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Martin goes Lucky Jim

Martin Amis explains to Peter Millar why he is going back to university to teach creative writing and reconnect with yooof

Budding authors of the future, breathe out now. Martin Amis, the famously thin-skinned author and acerbic critic who is about to take over at Britain's newest, most ambitious Centre for New Writing insists he is nowhere near as tetchy as his reputation.

Just returned from a two-year sojourn in South America, Amis, the "enfant terrible" of 1970s literature who grew into the "bad boy" clashing with the media on everything from the size of his advances to the cost of his dental work, wants to give something back.

Becoming a Manchester University professor may seem an unlikely move for a writer famed as much for his lifestyle as his literary output, but according to Amis it fulfils a long-held ambition to teach. And to take the pulse of a modern Britain he worries may be becoming somewhere alien with which he no longer feels in touch.

"I won't actually be moving to Manchester," he emphasises with polite but ill-concealed disdain, "I'll just be going up once a fortnight." Although he will spend a substantial part of the other 13 days reading his pupils' efforts at home in London. Manchester University is altogether more fulsome. Having approached Amis tentatively, it boasts on its website that it was a "coup" to get him.

Amis is very much aware that today's students "see themselves as customers" and is determined to entrench in them a "love for serious literature, great books, Conrad, Jane Austen. It won't be just them doodling and me looking fondly over their shoulder". Austen was a seminal influence on turning young Amis into a writer when his mother, Elizabeth Jane Howard, herself an author, introduced her schoolboy son to her work.

He also won't be suffering fools gladly, and will have more than a few sharp words for any budding writer unwilling to cause offence or kowtowing to political correctness, especially to current sensitivities about Islam.

"I'm astonished at the failure to identify Islamism as dangerous, to see it for what it is: a millennial death cult with us very much in its sights. There is a tendency in England to see anyone with darker skin as a victim of repression, or some past crime committed by our empire or government and not for who they are." He adds hastily: "We respect Muhammad, but not Mohammed Atta [the 9/11 hijacker and subject of his latest novella]."

On the question of growing Islamophobia, he says: "A 'phobia' is something irrational, but there is a need not to kowtow. It's not the same as anti-Islamism." Amis, as ever, is nothing if not precise with words — something Manchester students will swiftly have to come to terms with.

He regrets how the issues surrounding Islam, such as wearing the veil, have "come out onto the streets" in what he sees as a society that has otherwise coped well with the challenge of multiculturalism. Britain, he feels, is still very much "behind the wave" in terms of political correctness. "I think PC has peaked in the United States. People are much less inhibited now about the way they speak. But it hasn't quite peaked here — maybe it has for younger people in their twenties — but with those in their thirties or forties, you still feel you have to be careful about stereotypes, and reverse stereotypes."

That is one reason why he is keen to get to grips with the younger generation — even though his students will be graduates rather than undergraduates — those he calls "the latest batch", whom he suspects, hopes, will be "postpolitically correct".

"I haven't met them yet, but it'll be a relief if I find they're not ideological," although he is aware of the danger of the opposite extreme. "It would be dreadful to find they're all the perfect products of a market state."

He certainly has no time for those who think the course is going to teach them to be the next Dan Brown or JK

Rowling: "The weeding-out process has to deal with those who think it's all just about getting hold of a few tricks of the trade — learn those and it's a short cut to all the razzmatazz. If that's what they think they're doing, they're going to be disappointed. They need commitment, great courage — writing a novel lays you open in a way no other creative work does."

It is partly reading the material produced by new, young and raw talent that has attracted him to the job, to gain an insight into the real thought processes of a younger generation. But he is also aware that Manchester is following in the footsteps pioneered by the East Anglia University creative writing course founded by Malcolm Bradbury: "Their record of publications per pupil suggests [creative writing] can be taught." So can Amis, who confesses he's no tech-nophile — "I'm all thumbs with modern phones, can't work the DVD player" — connect with the MySpace generation? "Yes, at a distance."

And teach them? "You can't teach talent, but you can bring it on, head them off blind alleys, give them tips about time management. I would have liked to have some advice of that sort when I was about 25."

Didn't his father, Kingsley Amis, give him such tips? "Yes, but it was very much sentence by sentence. He didn't give me some of the tips I could give now to my younger self."

One of those will be impressing on students that learning how to write novels will involve learning to read differently: "to identify with the author, not with the character, to see what he is trying to do".

Amis would not deny that he is taking his new job as much for his own self-improvement as for that of his future students. He confesses to a "long-held desire to be out in the world, to have colleagues". For the past two years Amis has been living with his young family in Uruguay — his wife Isabel Fonseca is half-Uruguayan — which he described as "a detachable interlude" in which he came to love the country but could not quite get his tongue around the Spanish language. He said: "My wife speaks the language well and my daughters have become fluent but I couldn't quite find the time."

As for his move to Manchester, he wouldn't mind if enough material for a new book came out of it, even chuckling graciously when I compare the idea to Lucky Jim, his father's breakthrough novel set in a 1950s provincial English university.

"It would be nice, and everything falls into the pot, but I won't be writing about it while I'm there." Does that suggest a fixed tenure? "We've said we'll see how it goes."

Going back into academia was the young Amis's fallback route; he felt he could easily have been caught up in the "classic 'two cultures' debate between CP Snow and FR Leavis", about the clash between the sciences and the humanities. But he got a job at The Times Literary Supplement, and the immediate success of his first novel, the heavily autobiographical *The Rachel Papers*, clinched his fate.

Success followed success, including a 1977 novel entitled *Success*, which told the story of two foster brothers whose fortunes rose and fell together, an early example of pairing characters in his novels, which he has used repeatedly, most recently in *The Information*. It was over the 1984 novel *Money* that his father, Kingsley, most graphically exhibited his exasperation over his son's very different prose style. According to Amis, when his father reached a point in the novel where a character called Martin Amis appears, he threw the book across the room and never read another thing his son wrote.

He will warn would-be writers of the "immense solitude" of the author's working environment, which he described as "a sort of sedentary, carpet slippers, self-inspecting, nose-picking, arse-scratching kind of job".

Throughout his career he has been only too aware of a certain inverted snobbery attached to the way he has been treated critically in England. "It's something to do with poncy accents, Oxford, being the son of the father. I'm Prince Charles. But there are fewer children of writers who become writers than children of bus conductors who become bus conductors."

He doesn't feel he has become more politically right wing with the advancing years, rather that the centre in Britain has drifted to the left. "It's not really the left though. Nick Cohen's book said it all."

He found Cohen's book *What's Left?*, a controversial and scathing critique of modern left-wing incoherence, spoke to his own politics directly: "It's a sanitary corrective to a lot of woozy undirected sympathy swilling around."

Becoming a professor may not yet have turned the "bad boy" into an *éminence grise*, nor quite a grumpy old man.

Tetchy, he isn't, but not tame either. Edgy might be a better word. Martin Edge. Hmm, could be an Amis character.

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