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The Amis Papers

An interview with Martin Amis

For Aldous Huxley, "experience is not what happens to a man; it is what a man does with what happens to him". Since publishing his first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, when he was 23, Martin Amis has rarely been out of the public eye, something which has proved a double-edged sword for a man born with, in his own words, "a silver pen in his mouth". Fêted by many as one of the most stylish and satirical novelists of a generation that includes Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes and Salman Rushdie, his detractors point to perceived misogynist and misanthropic traits behind the dark, often despairing comedy of novels such as *Money*, *London Fields* and *The Information*. In recent years, the British media has delighted in a split from his literary agent, which led to a highly publicised bust-up with Julian Barnes; the considerable advance secured as a result, part of which was spent on his teeth; his divorce and the discovery of a daughter by a relationship from the 1970s. In *Experience*, Amis's volume of memoirs, the novelist candidly discusses all these issues, as well as poignantly remembering his cousin Lucy Partington, murdered by Fred West, and the other half of the "literary curiosity", his father Kingsley Amis, who died in 1995. David Vincent for Amazon.co.uk spoke to Martin Amis at his London home about his work, his father's work, Nabokov and hitting 50.

Amazon.co.uk: There's a strong sense of death and mortality in *Experience*, covering more than just your father Kingsley's death. You wrote in *London Fields* that looking at death was a full-time job. Has it become more so?

Martin Amis: You have to really strain to avoid it after a certain age. It's one of those things that nothing can prepare you for. If my book prepared one person for ageing and facing up to death then that would be a miracle, because I don't think these events are real until they're experienced. But it's a terrible surprise, even when you've seen it coming all your life. You begin to get a feeling that you're running out of life: it's exhaustible, and you're running out of it. It's like driving a car and seeing the fuel gauge heading towards empty. Turning 50, as my brother Philip said the other day, the only good thing is that it isn't 60. (Philip) Larkin says of death, "so dark and so near". It does begin to feel near. The great effort of trying to ignore it belongs to your late 30s and early 40s, the last gasp of youth. It's why children are so reckless and brave--they think they're immortal. We all do think we're immortal until the evidence is so overwhelming that you have to capitulate, and that's a crisis. That is the mid-life crisis, and everyone has it, even if they don't make all the kind of vulgar errors, or what look like vulgar errors, that others do. I do think it's the great challenge; as I quote Allen Bloom saying, quoting Socrates, "The task of philosophy is learning how

The File on Amis



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by Martin Amis

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KINGSLEY AMIS

to die". Not a bad definition. It's everyone's task to do that.

Amazon.co.uk: Apart from the Fourth Estate, you express understandable anger against [serial killer] Fred West for the murder of your cousin, Lucy Partington. How hard was that personally to come to terms with? In your writing, you've often considered callous and immoral thoughts and acts, yet here you were confronted with their terrible consequences in real life.

Amis: He doesn't belong in our universe. He's a visitor from another planet. But I feel I understand him, I have a sense of him. If I ever take him on, it will be in a novel. I felt I was wanting him away in this book, but he forced himself into my life, and the lives of my cousins and aunts and uncles. But I keep him more or less at arm's length just by putting him down in the footnotes, for the most part. He used to lurk in his van outside a home for disturbed girls. That's what Fred West--Frederick West, we should call him, we shouldn't use a diminutive for a man like that--that's what he liked: damaged, disturbed girls. Easier to manipulate and control. That sums him up, I think.

Amazon.co.uk: In the course of writing *Experience* you had reason to revisit your father's work. Did you reappraise your opinions, and were you surprised by your reactions?

Amis: I did, I had a great immersion in him, and was also reading his letters for the first time, which gave me lots of fresh feelings about him. As to the body of work, I was incredibly impressed by the sustained acuity and energy. And the poems have stood up incredibly well. I see a great dip and crisis, wonderfully mastered but it took a long time. Between *Jake's Thing* and *The Old Devils* there was almost a decade of struggle in which he produced, after *Jake's Thing*--a terrific if troubled book--*Russian Hide and Seek*, which is a depressed book, and *Stanley and the Women*, a mean book, although full of great things. And then this incredible, efflorescence of *The Old Devils*, which I think is a masterpiece. He might have just got meaner and meaner with time, but it was my mother, by her presence and example, who stopped him becoming that. Part of the reason I love *The Old Devils* is the sense of relief it gave me. He could well have not come out of it, this real disappointment with life, and love too. He was very romantic, but he could turn his back on the primary value, and really not just turn his back, but prosecute his case against it. It could have been the way he might have gone.

Amazon.co.uk: 1995 was obviously the *annus horribilis* for you, and it provides the chronological spine of the book. A feature that recurs in your fiction is the character who is perpetually dumped on, suffering indignity after indignity. Is that how it felt for you in the 1990s?

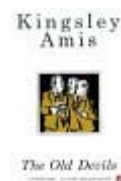
Amis: Yes it did, but I had ballast that my characters didn't. Richard Tull (in *The Information*) is the most thoroughly disgraced of all my characters, humiliated, and the poor bastard doesn't have a body of work behind him, whereas I did. I felt the solidity of that. And I've never given a shit about what they say about me in the papers, but by any objective view, yes, I had a hard time. However, it was a rare case of disaster giving something back, because at least I got a book out of it. And I think I will get other books out of it. The way it works is that experience beds itself down in you, and the significant bits go into your unconscious and emerge some years later in a novel. That's certainly how it works for me.



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Amazon.co.uk: Famously, George Orwell's final published words were "At 50, every man has the face he deserves". In *The Information*, Richard Tull says, "By the age of 40 every man has the face he deserves". Which is it?

Amis: Orwell said 50, I say 40. They're both wrong. You don't have the face you deserve. In Lisbon, not long ago, my wife saw an elephant man who made you fall over backwards, he was so grotesque. He was quite a famous figure in Lisbon. He didn't deserve that face. There are other things at work.

Amazon.co.uk: Charles Highway said, on the opening page of *The Rachel Papers*, that 20 was the real turning point. You weren't much older than that when you wrote the line.

Amis: There is not much mention of your novels in *Experience*. Was this a conscious thing? Nabokov said, *a propos* the same subject in the preface to *Speak, Memory*, that he felt "the trouble of writing them had been enough, and that they should remain in the first stomach".

Amis: (Laughs) Yes, the trouble of writing them had been enough. It felt like bad form to go on about one's own stuff. So, as with the whole book, it wasn't as though I was fighting temptation, it was some internal regulatory system was telling me, that's enough of that. When you writing a memoir, the two poles of the experience are universality and particularity. You can't do anything about your life in its details, and every life is full of odd-shaped peculiarities that are not very unique, but what I wanted to stress, were the more universal aspects, so that although my father and I are a very rare case, we're also a very common case, that of father and son. Rare perhaps in that we got on so well. The press tried to rig up an enmity between my father and me, but it was not the case. I got on with my father better than any of my friends, or anyone I knew, got on with theirs.

Amazon.co.uk: Duality and reversal are themes you consistently explore in your fiction. Why are contradictory aspects so rarely embodied in the same character in your work? Is it partly fuelled by a disparity between the public Martin Amis and a self-image? Martin Amis and "Martin Amis"?

Amis: I don't think so, because I've always done it. I think it's just that's the kind of writer I am. *London Fields* is the best example in that there are two babies in that book. One is hellish and one is heavenly, but every parent knows that babies are both heaven and hell all at once. Maybe another kind of writer would have had one baby, who was sometimes hellish and sometimes heavenly, and they would not have had Guy Clinch and Keith Talent but instead one character who was sometimes brutal and sometimes sensitive. I'm not subtle; I like extremes. Someone once said of my work, and I didn't mind it at all, that I deal with banalities delivered with tremendous force. That's fine by me.

Amazon.co.uk: There's a literary precedent for duality. Among others, Nabokov dealt with it in his novel *Invitation to a Beheading*. Your book reminded me of another Nabokov novel, *Pale Fire*, with its copious use of endnotes. His was contrived fictionally, with the real tale being held by the parentheses. How was it for you?

Amis: It was one of those things that look like a big decision, but wasn't any decision at all. I thought at once that I would have to have footnotes, and my first thought was, this will make it fun to write, and it did have that effect. It was a necessary way of letting off steam from usually quite emotionally arduous material, and then you could have a footnote where you just talked about James Joyce for a minute. Interesting that you should mention *Despair*. I made Kingsley read that when he was in hospital, quite late on. He did read it, but he didn't tell me what he thought of it, except that he didn't think much of it. But he wrote to Larkin, or Robert



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Conquest, and said, "I managed to read Nabokov this time", and then he turned the paper upside down in the typewriter, and wrote 'CRAP' backwards, so that it looked like Cyrillic. He was never a great fan of Nabokov, although I could quote Nabokov and make him laugh sometimes. But he did that hostile review of *Lolita*. A philistine review, deliberately philistine. I couldn't interest him in any of the people that I thought were good. He didn't really like prose. He liked his own prose, and Anthony Powell, and that was about it, really. He liked one novel by Evelyn Waugh, *Decline and Fall*. His great passion was poetry, rather than prose.

Amazon.co.uk: In *Experience*, you quote a letter from your 17-year-old self in which you choose a number of "chaps" for your Oxford Entrance. You chose Shakespeare, John Donne and Andrew Marvell, Coleridge and Keats, Jane Austen, Wilfred Owen and Graham Greene. If you had to reduce it to six, who would inhabit the pantheon now?

Amis: Well, Shakespeare certainly. Shakespeare is literature, single-handedly responsible for the elevation of drama beyond its "hey nonny non", village idiot constituency, which is where it belongs. So Shakespeare, predominantly. James Joyce, Vladimir Nabokov, John Milton, Saul Bellow, and then many candidates to make up the sixth.

Amazon.co.uk: Novelist Geoff Dyer commented that you "domesticated or transformed a voltage that originated in America". Do you aspire to be an American, possibly Jewish, novelist?

Amis: There's definitely an opening for a Jewish-American writer, because the Jewish-American novel, which was the great engine of the world novel in the second half of the 20th century, is over. All the great Jewish writers are now in their 60s, 70s and 80s, and are not being replaced. Now that I have two Jewish daughters, I feel I have an "in". It's something that's been much misinterpreted, though. Since I said, five years ago, that one day I might go and live in America, the whole of England has assumed that I live there now. I've lived in London for nearly 40 years now without a break, and written several novels about the place. The only real urge to move and go to America is for stimulus, for a more chaotic society than England can now offer. I liked England when there was more piss and vinegar around. I didn't like it in my day-to-day life, but I liked it as a novelist, because we thrive on conflict and inequality. We don't want this kind of success story that England is becoming. I like to think that it's a successful, multi-racial society, but it isn't. No society could ever quite be that, and it suddenly seems to be going sour. It looked like an achievement, but it's now being whittled away by various bastards and nutters. But still, as Saul Bellow says, and it's absolutely true, "America's more like a world than a country". That's the appeal of it. One thing you can absolutely say of England, is that it's the greatest nation of poets there's ever been. Our novels don't stand up to the Russians or the French, but our poetry fears no-one. That's a hell of a thing to say for a country. And the greatest-ever poet was Shakespeare.

Amazon.co.uk: How will you follow up *Experience*?

Amis: I'm doing another memoir, but it's a historical, polemical memoir. It's about Bolshevism, basically, the connection being that Kingsley was a communist into his 20s--Comrade Amis, he was at Oxford, and Iris Murdoch was Comrade Murdoch--and two of my great friends, Christopher Hitchens and James Fenton, were Trotskyites when we were working at the *New Statesman*. They were out selling the *Socialist Worker* on Kilburn High Street on Saturday mornings, like the guys you still see today. You'll never get Christopher to say, well, I was a bit misguided in those days, so we've got to have this sort of debate. But then I just got completely fascinated by Lenin and Stalin, so I'm going to do that, which will be about 70 pages, pamphlet length. And then I can get back to the novel, which I was writing concurrently with *Experience*, but which, in truth, I would doodle with when I was writing *Experience*. There were days when I just wanted the relief of fiction. And there's a book of essays to be clerked through, all my essays and book reviews. So I'm feeling good and productive.

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