

Martin Amis leaps back into the ring

By **Kate Summerscale**

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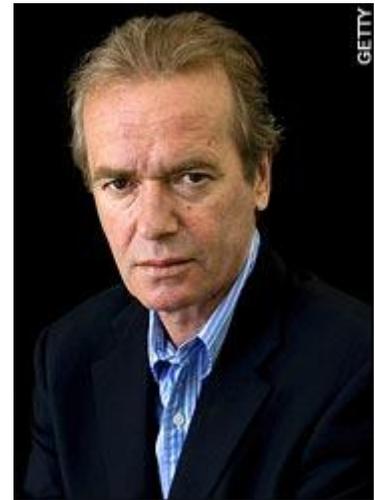
It's been 15 months since Martin Amis and his second family – the writer Isabel Fonseca and their daughters, Fernanda, 10, and Clio, eight – arrived back in England after nearly three years in Uruguay and they still haven't quite unpacked.

The living room of their big terrace house in Primrose Hill is scattered with boxes and ladders; in Amis's study, the desk is still swaddled with thick packing paper and masking tape.

There, Amis, dressed in dark grey shirt and trousers and a soft black waistcoat, offers me a scuffed leather armchair next to the electric heater, while he sits at the desk, beneath a skylight littered with leaves. As we talk he slowly hand-rolls cigarettes, or gently works a pink paperclip between his fingers.

Amis, who has just taken up a post as professor of creative writing at Manchester University, has been attacked in print by one of his new colleagues, the influential literary theorist Terry Eagleton.

In the most recent edition of the Marxist primer *Ideology*, Eagleton quoted an observation by Amis that "the Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order" and a suggestion that we strip-search "people who look like they're from the Middle East or from Pakistan".



Martin Amis says Terry Eagleton got his facts wrong

"Not the ramblings of a British National Party thug," remarked Eagleton, "but the reflections of Martin Amis, leading luminary of the English metropolitan literary world." For good measure, he described Amis's late father, Kingsley, as "a racist, anti-Semitic boor, a drink-sodden, self-hating reviler of women, gays and liberals", and added: "Amis fils has clearly learnt more from him than how to turn a shapely phrase."

advertisement In his first interview since the attack, Amis delivers his counter-blast. Eagleton is "slovenly", says Amis, lighting his first roll-up of the afternoon.

He is "a disgrace to his profession", and possessed of "a not very charming combination of ill will and laziness".

First, he says, Eagleton got his facts wrong. Though the professor claimed to have taken the offending remarks from an essay written last month, "none of them were from the essay I wrote – last year – but from a press interview he had dug up. How he imagined he was reading an essay when he read those quotes, I don't know".

Eagleton has also stripped the comments of their context, says Amis. The interview took place in August 2006, soon after the revelation of an alleged terrorist plot to blow up 10 aeroplanes flying out of Britain.

In the heat of that moment, Amis said to his interviewer: "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..."

Amis argues that by omitting the prefatory "There is a definite urge – don't you have it?" Eagleton has distorted his meaning, and obscured the fact that he had been describing an emotion rather than arguing an ideological position. "I wasn't advocating it."

The "urge", said Amis, "evaporated within a few hours, in my case, and I don't think any of those measures would have been moral, or effective". Eagleton "wants to have enemies," said Amis, "but he won't check what they say or the context they say it in." He is "looking for trouble, but he's not taking any trouble".

Eagleton has form in this matter, he believes.

Earlier this year, says Amis, his friend Salman Rushdie was also embroiled in a spat "rigged up" by Eagleton, who, he claims, "was reduced to helpless apology at the end of it. He just got it all wrong. He said Salman was pro the Iraq war.

And Salman wrote in, listing his activities against the war, his tours, his lectures, his constant campaigns...

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