In conversation with Martin Amis Part 1:
Crises and literature

James Crabtree

Earlier this year, journalist Toby Muse interviewed Martin Amis for Prospect, at the Hay Festival in Cartegena, Colombia. Over the coming days, First Drafts will be featuring the highlights of that conversation, with Amis expressing views on topics ranging from terrorism and Barack Obama to his new (much anticipated) novel, and the challenges of portraying the sexual revolution in fiction.

In this first excerpt, Amis talks about the role of literature in a time of crisis, the response to 9/11, and the relevance of Joseph Conrad to Al Qaeda. You can now also view the second excerpt on our blog.

Amis’s assertion in the clip above that the best fiction occurs “belatedly… three years or so [after a crisis]” is intriguing. In response, today we are also publishing a web-exclusive article from our own arts and books editor, Tom Chatfield, entitled “The Return of the Master.”

The next ten months will be an ecstasy of anticipation for Amis watchers, with the publication of his repeatedly-delayed new novel, The Pregnant Widow, finally due at the start of 2010. The title itself refers to a sentiment he mentions in both today’s video clip, and the second clip (which we’ll put up tomorrow)—namely that there is often a gap between conception and birth in art, literature and society alike. It’s an intriguing choice, given, as Tom points out, that Amis himself has of late been all too keen to act as midwife to the intellectual response to world catastrophe, rather than waiting for things to settle:

Since 9/11, however, Amis’s determination to prove equal to even the deepest crisis has been accompanied by a constriction of the verve that made [his earlier work] so engaging—a hankering for definitive moral utterance that has left him looking, often, nervously out of killer with his times. As Michael Tomasky put it in his review of 2008’s The Second Plane, Amis in his most recent incarnation as a public intellectual “sounds increasingly like the embarrassing uncle screaming at the television.”

Tomasky’s sentiment is widely shared, and with it the feeling that Amis’ detour into the politics of terror has been an unfortunate digression. Tom Chatfield’s conclusion is even simpler: “If we’re lucky, The Pregnant Widow may be the book in which the master rediscovers his voice.”

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Australias’s Courier-Mail thought our headline “Sarko the sex dwarf” was

4 Responses

In conversation with Martin Amis - Part 2: The new novel - First Drafts - The Prospect magazine blog says:

May 14, 2009 at 10:43 am

[...] Prospect about his work-in-progress The Pregnant Widow (part one of the interview can be viewed here). As Amis explains, the book’s title is a reference to the “long night of chaos and [...]”

Frederick Willman says:

May 17, 2009 at 1:40 am

Hello, Reviewer:

The greatest UK writer of our times is the late Max Sebald. If you have read him, you
don’t expend too much energy on much else.

Ifenju
Madison, WI, USA

Tom Chatfield says:
May 17, 2009 at 2:02 pm

WG Sebald is both late and German. A towering genius, but not really in the running for the title of greatest living, or even recent, British author …

In conversation with Martin Amis - Part 4: Meeting Colombia’s assassins - First Drafts - The Prospect magazine blog says:
May 21, 2009 at 6:11 pm

[...] can view Part 1, Part 2 and Part 3 of the Amis interviews at these links, plus a web exclusive article from our […]

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In conversation with Martin Amis

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