to write

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—litman
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This reviewer is completely wrong (and her envy of Lansens' talent and success is laughably transparent)...The Wife's Tale is a great book, like Lansens' first two...a...

—litman

The Peep Diaries

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every day, Amis said there is no "quota" he seeks to fill: "Sometimes it will be no words. Sometimes it will be 1500."

He urged his students to use any anxiety they have about their writing -- or their lives -- as fuel: "Ambition and anxiety: that's the writer's life," he told his class of six students.

The class lasted about three hours, during which time two stories were workshopped. The first to be discussed was the first chapter of a science-fiction novel set in the near future.

"I read much more science fiction than I wanted for a number of years," Amis recalled, referring to his days as the Observer's sci-fi critic. "By the way, never say 'sci-fi.' You'll enrage purists. Call it SF."

After each of the five other students and Clark had the opportunity to share their comments, Amis embarked on a thorough edit of his own, zeroing in on things he believes turns those who pen OK prose into "a different kind of writer." He was adamantly against dumbing down, insisting "you should always write for your top five percent of readers."

Amis has a reputation as a no-nonsense individual, but he was very kind to his students. Most criticisms or suggestions were preceded and followed by praise.

"I trusted you and I thought you knew your stuff," he told the writer of the SF story, an older gentleman.

He had a particular problem with one word in the story:

"Boob. I don't like the word boob." Amis said it was one of those words that presents no good alternative, like stomach (Gut? Belly?)

"What about cans?" asked a student, which got a laugh out of Amis.

Later, Amis discussed Nabokov -- and among the names Amis frequently drops, Vladimir Nabokov's is the most frequent -- and the philosophy of good titles. Never pun your title, Amis said, and simpler is usually better: "Lolita turns out to be a great title; couldn't be simpler."

During the first break, I joined Amis outside as he hand-rolled a cigarette, pinching tobacco in his fingers and depositing it gently onto the paper, adding a filter, and sealing it. It was here I learned that what Amis was doing here at Humber College -- working with students on their stories and novels -- was a first.

"In Manchester (University, where he teaches creative writing) my rule is I don't look at their work," he laughed. "It's not like that. We don't do it that way. We read great books, and we talk about them ... We look at Conrad, we look at Dostoyevsky."

The discussion did not focus solely on writing; over the course of three hours, the students schooled Amis on topics ranging from the Avro Arrow, to serial killer Paul Bernardo, to Margaret Atwood's LongPen (this came about after Amis told the class about Yukio Mishima and the Japanese writer's unusual suicide.

"It's hard to imagine Margaret Atwood doing that," he said.

The class ended with a discussion about ambition. What, he asked, do you want to do?

One woman said she simply wanted to be able to write everyday.

"That's a very good, sound ambition," Amis replied. "It's a tremendous [privilege] to be more or less a full-time writer."

One student, lawyer and non-fiction writer Steve Sturka, asked Amis how he knows when an idea is worth pursuing in novel-form?

"It's got to give you a kind of glimmer," Amis said. "It's an amazing thing when you get going and it's all there" -- at this he outstretched his arms, wide -- "it's all there right in front of you."

Other Amis-isms

- Watch out for words that repeat too often.

The Afterword

Hear hear!

—Scott Maniquet
The Afterword

It doesn't matter what kind of addict she may be, it's the fact that she may be an addict that we need to focus on. We need to get help for her quickly...somebody think...

—CoolShitBlog
The Afterword

I remember when newspapers reported news. This article is a waste of space. Who cares what Margaret Atwood does in her private life.

—Bay Bulls
The Afterword

Congrats guys, continue and keep up the good work. <http://www.reversemortgagepage.com> anchor text "reverse mortgage"

—malmonica
The Afterword

Thanks very much. And it's my sixth year. Don't take that year away from me, man.

—Bookninja
The Afterword

One detail of interest to me is that Father MacAskill is a War bride child, born in 1944 in the U.K. to a Canadian soldier and a British mother. Some of the real War...

—RobertA9
The Afterword

No wonder the newspapers are in such dire financial positions, who would pay for such useless drivel? Take those reporting skills and start writing about something...

—Denis Pakkala
The Afterword

I totally miss Don Bluth movies. Disney kinda sucks.

—Van Grungy
The Afterword

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- Don't start a paragraph with the same word as previous one. That goes doubly for sentences.
- "Stay in the tense."
- "Inspect your 'hads' and see if you really need them."
- "Never use 'amongst.' 'Among.' Never use 'whilst.' Anyone who uses 'whilst' is subliterate."
- "Try not to write sentences that absolutely anyone could write."
- "You write the book you want to read. That's my rule."
- "You have to have a huge appetite for solitude."

[Watch for Q&As with Martin Amis, Rachel Kushner, David Mitchell and other Humber School for Writers faculty in the weeks ahead. And look out for the next installment in the ongoing *The Ecology of Books* series, which will explore creative writing programs, in early August]

[Martin Amis. Photo by Kevin Van Paassen/National Post]

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