

The prose and cons of Martin Amis - interview with novelist - Interview

Graham Fuller

The author's dazzling new novel is punishingly funny and as outrageous as the fee he demanded for it

The publication this month of Martin Amis's *The Information* (Harmony) follows the tornado in a teacup that blew through English literary circles in January when he employed the tenacious American agent Andrew Wylie to secure him a [pounds]500,000 (\$794,500) advance for the novel. Wounded parties included Amis's spurned longtime agent, Pat Kavanagh, and novelist A. S. Byatt, who, though not directly involved, publicly lambasted Amis for what she considered his testosterone-driven attempt to drain the London publishing well dry. Amis's alimony payments and his expensive Stateside dentistry were cited by Byatt as the ostensible reasons for what she called his "folie de grandeur," although Amis readers who recall Giles Coldstream's dental terrors in *Dead Babies* (1975) and John Self's in *Money* (1984) might feel sympathetically toward the author's traumatized mouth. In the event, Wylie netted Amis a reported [pounds]480,000 from HarperCollins, only [pounds]20,000 more than the original offer made to Kavanagh.

In writing the new novel, his eighth, potentially a *succes de scandale*, Amis pre-erupted the envy the Wylie deal provoked. *The Information* is a self-lacerating satire about an erudite but unreadable (and virtually unpublishable) English novelist, Richard Tull, who is desperately jealous of his best friend Gwyn Barry, a glib, talent-free writer elevated by his PC, New Agey tome *Amelior* to best-selling megastar status. So incensed is Richard, in fact, that he hires a hit man, one Steve Cousins ("Scoozzy"), to hit this Mend who has written the hit book. Densely rifting on the signifiers and striations of the English class system, lit crit, the PRification of America, marriage, fatherhood, and oral sex, *The Information* is as zeitgeisty, as technically dazzling, and as laugh-out-loud funny as *Money* and *London Fields* (1989). Like those books, it leaves you simultaneously queasy and awed, albeit wondering if its author will ever descend from the lofty heights of his superdemotic ultranaturalism. A courteous voice on the end of the telephone, Amis spoke to me - shortly before his daily game of tennis - on the day he received the first British hardcover copies of *The Information* at the London flat where he writes.

GRAHAM FULLER: How are they looking?

MARTIN AMIS: Very nice.

GF: What's the cover like?

MA: Just plain lettering, with a little typewriter stenciled into the center in a box.

GF: Very writerly.

MA: Yes.

GF: Knowing I was going to talk to you today, I dug out my paperback of *The Rachel Papers* [1973], which is looking very battered and coffee-stained.

MA: I bet. Twenty years old, right?

GF: Yes. It's hard to believe that you've been a published novelist for two decades.

MA: It feels pretty strange from this end, too.

GF: So I want to hear your version of the fuss about your advance, then we'll talk about *The Information*.

MA: I'd prefer that.

GF: Why did you feel driven to hire Andrew Wylie and do you now feel it was a hubristic thing to have done in terms of the negative publicity?

MA: Well, I can't say too much about this, but what I can say is that the negative publicity had already begun, long before I had hired

Andrew Wylie. Confidentiality was lost very early on, and the minute it was lost, I was in an exposed position. There had already been articles based on the assumption that I was a greedy egomaniac. Once it's out in the papers, you're never really in control of events. It kind of all went sour. And so hiring Wylie didn't create the bad publicity. It added to it, but it didn't create it. I don't think I can say too much more than that.

GF: It's been rumored that *The Information* is a roman à clef about you and your novelist friend Julian Barnes, which wouldn't be a big deal in itself, because all writers cannibalize their friends and relatives. But obviously the speculation ripened in this case because Julian Barnes is married to Pat Kavanagh.

MA: I know. It is not, in any sense, a roman à clef. I wouldn't be interested in writing one. The only living writer depicted in the book is Salman Rushdie. And if they're anyone, the two writers, Richard and Gwyn, are me. Pat read this novel over the weekend with Julian in the house, and it never occurred to her that Julian was the basis of either character in the slightest degree, and she ought to know because she's married to him. At a certain level, people think every novel is a roman à clef, and they have trouble believing that a novelist can make anything up.

GF: But you do use autobiographical elements.

MA: It's turned out to have long been my habit in writing to take a little bit of myself and imagine a full character based on that. For instance, in *Money* I took the lustful, ignorant, boozing, brawling 3 percent of my character and forgot about the other 97 percent. In *The Information* I take that part of myself as a writer who feels neglected - which all writers do, no matter how much attention they get. You know, you whimper with neglect even as you make your Nobel acceptance speech. The writer's ego is boundless. On the other hand, when you doubt yourself, as writers professionally have to do almost every day, then you can also feel overrewarded, as if you've just lucked out, when things go well. So I separated those two elements and built characters around them in search of the comedy of the situation. *The Information* is basically a comedy, and comedy in my view now has to do everything. It's as if all the other genres have collapsed, You're going to find some odd things in comedy these days, things that normally wouldn't have much business being in comedy.

GF: Do you think that drama has given up the ghost?

MA: I think it has been largely superseded by the written culture, and now by the audiovisual culture. If you compare English drama to English poetry - where you get wave upon wave of mighty geniuses - and if you take Shakespeare's godlike singularity out of it, there's practically nothing there. There are few distinguished dramatists now.

GF: Have you never been tempted to write a screenplay and make a quick million?

MA: I did, actually, write a screenplay three years ago, a science-fiction satire that never got made. The trouble with writing a screenplay is that it's ultimately a collaborative venture, whereas the novel is a megalomaniac's venture. You're the crowd scene, you're the weather, you're everything. And you get used to that autonomy.

GF: In *Dead Babies*, in *Money*, and in *London Fields*, to some extent, you use the idea of the practical joke as a kind of structuring device. It occurred to me that, either consciously or unconsciously, you were playing a kind of elaborate practical joke when you set out on the agenting of *The Information* - one with very high stakes.

MA: Except a practical joke has to be organized in order to work, and the agent business was a flurry of events, really.

GF: But the literary envy that it seems to have inspired is exactly the theme of the novel.

MA: I know. It's all very bizarre. The book is about a literary enmity, and the deal created a literary enmity that wasn't there before. So it's full of ironies; the book seems to have second-guessed events in a peculiar, postmodern way. But none of this was intended or predictable.

GF: Tell about literary envy as it relates to you. Your standing is high, and it therefore struck me as odd that this was so close to your heart.

MA: We all have our disappointments. There's always some damn thing that you're not getting, some prize or other. As Gore Vidal said,

"It's not enough to succeed. Others must fail." There's always room for disgruntlement. But in writing about writers, I'm in a practically unique position in that - and this may qualify me to write about them or underqualify me to write about them - I was born into a household where there was a practicing writer, my father [Sir Kingsley Amis]; going about his work. Writing is, in some deep sense, unmythical to me as a way of earning a living. As a result, I've never had the highs and lows of authorship. If things go well, I think, That's how things ought to go. And if things go not so well, I think, Well, that's part of the job. I've seen it from my father's point of view, so I can see these swoops and leaps of the ego as kind of ridiculous, even though I'm experiencing them. It's just there in my blood.

GF: Do you think you have an ironic distance on it?

MA: Yes, I think I do. When I get a bad review, I can see my emotions start up, and I can see how it would be if you really cared. But I don't really care, because not everyone's going to like you, and ditto if something good happens. I've seen these ups and downs all my life. Not that my father stormed around the house pulling his hair out or exulting.

GF: Why do you think humiliation, particularly sexual humiliation, has emerged as such a powerful theme in your writing?

MA: [laughs] I think humiliation is the big theme, and sexual humiliation is just part of it. It might be something very simple and even cliched, in that I'm a younger son. My brother is very close to me in age and he used to get his way all the time. I had fifteen years of smarting about that. Then, of course, the comedy of humiliation interested me. It turned out to be my patch.

GF: BUt you're unrelenting with it. You make it a risky business for us to empathize with your protagonists.

MA: Nabokov said, "Never identify with a character, identify with the author" - see what the author is thinking or trying to do. We all do, of course, empathize or sympathize with characters. It sounds whorish in a way, but I want my readers to go through a lot when they read me. I want them to have a great time, but I also want to give them a rough ride and to stretch them. I want the characters to be risky to like.

GF: Books like *London Fields* and *The Information* are metaphors, really, about our condition, so I wonder if you would almost consider it a betrayal if the characters emerged at the end stronger and wiser and surviving.

MA: Well, sometimes that is necessary. The ending of *Money* is an ironic happy ending in that John Self comes through a bit stronger than he went in, despite being humiliated and duped by everyone. Certainly in *The Information* Richard comes out with precious little, although his child is all right - the worst thing doesn't happen.

GF: *The Information* occupies the same territory as *London Fields*. it has the same pub culture, characters from opposite social extremes, and Scozzy is a cousin of Keith Talent. . . .

MA: Yes, in a way. It shows the high and the low and not much in between. There's a major difference, though, in that Scozzy is not a type, and Keith is. In a book about writers, you can't have a type as the nemesis figure; you've got to have an exotic.

GF: There's also that same atmosphere of impending doom, as evinced through all your astronomical interpolations and storm warnings. Did the two novels spring from the same concerns?

MA: I started writing *The Information* five and a half years ago, just after *London Fields*, and took a year off to write *Time's Arrow* [1991] in the middle. In a sense, I think of *Money*, *London Fields*, and *The Information* as a very informal trilogy, with each one standing on its own. Certainly they are the ones I feel are my main contribution. They're just long novels about the same kinds of things - shifting identities, writer figures. They've all got dogs in them; they all have pornography in them; they all have credulous characters who are affected the wrong way by what they read. Either it's a kind of trilogy or it's just my stuff, and I'll be like Graham Greene and go on writing it forever until I'm dead.

GF: There've been some personal upheavals in your life recently. How do you feel spiritually these days?

MA: Actually, fine. I do feel I've come through a giant midlife crisis. People tend to think of the midlife crisis as a cliché, something that happens to dopes who haven't got the character to get through midlife. I disagree; I think it's intrinsic and that a lot of things get sorted out. I feel a bit sorted out, in a good way, and that the crisis is past now. And I'm on better terms with death than I thought I would be three or four years ago. Life seems sort of clearer. Diminished, but clearer.

GF: Turning forty - as Richard and Gwyn do at the start of *The Information*, and as you did when you began writing it - seemed to be the moment when you realized your mortality, but a moment of relief, as well.

MA: You're sort of glad you made it, even to that modest age. You get a dawning awareness of certain things, but it doesn't come on your fortieth birthday. It comes around thirty-eight or thirty-nine; some people get it much earlier. There's a youthful illusion that age and death are just a rumor and that, funnily enough, you've been picked to defy this law. Intellectually, you're satisfied that you're going to get old and die, but you don't feel it in your gut. That feeling of exclusion from time as a universal process might even be the definition of youth. But around forty the jig is up, really, and it's a full-time job looking the other way. You can't get out of the road. It even puts shadows in the orbits of your eyes, that realization, and it changes your balance, your sense of your place in time. Also, you begin to make quite logical but obvious comparisons between what's gone and what's to come. And it isn't good news, on the whole.

GF: I guess I'm trying to divine whether you feel pessimistic or optimistic.

MA: I think that I'm more optimistic than I was.

GF: Has that partly been the result of having children?

MA: Yes. And this will sound old hat now, but the big question of the second half of this century was, What are we going to do with nuclear weapons? Now that we've got out of the emotional idea that it could all end tomorrow, we can look at other things. That's a success story, and an evolutionary development of huge significance. We can now look at other things.

GF: Do you feel your recent books have been written in the shadow of the millennium?

MA: Yes, very much. *London Fields* is proclaimedly about the end of the millennium. You do feel that history is approaching a climax and that all over the world one is seeing the classical symptoms of millennial anxiety and fever: fundamentalism, strange weather, et cetera. I think 1999 will be the year of behaving strangely. People behave strangely at the end of centuries, let alone at the end of millennia. And the world is certainly ripe for it, isn't it?

GF: Yes, although it could all end with a whimper, not a bang. Do you write in white heat, like Robert Louis Stevenson, for example, or are you more of a plodder?

MA: I'm a bit of a grinder. Novels are very long, and long novels are very, very long. It's just a hell of a lot of man-hours. I tend to just go in there, and if it comes, it comes. A morning when I write not a single word doesn't worry me too much. If I come up against a brick wall, I'll just go and play snooker or something or sleep on it, and my subconscious will fix it for me. Usually, it's a journey without maps but a journey with a destination, so I know how it's going to begin and I know how it's going to end, but I don't know how I'm going to get from one to the other. That, really, is the struggle of the novel.

GF: Will you encourage your sons to be writers? You know, Amis fils and Amis petits-fils?

MA: [laughs] My father never encouraged me, and I would never encourage them. I would never discourage them, but I think it's a hollow promise for a writer to tell his son that he can do it, too. It's a way of saying you can have my life. And it's such a long shot that it's better to keep your mouth shut and let your example encourage them, but not your words. They're both extremely witty little boys, so you never know, and it would kind of thrill me if they did write. But they can be anything they like, and it won't make any difference to me. I'm not going to confuse them on the subject.

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