

## 'It's a bit girly, but it really works'

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### Novelist Martin Amis is feeling fitter than ever, thanks to pioneering Pilates teacher Dreas Reyneke. Victoria Lambert joins them for a session

Martin Amis is about to initiate me in an arcane literary tradition. He is lying on his back, legs lifted, both bent at the knee, one placed elegantly across the other.



Lift off: Lambert and Amis in Dreas Reyneke's studio

He turns his head so that he can check that I am following. "Shall I show you this one? It is a very good one for writers." He looks enthusiastic.

Go on, I say, indulgently, flopping backwards, legs lifted up to mirror his position.

"Cross your leg like that," - he indicates his own - "and then pull it up with your hand."

He gently pulls the crossed lower leg towards his head, creating a stretch up the haunches. But I am not working hard enough.

"Pull it up," he insists. "It gets you right in the arse."

Amis is instructing me in Pilates - the fashionable exercise system that tones the body and corrects the posture - at the studio of Dreas Reyneke, one of the world's foremost teachers. Reyneke's clients include Juliette Binoche, Miranda Richardson, Ruby Wax and Helena Bonham Carter, who describes him as "a plastic surgeon for the body, but without the plastic - or, indeed, the surgery".

Amis has been attending Reyneke's Notting Hill studio twice a week for the past three years - ever since his wife, Isabel Fonseca, told him it was a good idea.

Now, Reyneke, a former dancer with Ballet Rambert, has published a book of exercises that reveals the literary heritage of Pilates - Christopher Isherwood was an early fan of the system, which was invented by Joseph Pilates in the early Thirties. The concept also owes something to the "medical gymnastics" developed in 1813 by Per Henrik Ling, a Swedish fencing master and romantic novelist.

One of the first Pilates teachers in Britain, Reyneke, now 67, opened his Body Conditioning Studio in 1973. The studio is a square, wood-floored room, with white walls and large gilt mirrors, and a high ceiling that is elevated into a glass pyramid-shaped roof.

It is light, airy - and stuffed to the gills with scary-looking contraptions. There are white leather massage beds that have weighted springs attached; a four-poster version, with sheepskin loops hanging down like large handcuffs; a pair of golden dumbbells; and wall bars that resemble a Bisque radiator. Classical music drifts gently through this very post-modern torture chamber.

Amis lifts the two huge golden dumb-bells using the muscles in his shoulders as well as his biceps. But this is not just weight-lifting, Reyneke explains. "It is for the whole range of movement for the shoulder cuff. As people get older, we lose the full range of movement of the arm."

Ah, so this must be particularly good for writers. If office workers get stiff shoulders and arms from being chained to their computers, imagine how much worse it must be for an important novelist.

"No," says the 52-year-old writer, between lifts. "If you are stiff, you won't be able to serve in tennis."

As he puts the weights down, I notice that his lightly tanned forearms are shaking a little from the effort. "Next time," warns Reyneke with a smile, "we'll get you lifting the weight over your head." Amis and I laugh, nervously. Watching one's fellow man being stretched across a variety of racks is a curiously bonding experience.

Amis moves to one of the white beds and lies down, hands above his head, wrists in nooses and feet pressed together firmly against a bar. "Squeeze the heels together and then stretch back," says Reyneke, cheerfully. "This is quite aerobic, you know." Amis pushes back against the heavy silver springs.

"After this, I get a long rest," he says. His muscles shiver again when he stops, like those of an overbred spaniel.

He is now bending his legs as he pushes back. It is complicated stuff, but he seems to be relaxed and enjoying it. I have ample time to admire his long lashes and his magnificent hair, which is salt and pepper and streaked with gold.

"When I came to Dreas, I was groaning," he says. "I was 50 and I wondered why old people didn't groan all the time. And I thought, well, they must just work really hard on suppressing it."



**Reyneke perfects Amis's Pilates positions: the two have obviously become friends - 'Look at this fierce mauling he's giving me,' Amis teases**

"I remember being in a real funk and thinking, it must be cancer of the testicles or something. I was feeling 1,000 years old."

Reyneke confirms: "It was a terrible pain, a terrible pain - so deep in the hip flexor."

After a few months with Reyneke, Amis explains: "I stopped groaning. When I get out of the car now, I don't go arrggghhh." (He groans, beautifully.)

It also helped his tennis. Amis was playing several times a week - and presumably sounding like an elephant at bay - when he realised something was physically wrong. "My wife sent me to Dreas and the groaning stopped."

Not that he is a reformed character. You should stretch before playing, I remind him. So, does he? "Not much," he admits.

"I am trying to make the exercise as exciting as the tennis, but it is difficult to compete," says Reyneke. No matter. Amis combines his twice-weekly sessions in Notting Hill with twice-weekly trips to the courts.

He pants, gently, and begins stretching out each leg in turn.

Reyneke says: "It starts to feel light, doesn't it?"

Amis agrees. Without conviction.

Has it improved your tennis? I ask. No, is his honest reply.

"I suppose it must do," he then adds. "I suppose my tennis would have got worse. It was terrible, I used to waddle and scamper."

He moves to another white bed, where he lies with his pelvis lifted and the small of his back arched away from the couch - a position called the lower rainbow.

Now, this one looks quite difficult, I observe.

"No, I wouldn't do it if it was," he says.

"It is good for the lower back," says Reyneke. A lot of Reyneke's work is to help people who suffer from back pain - which brings us to the pelvic floor.

Anyone who has tried Pilates will know that most of the exercises depend on developing an intimate knowledge of one's perineum - the pelvic floor muscle that is suspended across the pelvic girdle. For mothers, it is a subject of endless fascination. For Reyneke, too.

"It is the inner support," he explains. "It is like a little hammock and it supports the viscera from the tailbone to the pubic bone. It supports the lower back from the inside.

"Men," he adds, "have a strong perineum."

Most men would be surprised to discover that they have a perineum at all, but Amis has been a good student of Reyneke and has learnt how to use his pelvic floor to his advantage. "If I am on the beach and a pretty girl walks past, I don't suck my stomach in as I used to - I just engage the perineum.

"It has the same effect, but better," he smiles.

Amis then demonstrates the "sock stretcher". Seated, he bends over his crossed leg and rounds his body down.

"This keeps you flexible enough to pull on your socks as you get older." He looks very comfy in his white tennis socks and navy tracksuit bottoms, which unwittingly display the best bottom in books. Kylie would look at these peaches in awe.

"These exercises are really very necessary when you do a lot of sitting," Amis tells me, as I wonder which ones have been keeping him so pert.

He is now on the most ridiculous contraption. It looks like it is really going to hurt and is jolly hard work. He is stretching his back out. I think I please him by noticing that he is very supple. His good humour - which hasn't wavered once in the 55-minute set - is improved when he realises that it is "shoulder time".

He grins and says: "I am notoriously shifty with my time. Some people do an hour and a half. This is the treat at the end, after being beaten up by Dreas," he adds.

Reyneke begins to massage Amis's shoulders, head and neck. He works on all his clients to see where they are tense and which muscles need most work.

Reyneke and Amis have obviously become friends - "Look at this fierce mauling he's giving me," teases the pupil.

So, this is the best bit?

Reyneke admits: "Some people come only for this."

Amis has a theory about massage: "Women get much more pleasure from this than men. Women more or less live for back rubs. Saul Bellow once said to me: 'I've got an idea that will make me a trillion dollars. Classes in how to give massage for men of a marriageable age. Think how popular that would be.'

"Men don't get the same gorgeous pleasure from it that women do."

It seems an opportune moment to point out that, for a man whose reputation is, frankly, quite blokey, isn't all this Pilates a bit girly? I mean, it is not football, is it?

"It is a bit girly." Amis smiles. "But I've never been blokey. I do like watching football, but I don't go out with the lads - that sort of thing. It's an unearned rep."

In Reyneke's book, many of his celebrity clients offer glowing endorsements. Ruby Wax, the comedienne, says of him: "You have turned me into a Ferrari; my husband thanks you." So, how does Mrs Amis feel about the new improved Mr Amis?

"Well, she hasn't paid me any compliments - but anything that's good for your husband is good for you."

- Ultimate Pilates by Dreas Reyneke (Vermillion) is available from Telegraph Books Direct at £12.99 plus £1.99 p&p. To order, please call 0870 155 7222

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