A few years ago, when it was announced that Martin Amis was writing a novel concerning pornography, the royal family and pedophilia, the reaction in his home country was, shall we say, slightly elevated. Now that book, *Yellow Dog*, has been published, and Amis has faced a storm of criticism, most poignantly encapsulated by fellow English author Tibor Fischer, who suggested that reading *Yellow Dog* was akin to finding “your favorite uncle … in a school playground, masturbating.”

But Amis is no stranger to the hard stuff. His previous books — such as *Success* (1978) and *Money* (1984), as well as his famously dirty short story, “Let Me Count the Times” (1981) — smartly conflated pornography with literary fiction long before that was in vogue. In 2000, he wrote a long and oddly contemplative essay for *Talk* magazine in which he interviewed John "Buttman" Stagliano and the XXX starlet Chloe, the self-proclaimed "Queen of Anal."

The protagonist of *Yellow Dog*, Xan Meo, suffers a vicious attack that renders him helplessly sex obsessed. Eventually, he's drawn into an ugly blackmail scheme involving the royal family and an illicit videotape. Nothing that follows will seem particularly shocking to fans of the Amis oeuvre, in which unreasonably bad things often happen to reasonably good people, making them become bad, and do bad things — namely incest, murder and a fair amount of impolite ejaculating. What might be surprising, however, is that the author doesn't find that funny anymore.

Here, Nerve talks to Amis about his own relationship to pornography, the pervasiveness of the facial come shot, and the Great Satan of porn.

— Philip Higgs

For the new novel, how did you come to focus on porn?

Well, it’s a great modern theme. But it seems to be very dynamic at the moment – it’s mutating and encroaching onto the mainstream in a

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**Fill in the blanks:**

"Chocolate is sexy; hot chocolate is **sexier**."
literary sex
scenes. This
month:
jealousy,
inadequacy and
a whole new
missionary
p

Scanner
by Ada Calhoun
Our crush of the
week

is a
gay-friendly
Southern
Baptist.

Horoscopes
by Neal Medlyn
Your week in
sex

Film Reviews
by Blige Ebiri,
Logan Hill and
Ali Moss
Days of Heaven
is paradise;
Kinky Boots is a
retread. Plus,
Date DVD.

Girls Gone Retro
by Anonymous
Some fantasies
never fade.

14 Days in the
Life
by Various
The best of the
Nerve photo
blogs.

Bad Girls Go
Everywhere
by Ada Calhoun
A Q&A with
Mary Harron,
director of The
Notorious Bettie
Page.

Naughty
Crosswords
by Jorge
Stafford
This week:
"How Do You
Do?" — four
ways you can.

Sex Advice from
Gossip
Columnists
by Will Doig
Q: Have you
ever slept with a
source?

Are you a fan of
porn?
[laughs] Well it's hard
to be a fan here [in
England], because
there is none. I mean,
there are sex
channels, but all the
action is obscured by
someone’s shoe, or a
bowl of flowers. You’d
have to be a very
dedicated user of the
Internet, now, to
become addicted to it,
as everyone seems to
be. But I don’t know
how to use the
Internet, and there’s no pornography around. So, no. [And] I’m too old for it
now.

So, you’re too lazy to get the porn?
I think, like every other man, there’s a bit of me that would be perfectly
happy looking at pictures of naked women for the rest of my life and doing
nothing else at all. But I’m also of the generation that is slightly
squeamish and resists it. I’m not evolved in that way. I have moral doubts
about it, and they’re increasing as pornography surges into the
mainstream. What strikes me is that it has now taken the place of sex
education, and the idea of one’s children’s sexuality being formed by
some medallion-in-the-chest-hair artist in Los Angeles is daunting.

I didn’t grow up with the Internet, but I was exposed to sex at a
young age — Penthouse or Playboy or whatever from an older
brother. So there’s always an introduction point, especially in the
young man’s life, to the pornographic side of sex. Is it the sheer
mass of it all that’s the problem now?
We’re not sure what it is, whether it’s a problem or not, but it’s certainly
bizarre. [Looking at Penthouse or Playboy] is not like watching hours of
bump n’ grind. It’s hard to get a sex education out of them.

Unless you read those little columns.
Right. But it’s the graphic nature of it, with several sexual acts — well, at
least one main sex act that’s hardly featured in the mainstream, or never
used to be, anyway. I’m referring to the facial. I’ve talked to young people
who say that’s very much part of the repertoire now.

The repertoire in what they see or what they do?
What they do.

Oh. Well.
[laughs] Yeah.

There’s an awful lot of sperm being spent in Yellow Dog, as there is
in Money. Is it all some kind of onanistic warning against the
wasting of the life force or something?
Well, that’s what I come up with in the end [of Yellow Dog]; that’s the
reason why women object more strongly to pornography, used to.
That’s their power base. If babies were made by other means – like
telepathy or sneezing, say – then women wouldn’t have a reason to
object to pornography, because then it doesn’t attack their sort of raison
d’etre: the power to give birth. And let’s be clear: What pornography deals
with is the sexual act that peoples the world, an absolutely fundamental
act. Women don’t object to gay pornography for that reason, I think,
because nothing’s going to waste; it’s not to do with their primeval power.

That’s a pretty heavy biblical, moralist way to see things.
I don’t think women consciously think that, I think that’s the reason why
they really do object to it in a way that men don’t.
There’s also a fair amount of anal sex in the book — a whole section on why "pussies are bullshit." Is this another take on the seed-spilling warning?
Well, it’s sort of animalistic and, well, dirty.

In "Let Me Count the Times," there’s a facial shot or two, and loads of masturbation. Where were you coming from, pornographically, in 1981, versus now? Is the porn zeitgeist much thicker?
It’s a moving target. More specifically, an evolving target. In Yellow Dog, it’s the sort of unembarrassed nature of pornography that I’m getting at. Along with other failures of modesty in the contemporary landscape. For instance, the mobile phone, and the new democracy of the midriff. And reality TV shows and all the rest of it. The loss of inhibition is so complete and, as it were, effortless, that it makes me feel — every now and then and not for very long at a time — like a sort of medieval puritan.

Is this the Great Moral Shift of the Oughties? What’s driving this loss of inhibition?
It’s not a collective decision; it’s a kind of drift. No one’s forced it on them, it’s spontaneous. It’s in flux. It feels like a good thing in that people seem to be less inhibited about their bodies — they’ll show you their midriff no matter how tubby or stretch-marked it is. That seems to be a plus. On the other hand, you get the feeling that people have never been more obsessed by their bodies — putting spikes in your lips or in your tongue, which is a tremendously assertive way of magnifying the importance of your body. If you talk to [people with piercings], that’s what they say it is: They say they now have a relationship with their tongue that they didn’t have before because they’ve got a jewel festering in the middle of it. So it’s very much being into the body, but at the same time being away from it. That’s one of the many contradictions. We’ll just have to await developments.

Doesn’t selling have a lot to do with it? Anytime you can get someone’s basic urges up, you can sell them something.
Well, people have been talking about that for 30 or 40 years. But now we’re desensitized, we hardly notice it. It’s not a shadowy area anymore, it’s right out in the light. But, as someone says in Yellow Dog, for pornography to be respectable, then masturbation has to be respectable. And indeed, that’s what people are saying, that wanking’s cool. It’s no longer the dirty little secret; we’re too grown up for that. But is it very grown up? It’s sort of regressive and infantile in some ways, too.

But there’s still some shame.
Well, it’s impossible to imagine it being completely cleansed of all stigma. But we’re edging in that direction. Usually these things go one step forward and one step back, but it’s very hard to imagine a new Puritanism at the moment — unless it would be top-down, unless a new administration, an even more right-wing and religious administration, took on pornography, as has been the tendency in the past.

So it’s not so shocking anymore, but you say you still can’t get much of it in England. Here in America, of course, it’s everywhere. Is America the Great Satan of porn?
Well, it’s enormous in Russia, too. It’s probably like American emissions accounts for something like twenty-five percent of the world’s pollution: I should think that’s an equivalent figure for pornography, too. I don’t see it as a black cloud of filth that’s going to choke and engulf us all and that, but I’m sure America is as preponderant there as it is in many other spheres.

So is this a sign that we’re regressing?
No. It doesn’t seem like a regression to me. We’ve had it with onerous things, like guilt and shame. There’s been some sort of subliminal collective decision to throw all that off. But you don’t get freedom that easily. What usually happens is the guilt and shame are still there, but they’re sublimated, and will take new forms. Again, the past has a weight. You can’t shrug it off. You can seem to, but you can’t actually.

In Yellow Dog, there’s a great deal of temptation — sexual, violent and otherwise. And it’s shown up before, in Money, most notably, but also in Success. It’s always around. What’s the temptation issue for you?
I like it. I like to create women characters who really do understand male
sexuality and male sentimentality and all the rest, and who make the
temptation as ferocious as possible. But it all comes under the heading of —
and this is what I’ve always been writing about — masculinity and what
a paradoxical state it is. It’s a constant trade-off, and not with the
conscious mind. The real paradox about masculinity is that it rests on
potency and the ability to have an erection, and now that that’s chemically
available, and — though no one’s whispered a word of it yet — what that
will do to masculinity is truly revolutionary.

In what way?
Well it should take away the main cause of male insecurity. As someone
says, “There will be no more wars.”

But young men fight wars as well.
Well, that remark is tossed out, but in fact that is the size of this event. It
might not take that form, but that is the utopian outcome.

There’s a quote near the beginning of Yellow Dog from one of the
main characters, Xan Meo, that says maybe women have it right,
that five million years of men in power hasn’t done the world a lot of
good and that maybe it’s time to “give the girls a go.” Things seem
to go right in the book when the girls are in control, but the men
always come around to screw it up.
The idea that men and women have worked it out now, and made an
orderly transfer of power, and that this has been frictionlessly
accomplished, is something I doubt. The power struggle goes on. As Xan
says [late in the book, in a letter to his estranged wife], it would be very
remarkable if women weren’t a bit crazed by their gains in power, and if
men weren’t slightly crazed by their loss. But it’s just a new configuration;
it’s not peace between the two parties. The story goes on; it’s not over, it’s
not fixed.

In the book, you seem to want to reserve sex for its original
purpose.
No, that would be a ridiculous project. But one would suggest that it can’t
be deprived of meaning without a price being paid. To think that it’s
meaningless is actually not the case. When you’re young, you certainly try
to behave as if it’s meaningless, but it isn’t. It catches up with you.

You’ve often been labeled a cynic. How much of that do you hold for
the more traditional things — love and marriage and all that?
I think I’m unbearably sentimental about it all. But I would say of marriage
what Churchill said of democracy, that it’s the worst possible human
arrangement apart from all the other human arrangements.

In Yellow Dog, there’s no real description of sex acts that involve
more genuine emotion. Is tender sex too meaningful to write about?
As [one of the characters] says in Yellow Dog, there are only two things
that novels can’t do: sex and dreams. But novels can do bad sex, or
unreal sex, cartoonish sex, insincere sex. But no one’s ever written well
about significant sex.

No examples from your own oeuvre?
No, I don’t think I’ve ever attempted it.

What about other novelists?
Well, D.H. Lawrence and John Updike, I suppose, have tried hardest, but
it doesn’t make for comfortable reading. I think the main point is that it
immediately becomes non-universal. It’s too peculiar, too particular.

You once said that after finishing London Fields, you felt like a
"clinical moron" from the effort. After finishing Yellow Dog — or
even after researching it, when you went to California to hang out
with porn stars — how did you feel? Did you feel like a moral
moron?
No, I felt fine. I felt like Nabokov describes it: I’m like a mother who’s just
given birth. I’m very weak, and there’s a baby in the corner of the room,
its face the color of an inner tube.
To buy *Yellow Dog*, click here.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Philip Higgs is a writer living, somewhat uncharacteristically for him, outside of New York. He will one day write a novel, but not anytime soon.