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[Martin Amis' memoir paints his father,](#)  
[novelist Kingsley Amis, as an affectionate,](#)  
[witty scoundrel](#)

- REVIEWED BY Erik Tarloff  
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## EXPERIENCE

A Memoir By Martin Amis Talk/Miramax  
 Books; 406 pages; \$23.95



The subject of sons and fathers has provided writers with a rich literary lode. The mother lode, one could almost say. Turgenev, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky come to mind, as do Dickens, Proust, Hemingway, Lawrence and Roth.

The list can probably be extended almost indefinitely. And it's rare indeed for the unwitting sitter in a son's portrait to appear in a flattering light. (Vladimir Nabokov's "Speak, Memory," is a rare exception.) Most such portraits seem, rather, like acts of Oedipal vengeance.

Martin Amis' family could, if one favored such facile judgments, be characterized as downright dysfunctional, and his father as a bred-in-the-bone monster. Sir Kingsley Amis was an alcoholic and compulsive womanizer who abandoned wife and family for another woman when his children were young. He was anti-Semitic, misogynistic, xenophobic and, in the last three decades or so of his life, bitterly reactionary.

He was, famously, a prickly and difficult companion, given to harshly unforgiving judgments proclaimed with unsparingly acid wit. He possessed an almost infantile need to have his own way in matters great and trivial. He was a mass of phobias and neuroses which he made no particular effort to resist, and which he expected others to indulge.

What therefore surprises most about this superb memoir is how loving a picture of the father his son provides. And this doesn't result from obfuscation; there are no traces of whitewash here, nor any strategic applications of the airbrush. Sir Kingsley's crotchets and tetchiness are observed unblinkingly, as in the following:

"Soon after 'Stanley and the Women' was published, in 1984, he said to me, 'I've finally worked out why I don't like Americans.' I waited.

"'Because everyone there is either a Jew or a hick.'

"'What's it like being mildly anti-Semitic?'

"'It's all right.'"

Martin Amis gives us a father who says such things (and worse), who is sometimes falling-down drunk, who publicly questions the value of his son's fiction and who unembarrassedly creates public scenes on a fairly regular basis.

But he also shows us a father who is warmly affectionate, physically demonstrative -- the members of the Amis family always hugged and kissed upon greeting one another, even into adulthood -- and subversive enough to seem like a kindred spirit to a bright and irreverent young man, regardless of their political and artistic differences. And he shows us a wit of legendary dimension, a man who paid his children the rare compliment of treating them as allies in his rather alarming merriment.

The crucial importance of the comic in human relationships can be a great mystery to the humorless, but for the rest of us, it covers a multitude of other lapses. As Martin says in another context -- after dismissing a certain critic as a "humorless worthy mediocrity" -- "... by calling him humorless I mean to impugn his seriousness, categorically." This is a splendid sentence, a world-class sentence, and tells us much about the redemptive aspects of his relationship with his father. He lets us accompany him and his brother, for example, to the celebratory lunch at which their father toasts their loss of virginity in a manner Martin characterizes as "comically extravagant." And afterward, "... he led us to an ambiguous little outlet in a side street north of Piccadilly. Some will consider it appropriate that he bought for us there, among the Brylcreem jars and the jockstraps and the hernia supports, a gross of condoms: 144."

A father like that, difficult though he may be, also offers wonderful, and wonderfully seductive, compensations.

And there is this description, admirable equally in its clear-eyed harshness and its forgiveness, of the events surrounding the end of the younger Amis' first marriage: "(H)e knew . . . that the process could not be softened or hastened. All you could do was survive it. That surviving it was a possibility he showed me, by example. But he did more. He roused himself and did more. 'Talk as much as you want about it or as little as you want': these words sounded like civilisation to me, in my barbarous state, so dishevelled in body and mind. Talk as much or as little . . . I talked much. Only to him could I confess how terrible I felt, how physically terrible, bemused, subnormalised, stupefied from within, and always about to flinch or tremble from the effort of making my face look honest, kind, sane. Only to him could I talk about what I was doing to my children. Because he had done it to me."

The memoir is not limited to his relationship to his father, although that theme predominates. It is also a sort of requiem to a murdered cousin and a moving account of his coming of age as an artist and a man. It offers, along the way, some striking pen-portraits of some of his friends, Saul Bellow and Christopher Hitchens particularly. And it must be said that, finding himself with an opportunity to settle some old scores -- with the likes of A.S. Byatt, Julian Barnes, Pat Kavanagh and Eric Jacobs, people with whom his acrimonious history is a matter of messy public record -- he largely forbears. Whether this is a testament to maturity and strength of character or (given the stringent nature of British libel laws) a response to advice of counsel is anyone's guess.

There is another recurrent theme, one which most Americans will find close to incomprehensible. This is the theme of his oral surgery. A great many pages are devoted to the agonies he has endured in the course of losing his teeth and having his jaw reconstructed.

One needs to know the extent to which he was pilloried in the British press for undergoing these travails -- as if it were a function of his vanity and nothing more -- to understand the masochistic luxuriance with which he recounts every dental visit, every procedure and prosthetic device. See? he seems to be saying, no one would be crazy enough to suffer like this for vanity. These passages might be effectively shaming to his critics at home, but they'll probably prove somewhat

bewildering to American readers.

Still, all those missing teeth notwithstanding, this is a magnificent book, probably the best literary memoir of the last 40 years.

*Erik Tarloff is the author of ``The Man Who Wrote the Book.''*

Page RV - 1

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