



OCTOBER 21, 2010 ET

On the Same Page

By Ariel Leve



Photograph by Simon Upton
Martin Amis and Isabel Fonseca at home in London.

On a scorching August day, Isabel Fonseca is slicing tomatoes, preparing a late-afternoon lunch. Her husband, Martin Amis, is sitting at the table reading. The couple have been vacationing in East Hampton, N.Y., for six weeks and are returning home to London the next day. “Are you reviewing that, honey?” she asks, sprinkling fresh basil over mozzarella. Amis shakes his head. He looks up from Saul Bellow’s “Letters,” which has not yet been published, and mentions he’s in the book (Bellow was a close friend). She’s surprised he has not skipped to the page. “I can’t believe you haven’t peeked,” she says, smiling. “I would have.”

Being married to one of Britain’s most celebrated authors could be a disappearing act for some women, but the American Fonseca, 49, is an impressive writer herself. Amis, 61, married both a muse and an equal, and they are mutually supportive even if they don’t show each other works-in-progress. What is evident is their ease in each other’s company. Their exchanges are respectful, playful, tactile. A hand on the knee when the other is speaking.

Nor do they work at the same pace. “The difference is I’m much more ruthless,” Amis says, laughing at what is clearly a familiar subject. “I end up doing more of the drudgery and childcare,” Fonseca adds. “By choice. But I can’t really use that as an excuse, because even when I don’t have [the children], I’m not as productive as Martin.” In London, Amis writes in a shed at the end of their small garden. Fonseca’s study is in the attic. If they bump into each other getting coffee, they stay in their own thoughts. “She’s chattier than I am,” Amis says. “Particularly in the morning. Isabel will ask me at breakfast what I’m doing.” He pauses. “For the next five years.” She laughs.

Fonseca takes a small portion—one tomato and one slice of mozzarella—and serves her husband, who is not an enthusiastic eater. When she says she allows herself to lose momentum with her work, he asks, “Do you think there might even be a gender difference?” Then he tells a story about

growing up in a house with two novelists—Kingsley Amis and Elizabeth Jane Howard. Kingsley was often off in the study (“more or less hermetically sealed in there”), whereas Martin’s stepmother worked in surges.

It has been a rough summer (Amis’s mother passed away and his close friend Christopher Hitchens revealed he has cancer), but now, as in the past, the couple have clung to each other during difficult times, and shared grief has brought them closer.

Their relationship began with a backstory of loss. Not long after they got together, 17 years ago, Fonseca’s brother Bruno and Amis’s father, Kingsley, both died. Soon after her brother’s death, they had their first child, Fernanda, who is now 13. “It’s a particularly awful thing when you lose a part of the original team you came in with,” Fonseca says. “It’s an awful club.” Amis nods while scanning the pages of the book. “It makes you prematurely aware of your own death,” she continues. “Everything is in sharper focus. Your vision is clear.”

Fonseca is currently experiencing a free-floating homesickness for America and they are considering a move. Four out of five of Amis’s children are half-American, and he feels partly American himself; he spent a year here when his father taught at Princeton in the ’50s and he feels connected to American novelists. “I love my adopted country, where my children were born and raised, and am exceedingly proud of my new British citizenship,” Fonseca says. “But I want to go home for a while. I am finding that as we all get older, I am violently missing my parents.”

Fonseca comes from a family of artists (her father was a sculptor, her mother and brothers are painters), a preoccupied, solitary bunch. She has always had an appetite for solitude and so has Amis.

“When you’re finishing something, you might as well put a life-size photograph of yourself at the dinner table,” Amis says. In this way, being married to another writer is the ideal partnership because the need for space is understood.

Fonseca views the relationship as a welcome structure in a world of industry. “No clocking in, no knocking off for the weekend. No vacation, really. And no one to notice if you don’t turn up.”

“Marriage is a running joke,” Amis says. “If it’s a good joke, it’s a good marriage.”

Amis on Fonseca

I rely tremendously on her beauty. She looks very nice when she’s asleep and she wakes with a smile. It’s an extraordinary thing. It’s very unfair, as all things to do with beauty are, but it’s a fact. I rely on it for joie de vivre. It’s proof of her equilibrium as well. Your happiness determines your demeanor in the world.

We’re not terribly social. My idea of a night out is a night in. Just us. Reading a bit—being in the same room. We have a small circle of regular friends; they come to us, we go to them. We’ll sometimes say yes to a fancy party and then always say, “Why did we say yes?”

I like being with her. I admire her very much. I like watching her, looking at her, I love her character. I like the way she treats her computer like s—t, whereas I treat mine like it's made of gold. You know when your computer heats up and makes an awful noise? I switch it off immediately. The other day her computer was sounding like some air-conditioning unit that was on full blast and I said, "What's happening with your computer?" and she said, "I don't know" while going on working. She's competent with all the electronics in a way that I'm not. It amuses me. She's more can-do than me.

I'll do anything for the quiet life. I hate rows, hate conflict. Isabel has a healthy appetite for it. And she feels sort of fine afterwards. Whereas I feel that something has come between me and my concentration. It's not frequent. It's a shock because it's rare. The subtext of it is that she does much more than I do of the shite around the house. Which is true. I don't mean children stuff, although it's true of that. I mean administration.

When she said, "Shall we go and live in Uruguay for three years?"—it was never quite as clear-cut as that, but I said, "I don't even want to be consulted about that."

Fonseca on Amis

He is the more passive one. When we were moving to Uruguay, I don't think he realized we were going until we got on the plane. But I have a pretty good idea of what makes him happy so it helps when I'm making decisions. He has simple needs and likes having separate space.

What he has is fabulous concentration. He has this wonderful ability to block everything out for hours at a time. And months at a time. His sense of center is very much his work. I allow myself to be distracted more.

We're not very social; people think we must be, but we're not. When we're home together, we're reading. We have a lot of historical interests in common, like the Holocaust. It's an unendingly fascinating subject for us.

I have always been fatalistic about the prospect of marital happiness. My parents divorced, as did Martin's. I never expected it to be this good. I was surprised, too, because there were so many sunerings along the way, indeed right from the start. Martin was married to another. My brother was already ill, hopelessly so, when we got together in summer of '93, and he died of AIDS a year later. Then Martin's father died, in '95, and mine in '97, and then his little sister Sally three years later. What are the chances, we could be forgiven for thinking, of someone staying by your side? It still seems like an incredible piece of luck.

Martin is a tender person. I never considered that I needed anybody and I was sort of surprised that I needed it and that he could supply it. I'm a busybody, flapping around doing things; he's the undercurrent, the rock.

We're in sync. He's much more open than he used to be. He's not a great talker about his feelings—in that sense he's a truly British type of person. He would die before ever going to a shrink. But he's warm. Writers in general are not great sharers. I learn about him from his work. The children always have that. He's an older father: He's 61 and Clio is 11, but it's all there.

Sometimes I can joke about his smoking, but actually I dread it. It's not that I don't get it—I smoked for 18 years. But the thing about nagging is, you're not giving the person any new information. And we all know that nobody does anything that they don't want to do.

Martin is not very streetwise. He's very interested in poetry and prose, and that's about it. He's one of the few people I know who can recite pages and pages of prose by heart. He's got such a good memory. That, I envy. I think from his books people think he's a lot cooler than he is. People confuse him with his characters.

Sometimes I worry I've only published two books—two and half if you count the one about my brother—and I'm 49. I get worried about time. Will there be time?

In terms of importance, Martin is there for the kids. He can be interrupted. He's not very strict. He's got three other children and they're needing him too. He's close with every one of his kids. Having young children, I couldn't delegate, I didn't want to. It was the kind of mother I turned out to be. I liked it. But I never want to stand next to a swing again.

Martin is not a hard person to be married to. Very calm, even tempered. I think he's a mystery. Maybe that's good, though.

Edited from Leve's interviews with Fonseca and Amis

Sources: Styling: Michelle Duguid; Grooming: Ruth Brown/The Interior Archive. On Fonseca in photo in front of bookcase: RM knitted dress, Harrods, London, or Rolandmouret.com; Wolford tights, Harrods or Wolford.com. On Fonseca in family photo: Roland Mouret wool dress, Harrods, London, or Rolandmouret.com; Wolford tights, Harrods or Wolford.com; Christian Louboutin court shoes, Harrods or Christianlouboutin.com



Photograph by Simon Upton
Amis and Fonseca with daughters Fernanda, age 13 (left), and Clio, 11 (right)