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Martin Amis: I have racist urges and my father was a 'bit dodgy' too

Just weeks ago, he and his father were both savaged as racist bigots who also "reviled" women, gays and liberals.

But yesterday, award-winning author Martin Amis, 58, appeared to put his hand up to at least one of the charges after admitting "racist urges".

"My grandfather was a racist. My father was a bit dodgy. I think I'm pretty free of racism, but I get little impulses, urges and atavisms now and then", he told Cheltenham Literature Festival.

"I can palpably feel that my children are less racist than I am. Their children will be less racist than they are and so it goes on."

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The usually outspoken Amis had remained uncharacteristically reticent about the charges levelled by leading academic Terry Eagleton until this weekend.

In a new introduction to his classic book, "Ideology: An Introduction", Eagleton had branded Amis' father Kingsley Amis a "racist, anti-Semitic boor, a drink-sodden, self-hating reviler of women, gays and liberals".

He goes on to tar Martin Amis with the same brush, saying: "Amis fils has clearly learned more from [his father] than how to turn a shapely phrase."

But yesterday, Amis junior, widely respected in literary circles for his novels London Fields, Money and The Information and memoir Experience which tackled his relationship with his father, hit back.

He said the charges were "the corniest and laziest second-hand response to Kingsley's work".

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Amis admitted his grandfather was a "burbling, bumbling racist" who was astonished to see black people driving cars in Washington and went on to acknowledge Kingsley, who died in 1995, was mildly anti-semitic.

"I think I'm pretty free of racism, but I get little impulses, urges and atavisms now and then", he added.

"I can palpably feel that my children are less racist than I am. Their children will be less racist than they are and so it goes on."

He went on: "No one can declare themselves free of prejudice.

"Our tribal instincts have been with us for five million years, so to snap your fingers and say you have grown out of that is idle.

You shouldn't indulge it in anyone. But it's delusional to think that we can shrug it off. It is much healthier to look at it that way and not just announce tremblingly that you are completely free of it."

Amis also confessed he had told racist jokes as a young man but "it was done playfully".

The spat with Eagleton appears to have been brewing since Amis, whose father died in 1995, gave an interview last year which focussed on terror attacks by Islamic extremists.

"There's a definite urge (don't you have it?) to say, 'The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order'. What sort of suffering? Not letting them travel. Deportation, further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they're from the Middle East or from Pakistan . . . Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children," he said.

Eagleton, one of the most respected academics in the country, said he found the comments reminiscent of "the ramblings of a British National Party thug".

The situation is likely to continue to be strained as both combatants work at the University of Manchester.

Eagleton is Professor of Cultural Theory while Amis has just taken up a post as head of creative writing.

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