



Success. Money. Happy?

New family, new novel, and a victory at tennis. No wonder Martin Amis is smiling

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Before I interviewed Martin Amis, I played tennis with him. As a writer, Amis has done for the game roughly what Hemingway did for bullfighting, but with better jokes. In the role of tennis correspondent for the New Yorker he has canonised Graf's forehand and hymned Becker's volley; he has hobbled Henman ('No one called Tim has ever achieved anything...'). If there were a Hall of Fame for Chroniclers of Racquet Sports, Amis would be its first elected member.

He plays most days, too. But even in the knowledge that he had spent more time on court in the previous week than I had managed in the previous year, I had the fanciful idea that our match might reveal something of the inner life of my opponent, test the novelist's grace under pressure. Unfortunately, in the first set the pressure I could muster was restricted to the odd mishit drop-shot or fluked pass.

Amis, meanwhile, with his finessed forehand and 'toreador' backhand, his occasional fretful 'Jeeesus' at a high bounce and his contemplative smoker's cough, gave a convincing impersonation of grace. For all my silent protestations to the contrary the lost deuce games! the conspiratorial net cords! he moved me around the court's four corners, as he once put it, 'like a lab rat'. He won the first set 6-1.

Between sets, Amis rolled a cigarette and sat smoking it in the sun, examining the pleasures of victory: the time he played Salman Rushdie, 'except you don't play Salman so much as exist on the court at the same time as him, while he occasionally deigns to prod something over the net', or the joys of wrongfooting New Yorker fiction editor Bill Buford 'I put him on his arse a couple of times.' And losing? I wondered.

'When I lose I throw racquets; I break racquets. I swear foully if I'm passed. Go to pieces, really. The wind, I'm convinced, is never the same for both players. It may be easy for my opponent to deal with, but I have the soul of a warrior poet (assumes mock-warrior-poet voice) and it is unbearable.' This sounded more like it. In the second set, I attempted to exploit my age advantage with a 'chip and chase' game (in desperation I also tried 'chip but don't chase' and, more often this one, 'chase but don't chip'). In the event, I acquitted myself about as well as John Self in Amis's novel *Money*: the pot-bellied gimp with the pinching pumps and spray-on Bermudas. I lost the second set 6-2.

In the bar afterwards, among hornrimmed bowls players cradling mugs of tea and studying the Kempton starting prices on a mahogany-encased TV, Amis smiled at my specious attempts to equate the technical brilliance of a Sampras with the cool flourish of his own prose and told me instead how it had taken him years to be accepted in this moderately exclusive west London club. 'I didn't just walk in and say 'Anyone for tennis?' he explained, somewhat ruefully. (You could almost imagine the iconic novelist furtively pinning a postcard to the noticeboard: 'Hi! I've just taken up the game and am looking for a partner! Call Martin, evenings and weekends').

Amis enjoys incongruity. His best short stories play with neat inversions, creating worlds in which being gay is the norm and red-blooded males find illicit pleasure in 'straight bars', or where poets earn silly money for sonnet treatments while screenwriters starve to lonely deaths in garrets. It is tempting to see an inside-out relationship between his life and work, too. While the protagonists of his novels tend to be mired in banality or hamstrung by paranoia, his own life writing prodigiously in the mornings, tennis here in the afternoons, a smart new house near Regent's Park, holidays on Long Island is not apparently set around with terrors.

The 48-year-old Amis is slight and lean and tanned. In his stripey sports shirt and dapper white shorts, the

impression he gives is of sunny neatness and order. He is an enchanting talker. His voice is a millennium experience, laden with fin-de-siecle lassitude, rarely troubled by qualification, preferring to deal in the drawled certainties and thrilling aphorisms that characterise his writing:

'The mouth is where we all live,' he will say in response to a question about his teeth; or, and there are many phrases like this: 'Only Tolstoy has ever written well about happiness.' We talk first about his new book, *Night Train*, a short noir novel which views the inexplicable suicide of a beautiful young astrophysicist through the hardboiled eyes of a Chicago cop. It is a fast read, striking for its vernacular, unusual for its female narrator, yet in many respects it is *Ur-Amis*, a marking of time, replete with the usual staged set pieces ('Suicide is a night train speeding your way to darkness'), the litany of urban terrors, and the now expected patina of apocalyptic cosmology.

As usual, too, it has received a mixed set of reviews. John Updike led the charge, claiming he had wanted to love this novel, but ended up hating it for its lack of 'positives', its 'post-human' quality. The criticism is a version of the perennial 'Problem with Martin': that although he has more pure writing talent than the current Booker short list combined, 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 one at any point). Like all standard lines, this is an exaggeration of the truth, but points at a real deficiency. In a recent review of Saul Bellow's novella *The Actual*, Amis wrote, almost plaintively: 'There is a great deal going on in these short fictions: tangled plots (for tangled lives), and intense formal artistry. But what accounts for their extraordinary affective power?' His question could have carried a supplementary: 'And if you find out, could you please tell me?'

Amis has, of course, heard the standard criticisms before, and defends himself assuredly. Against the charge that he only writes caricatures, he argues to the effect that 'so did Dickens'; that he always sounds like himself ('who the fuck should I sound like?'); that he lacks compassion ('there's never much kindness in comedy'); that he is incapable of writing dull sentences ('And?'); that he is a misogynist/ a misanthrope/ a megalomaniac (he's not).

He's right, but it's not the whole story. At one point in our conversation he says something that strikes me as extraordinary. Speaking of the experience of reading his father's work he suggests: 'That's the great thing about writing. If I die on the tennis court tomorrow, my children will get a very full picture of me. They will know exactly who I am through my books.' Can he really think this? Certainly, when you read Amis, you can believe you have a clear sense of him: his reptilian humour; his street-smartness; his ambition; his intellectual energy and also his apparent cruelty, his coldness. But it is difficult to equate this idea with the charming, relaxed figure ('chipper' is a word written in my notebook) that Amis actually presents.

There is definitely an arrogance about him in the honed knowingness of his effortless observations but there is a frailty too, even a sentimentality, when he talks about his mother, say, or his sons, that is entirely absent from the books. His emotional life is hard to fathom. At one point, he says, bizarrely, that he 'had some weeps' when writing the cartoonish terrors of *Night Train* (Amis crying over his own imagery? It's like Tarantino swooning at the sight of blood); at another, he claims innocence as the virtue he most cherishes (though in his books it's experience that counts); and, perhaps most oddly, quoting his father and, he stresses, not referring to his own recent experience, that 'the worst real psychological violence I could imagine is divorce' (so why has he never properly confronted domestic hurt as a subject?).

In the Bellow review, Amis claims that the act of reading is like communing with the author's soul. With Amis, the reader has always communed with a soul clunking in an armour of ironies. It is possible, though, that all this is about to change the arch-satirist of our confessional age is about to begin a memoir, part of which will deal with the death of his father. Amis is at his most animate when recalling Kingsley. Their relationship has been sketchily documented the adolescent Martin and his brother turning up late one night on the doorstep of their father and his new lover, Elizabeth Jane Howard, to force him to explain why he had left their mother; the father's refusal to read his son's books ('How could he be so incurious of me?'); and the son's touching, principled defence of his father in the row over Eric Jacobs's biography. There is, you sense, a great deal more to say. No doubt Martin sought his father's approval (but no more, I would guess, than any other son). And clearly he misses him badly: when I mention how much I enjoyed Kingsley's posthumously published grammar book, there is a boyish sparkle in Amis's response; he positively glows not an anticipated Amis reaction when we discuss what his punctilious Dad would have made of the extravagant Americanisms in *Night Train*: 'I would love to have seen his response to a sentence that begins 'Too',' he says, smiling broadly.

There is also, I would imagine, a sense of liberation. Kingsley's presence weighed heavily on his children. Amis explains carefully how his father could not be left alone in the dark, how he could not use the Tube or get on a plane (he once took a taxi home from Newcastle). And how 'as a boy I remember often being woken in the night. Sometimes I'd hear him screaming. He had dreams of depersonalisation. And he would be led into my room by my mother, and I'd put on the light, and we'd chat for hours, but not about anything serious. He'd sit there looking meek. Next morning I'd go down and ask, 'What was all that about last night?' and my mother would say, 'Oh, it was nothing. It was one of Daddy's dreams. And he knew he'd have to be calm if he was with you.' Kingsley's death in 1995 came at the end of Amis's two crisis years in which he left his wife, and discovered that his long-missing cousin, Lucy Partington, had been murdered by Fred and Rosemary West, an event which will form the second focus of his memoir (the third is his famous teeth). It was the culmination of an unstable period in Amis's life you get the sense that he loathes instability which began when he turned 40 and was struck by a strong awareness of his own mortality. 'Death seemed suddenly 'so near', he says now, quoting Larkin.

This certainty seems to have been exacerbated, intellectually at least, by his growing interest in cosmology, which is pivotal to his new novel: 'Updike was right when he said I was interested in exploring the 'post-human', he explains. As Amis understands the term, this is what will result when humanity takes on board the fact that 'the universe seems to be bifurcating every millisecond'. This knowledge will cause 'a revolution of consciousness, and there will be casualties. There will be gratuitous suicides like the one in *Night Train*. Because anything that can happen will happen. The new goal will be to get everyone on the planet thinking of themselves as the member of a species rather than part of a country or' and we survey the tennis club bar on which a small girl is perched and screaming for 'more juice!' 'God forbid, a member of a club.'

Once Amis gets into this quantum stride, there is little stopping him. He talks of the influence of Galileo on the Renaissance; and of the strange death of the 'naked-eye universe' (what we see through the window); he is, he says, well aware that some of it 'makes me sound absolutely crackpot', but that 'part of me is convinced absolutely that this is the big question that is coming up'. He may be right, but there is a difficulty here too. We are so used to Amis's scorn for the earnest that it is hard not to feel uncomfortable with his theorising. It is only right that a significant prose writer should want to tackle the big questions, but equally it is impossible to stop part of yourself feeling: 'Trust Martin Amis to blame his menopause on the Milky Way.'

If Amis did have a mid-life crisis, it now seems to be in the past. He responded to it in highly conventional fashion: he found himself a new, younger partner, the American writer Isabel Fonseca, with whom he has a new baby. And he reconstructed that part of himself in which he felt his mortality most keenly: his rotten teeth. There was, too, the unexpected bonus of meeting his 'lost' daughter Delilah, the product of an affair 20-odd years ago with the late Lamorna Heath. 'I used to have fantasies about standing outside the house and following the pram,' Amis says. 'But I never actually did that. When the story came out I was shocked but then thought that there was no way this could be anything but a good thing. And so it has proved.' Further stages in the plans for a new life include the decision to move to the States 'when the boys are a little older'.

And, finally, fascinatingly, the writing of his memoir. It would be good to think that with this slice of autobiography Amis could kill off the Problem with Martin once and for all, that he could give his authentic voice its full 'affective power'. He seems engagingly worried by the project, in particular at the idea of confronting the death of his cousin in such direct fashion: 'I've begun to doubt whether I can write about it. As a writer you come up against the limits of what you can do, in the way of turpitude. This is just so mangled. It's daunting, but I'm going to see what happens. I will spend some time with David (Lucy's brother and Amis's childhood friend) and see what emerges. She was a studious, religious girl,' he says. 'And a poet, too. Rather a good one.' It is a while since Amis has come up against the limits of what he can do, if indeed he ever has. In the make-believe of London Fields, his narrator joked about the luck of being presented with a murder story, of already knowing the 'murderer, and the murdered'. But now Amis has been handed this awful 'gift from real life' what will he do with it? It is my guess he will make of it something remarkable.

And when he has found his new auto- biographical voice, what will he be writing after that? An old-fashioned love story? 'Yes,' he sneers, 'with lots of puppies.' And then, smiling, he collects his racquets and goes home, into the perfect Indian summer evening, to Primrose Hill, to put his baby daughter to bed.