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BOOKS OF THE TIMES

For Writers, Father and Son, Out of Conflict Grew Love

BY MICHIKO KAKUTANI

With novels like "London Fields," "Money" and "The Information," Martin Amis has demonstrated that he is a writer equipped with a daunting arsenal of literary gifts: a dazzling, chameleonesque command of language, a willingness to tackle large issues and larger social canvases and an unforgiving, heat-seeking eye for the unwholesome ferment of contemporary life. The one thing lacking in his work, readers might have argued, was an emotional sincerity; too often his writing substituted sardonic detachment for heartfelt feeling, chilly postmodern pyrotechnics for a concern with what one of Amis' heroes, Saul Bellow, has called "the mysterious circumstances of being."



EXPERIENCE

A Memoir.

By Martin Amis.
 Illustrated. 406 pp. New York:
 Talk Miramax
 Books/Hyperion. \$23.95.

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All that has changed with "Experience," Amis' remarkable new memoir. The entertainingly footnoted volume loops back and forth in time to chronicle the author's coming of age with becoming earnestness and humor and serves up some charmingly antic set pieces including what must surely stand as the darkest and funniest account of dental surgery ever written. The book will be best remembered, however, for its wonderfully vivid portrait of the author's late father, the comic novelist and poet Kingsley Amis. It is

a portrait of a father and son as deeply affecting as the one Philip Roth created in his 1991 book, "Patrimony," a portrait animated by clear-eyed literary insight and enduring love and affection.

Certainly it could not have been easy being Kingsley Amis' son. The elder Amis' acidic memoirs, published in 1991, not only settled dozens of literary scores, but also drew a self-portrait of a willful curmudgeon who was as prickly as he was unsparing. Kingsley Amis gave interviews characterizing his son's books as unreadable, his liberal politics as "dangerous, howling nonsense."

"My father never encouraged me to write, never invited me to go for that longshot," Martin Amis writes in "Experience," "he praised me less often than he publicly dispraised me."

Yet beneath the apparent antipathy, father and son evinced a clear literary kinship. Both got their start as angry young men with a dyspeptic gift for satire and biting humor. Both wrote a series of novels featuring feckless, self-deluded heroes. And both have admirably lived up to Amis Senior's credo that "any proper writer ought to be able to write anything from an Easter Day sermon to a sheep-dip handout."



Michael Birt/Talk Miramax Books

Martin Amis

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Martin Amis suggests in these pages that some of his father's more provocative political statements were simply exercises in "winding me up," and in "Experience," he conveys the bantering, comradely quality of the relationship between his own younger self -- "a drawling, velvet-suited, snakeskin-booted" adolescent cultivating a ridiculous "plumed and crested manner" -- and Kingsley in his prime, a tireless womanizer, drinker and raconteur, an inexhaustible "engine of comedy," presiding over the household's humor and high spirits.

As an adult Martin took his two young sons to lunch at his father's every Sunday, and also joined his father for a garrulous midweek meal. When the younger Amis left his wife for another woman in 1993, it was his father he turned to for solace and advice. "Only to him," he writes, "could I confess how terrible I felt, how physically terrible, bemused, subnormalized, 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."

After the collapse of his marriage to Elizabeth Jane Howard (for

whom he had left Martin's mother, Hilary, in 1963), Kingsley Amis began to enter a decline. Even in his youth he'd suffered from nyctophobia (fear of the night) and monophobia (fear of being alone), and in the wake of Howard's departure, Martin and his brother began to take turns "Dadsitting," promising him that he'd never have to spend an evening alone. They eventually helped arrange for their mother and her third husband to take up residence with Kingsley in an unorthodox menage that would endure for 15 years.

To this day Martin Amis credits his mother's caretaking with bringing his father "back to life and love," and enabling him to renounce the bitterness and misogyny so evident in books like "Stanley and the Women," and to go on to write such comic masterworks as "The Old Devils."

Eventually, the toll of years of drinking -- combined, perhaps, with Alzheimer's disease -- would rob Kingsley of the two things most intrinsic to his sense of self: his capacity for laughter and his love of words. "I now see that this was an alternate-world Kingsley," Martin Amis writes of his father's final weeks, "an anti-Kingsley, confined from now on to a regime of tautologies and commonplaces. What his brain was doing was the *opposite of writing*."

In "Experience" Martin Amis writes not only of his father's death in 1995, but of the other events that rocked his world in the mid-90s: the dissolution of his first marriage, the discovery that he had fathered a daughter named Delilah some 20 years earlier, his much talked-about break with his good friend, the novelist Julian Barnes, and the revelation that his beloved cousin, Lucy Partington, who mysteriously disappeared two decades ago, had been murdered and dismembered by one of Britain's most notorious serial killers, Frederick West.

The disappearance of Lucy in 1973, coupled with the grisly circumstances of her death, Amis observes, seems to have planted the seeds of "infinite fear" in his unconscious, and in retrospect perhaps fueled the morbid strain in his fiction, his inclination to focus, in his novels, on death and loss and extremity, and to grapple with them with hyperbole and black humor.

In "Experience," however, Amis speaks "for once, without artifice" of the "ordinary miracles and ordinary disasters" of real life -- of what it means to be a son, and what it means to be a father with children of his own. The result is Amis' most fully realized book yet -- a book that fuses his humor, intellect and daring with a new gravitas and warmth, a book that stands, at once, as a loving tribute to his father and as a fulfillment of his own abundant talents as a writer.

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