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MARTIN AMIS: DOWN LONDON'S MEAN STREETS

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Byline: By Mira Stout: Mira Stout is an American writer living in London. Her work has appeared in The Financial Times, The Spectator and The Paris Review.

Lead: LEAD: MARTIN AMIS IS probably fiction's angriest writer. In Britain, with its long and decorous literary tradition, his voice stands out discordantly from the rest like a boom box at a harpsichord recital. His urban satires have provoked extreme reactions in Britain, none more so than his latest, most ambitious novel, "London Fields."

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MARTIN AMIS IS probably fiction's angriest writer. In Britain, with its long and decorous literary tradition, his voice stands out discordantly from the rest like a boom box at a harpsichord recital. His urban satires have provoked extreme reactions in Britain, none more so than his latest, most ambitious novel, "London Fields." Although mysteriously absent from this year's nominations for the Booker Prize, England's most prestigious literary award, the book is in the midst of a long run near the top of the best-seller list and has triggered phenomenal media attention. In recent years, Amis has become an outright literary star - an anomaly in Britain. But then, his prose is probably more American than British in its energy and raucousness. For many critics, Amis's comic talent is unrivaled, but for others, mostly older and conservative readers, he is a malevolent harpie, with morbid, vaguely unpatriotic interests. Intriguingly, his father is Kingsley Amis, one of Britain's original Angry Young Men of the 1950's, now a Thatcherite Conservative. Martin sees a fouler England than his father does.

"London is a pub," he declares, looking disgustedly out of his study window into the gray street below. "Not the pub with the jolly butcher and the smiling grannies; it's the pub of eight or nine alcoholics, a handful of hustlers and nutcases and a few token regular people. It's a stew," he declares. "The whole idea of the pub as a place for the working man has vanished. Who's working? Now the pub is where you go all day. We're in a gentle, deep decline," he says quietly. "Not as frenzied as America's, but perhaps even more poignant, more tragic."

Shoppers at London's chic Burlington Arcade or tourists queueing for tickets to the latest Andrew Lloyd-Webber extravaganza may disagree with him; the British look richer than they did a decade ago. BMW's and Mercedes-Benzes jam the bus lanes,

the Royal Family soap opera is better than ever, and Thatcher's Government is enjoying its 10th consecutive year of Tory rule. On the surface, all looks well indeed, and for many it is. As in most things English, London's malaise is subtle, and class-inflected. "London Fields" - to be published in America next month - floodlights the sagging underbelly of Thatcherite consumerism.

Now 40 years old, Amis has written six novels, a collection of short stories and another of articles. Where his early, more self-gratifying novels were a pungent brew of sex, drugs and murder, his recent work (fiction and nonfiction) has ambitiously opened out into junk culture, nuclear weapons, America, and now the destruction of the environment. He traces his characters' destructive behavior to the overwhelming shadow of the bomb. Says a jaded character in "London Fields": "If at any moment nothing might matter, then who says nothing didn't matter already?"

Talking politics with Amis, it's easy to forget that he is a satirical writer; his pitch-black humor springs from a bristling arsenal of outrage, despair and fear. "If you laugh at it, it evens things out, makes it easier to live with," he says. Amis's laughter is vengeful; vigilante humor.

His last few novels have buried the myth of a decent, gentle, pastoral England, paving over the site with cement-hard observations of a seedy, queasy new Britain, part strip-joint, part Buckingham Palace. If 10 years of Thatcherism have materially bolstered Britain, there is a grudging national consensus that prosperity has hardened her spirit. Amis's mean London streets are litter-strewn, vandalized; morality is nudged toward bankruptcy by "market forces." His characters are close to the edge, more like New Yorkers than traditionally stoic Londoners. Amis's sharp social ear prompts some comparison with Tom Wolfe, but he's more literary, idiosyncratic, closer to Nabokov in his primary, sensuous delight in language. "London Fields" is not a chronicle of London in the way that Wolfe's "Bonfire of the Vanities" is a tale of New York; Amis's is a more personal, oblique urban vision. Plot is always subordinate to language in his fiction, to the frustration of some readers. Even aficionados find his work nearly unreadable in places, and routinely painful. He demands absolute unsqueamishness as far as expletives, body secretions, psychological cruelty and even sadism are concerned. He has an extortionist's talent for knowing people's secret fears, creating a climate of danger and paranoia. "London Fields" is a meditation on the millennium - disguised as a murder mystery. Narrated by a young American writer living in the trendy West London neighborhood of Notting Hill Gate, most of Amis's tragicomedy of sleaze and death takes place in a sinister pub called the Black Cross, a locale that epitomizes the squalor hidden behind London's posh facade.

British novelists, from Iris Murdoch to David Lodge, have closed ranks against the new unpleasantness, ignored its consequences and settled in marginal enclaves of finer sensibility. With few exceptions, British fiction reflects the sovereignty of cozy, self-examining middle-class life: second-marriage angst, dinner-party betrayals, university-tenure feuds. Where his colleagues' writing is spare and cerebral, Amis is an unabashed maximalist: his work is refreshingly emotional, even carnal. He feels that "good readers" don't want to be shielded. "My stuff is fairly sentimental; it's a lot worse out there," he says sadly.

I SPENT SOME TIME with Amis not long after he had finished his new novel. We

met several times in his bachelorish writing flat in Westbourne Park, a bleak outpost of Notting Hill Gate. He explained apologetically that his wife did not allow interviewers in the house, a mile away.

Amis opened the front door of the forbidding Victorian rectory, greeting me with a sympathetic combination of professional wariness and animal curiosity. He has already been the subject of an extraordinary number of British interviews. Having read quite a few of them, I expected him to be small (around 5 feet 6) and clever, but what doesn't emerge from press clippings is his youthfulness, a quality of jaded teen-age swagger. The combination of his shortness and his bunched, athletic build gives him the look of a boy-man. He wears nondescript clothes, except for a pair of raunchy black ankle boots with cowboy heels.

In the kitchen Amis clumsily made some tea, chatting companionably as he struggled with the kettle. His high, bulging forehead and single dark eyebrow give him a moody air even when he's laughing, and his deep-set eyes and pouting mouth are cold in repose. His treacle-brown hair, cut short, is thinning slightly. He has a powerful, attractive presence.

The first thing you notice in the flat is the pinball machine parked in the kitchen. Amis is a famous pinball nut. Perhaps he cultivates a bad-boy image to counter the seriousness and stridency of his writing. Altogether the flat resembles an all-male clubhouse, a sanctuary from grown-up pressure and parental taste. It's vaguely organized around typing and books, but the dart board, scruffy stereo, video and television set seem equally important. The odd children's book and woman's straw hat are the only jarring evidence of his family-man status.

In the newspaper-strewn study Amis spoke in a relaxed, candid way about his work. He was not the egomaniac that other journalists have described, but his self-assurance occasionally veered into profound self-satisfaction. He gives off complex signals; despite his worldly, wised-up manner Amis's natural curiosity makes him appear unexpectedly open and vulnerable, but also capable of sudden and vicious attack. His speech is enjoyably close to his narrative style - peppered with vivid adjectives and American slang, but the accent is standard Oxford issue. I ask him about his childhood. "Childhood? What childhood?" he exclaims. "When Nabokov said a writer's childhood was his treasure chest, I thought, 'Christ, what do I do? I haven't got one.'" He claims not to regret its absence.

Amis's paternal grandfather was a mustard clerk from Clapham, and his mother's father was a suburban shoe millionaire. Kingsley Amis is twice divorced, and Martin's mother is on her third marriage; in a fairly bizarre family arrangement, Kingsley, now divorced from the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard, lives as a lodger with Martin's mother and her third husband.

Martin was the middle child of three, including an older brother, Philip, now a graphic designer, and a younger sister, Sally. "I was the steady one." Amis attended approximately 14 different schools during the 1950's and 60's, due to the great success of his father's masterly picaresque novel "Lucky Jim," which swept Kingsley broadly around the university circuit, including a year at Princeton, which introduced Martin to America.

The home atmosphere was permissive. "Something out of early Updike, 'Couples' flirtations and a fair amount of drinking. They were all 'at it.'" Amis speaks of his mother, Hilly, adoringly, stressing that her generous philosophy influenced him as strongly as his father's humor. He was devastated, at 12, by his parents' divorce.

"I had a passionate street life; going to pubs and betting shops, smoking dope a bit. My parents were lax about girls, too," he remembers happily. He mainly read comic books until his stepmother, the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard, urged Jane Austen upon him. He was a mod, briefly ("too many scooter crashes"), and then a hippie ("flowered shirt, velvet suit, far more relaxing"). But it was all a pose, he admits. He reformed academically before too much damage had been done, and went off abruptly to Oxford, where he earned a first-class degree from Exeter College.

A seemingly effortless journalistic-literary career followed: entry-level job at The Times Literary Supplement; literary editor of The New Statesman at 27; feature writer for The Observer, author of sensationally reviewed novels at roughly two-year intervals. Writing seemed a natural path for Amis, growing up in a literary household. He was 20 when he began, but Kingsley famously displayed negligible interest in his son's work. Martin's reputation may now supersede his father's: an uncomfortable but not an acrimonious situation, both claim. Their "rivalry" is of such interest in Britain that when the National Portrait Gallery invited father and son to pose together for a double portrait, Kingsley's touchy refusal made the front page of The Sunday Telegraph. According to Martin, his father later regretted the fuss. Their relationship is unusually close - they even kiss cheeks un-Englishly, upon greeting - but they disagree about virtually everything: politics, people, literature. "Several times he has even dumped on me in print," Martin laughs smartingly. His fondness for his father is such that he has never publicly retaliated, nor objected to Kingsley's opinions of his work. Martin takes it sadly, makes light of it. Apparently, Kingsley liked the beginning of his son's last novel, "Money," a hectic tour of lowlife New York, London and Los Angeles, but didn't finish it. "I can point out the exact place where he stopped and sent the book twirling through the air; that's where the character named Martin Amis comes in. 'Breaking the rules, bugging about with the reader, drawing attention to himself,'" Martin says wearily, reciting his father's litany of complaints.

The novelist Julian Barnes explains: "They do love one another. That established, Kingsley feels that he doesn't have to hold back in any other area, so he makes no pretense. Scandalously, I think, when it comes to the press. For Martin, it's a hurt that will never go away. The good side is, it's acted as a form of vaccination for Martin. If his father, whom he loves, dislikes his books, then it really doesn't matter what any critics say."

I spoke to Kingsley Amis on the phone at home in North London. Reworking a new novel, he seemed glad to break and talk about Martin. He spoke gruffly, and with an enormous fondness that he occasionally sacrificed for a good cutting remark. He began cautiously: "I think that if anyone's reading us both in fifty or a hundred years' time, we shall seem like very much the same kind of writer. We're more similar than we seem in some ways; we have a similar sense of verbal, spoken humor. We compete with each other on that, always have, in a family-joke way."

One of Kingsley's main reservations is Martin's constant surveillance of his characters'

bedrooms and bathrooms, which he feels is misguided and "in poor taste." He modifies: "Sex is a fascinating area, but it's harder than he thinks. Nobody says that fiction should be able to discuss everything; he thinks he can do it, but I wonder if he can." Kingsley Amis is upset when accused of being hard on his son. "To be 'hard' on someone is to be unfair, inappropriate. What I would describe is a strong, even furious opposition of views." He pauses. "I'd like to say this about him: I admire him very much as a man. He's responsible, and above all sane. I like sanity." And Martin's political views? "They're a lot of dangerous, howling nonsense," he thunders, "but apart from that I regard him as one of my best and closest friends." He's explosive on Martin's view of Thatcher: "If London has gotten more dirty and squalid and violent in Thatcher's day, she hasn't done that - I think it would be much worse without her. Anyone with Martin's income has no right to complain. I say that very, very loudly, and rather crossly."

Abruptly returning to writing, Amis says unexpectedly: "But apart from Martin Amis, new British writers are disappointing. They should be doing what Martin's doing. When you get to be my age, a writer ought to be saying, 'Can't see what these young fellows are on about!' But with this lot, I can see only too well, and it's not very interesting. I'd rather read detective novels."

Saul Bellow is another admirer from the older generation. He's a sort of hero to the younger Amis, who quotes him both in his novels and in conversation. I spoke to Bellow on the phone in Chicago. He and Amis had met when Martin interviewed him several years ago, and a master-apprentice friendship was struck. Bellow was amiable, and charming. I asked him what he thought of Martin's controversial prose style.

"There are two ways for fiction to go - one is to use an uncharged language which subordinates itself to the story and characters entirely, and the other is to use a charged language. Martin certainly uses a charged language. Anyone with that much of a feeling for words is bound to be accused of putting words first," he says equably. "This was the case with Flaubert and Joyce, to begin with. Some critics felt that the poetry monopolized everything. I understand this intoxication with a new way of writing. The discovery is an overpowering one when it happens; you find you have a new way to write about modern life. And that's pretty heady."

Does Bellow think that Martin Amis has the inventive genius of a Joyce or Flaubert? "Yes, I do. I see signs of a very large outline."

ONE DAY AMIS launches headlong into his pet topic, decline:

"The 19th-century British novel was, if you like, a superpower novel. It was 800 pages long, about the whole of society. With decline, the novel has shrunk in confidence, in scope. In its current form, the typical English novel is 225 sanitized pages about the middle classes," he says. "You know, 'well-made' with the nice color scheme and decor, and matching imagery. I almost try and avoid form. What I'm interested in is trying to get more truthful about what it's like to be alive now."

Amis bemoans the escapist, nostalgic leanings of the British toward their own country. He's bemused by foreigners' dated view of Britain as the land of tweedy aristocratic grandeur and dominance, the world of P. G. Wodehouse and Evelyn

Waugh. His own focus is the brash ascendancy of tabloid England, the downmarket world of Page Three pinups, Bingo greed and soap stars' abortions. He finds a rich source of comedy in contrasting the resentment-fueled economic rise of the working class against the slump of the largely ineffectual, burned-out upper class. "Dead Babies," "Success," "Money" and "London Fields" all feature bulldog-tenacious, kicked-around Cockneys barely triumphing over haughty, stunned aristocrats. Amis is sometimes criticized for caricaturing rather than characterizing his subjects, but he's quick to point out that he places no value judgments on his characters' actions (no matter how rotten); he's hardly a champion of the working classes, but he considers Thatcher's formula that money equals democracy "facile." Unlike America, Britain has been a traditionally modest, even money-scorning culture, and its quick transition to a brass-knuckled state has been rather graceless, Amis feels, unaccompanied by inner generosity or fraternal spirit: "I think Thatcher has done a lot of harm. The money age we're living through now is a short-term, futureless kind of prosperity that will last as long as there are public institutions to sell off, and as long as North Sea oil lasts. But it's really a 'live now, pay later' thing. Money is a more democratic medium than blood, but money as a cultural banner - you can feel the whole of society deteriorating around you because of that. Civility, civilization is falling apart." Keith Talent, the protagonist of "London Fields," embodies the spirit of his age. A witless, wife-beating darts enthusiast, "Keith cheated people with his limousine service at airports and train stations; he cheated people with his fake scents and colognes at the pavement stalls of Oxford Street and Bishopsgate . . . he cheated people with non-pornographic pornography in the back rooms of short-lease stores. . . . Keith earned three times as much as the Prime Minister and never had any money, losing heavily every day at the turf accountants on Portobello Road. . . . Sometimes he would ponder this on alternate Thursday lunchtimes, in his sheepskin overcoat, his head bent over the racing page, as he queued for his unemployment benefit. . . ."

Rolling himself a lumpy cigarette from a ratty-looking tobacco pouch, Amis readily talks about how the new book expresses his preoccupation with becoming middle-aged; it's a forced, angry farewell to selfish pleasures.

"It's a little death, middle age. Romantic possibility . . . changes," he strains, looking a bit dreamy. "It's calmer waters now, windless seas - if not the doldrums," he says, unable to squash a note of petulance in his voice. "You always thought it was a hilarious secret that while everyone else got old, you weren't. But children redefine everything for you. A lot of the self is lost, thank God; the internal gibber of wants and need dies down," he lectures, not very convincingly.

In 1984, Amis married Antonia Phillips, a widowed Bostonian philosophy teacher. Without prompting, he goes over to his desk and with classic pride shows me a snapshot of his sons, Louis and Jacob (5 and 3), a couple of towheaded boys plying a pair of giant milkshakes. The sight cheers him. "That's beer," he jokes.

Despite being sidelined by married monogamy, Amis is still a keen observer of the sexual arena. His fascination with its dark side reaches a new low - or high, depending on one's taste - in "London Fields." It's his blackest statement yet in a canon of black statements about sexual love. If his life has become G-rated, his work now earns an X. Amis insists that he uses sex as a vehicle for revealing characters "when they're not just going through the motions." It's an area where need and greed converge, and where tenderness is accidental, a rare thrill.

Amis's early notoriety as a famous (Continued on Page 48) writer's son, and later as a successful author in his own right, provoked mixed but intense attention well before the publication of "London Fields." He says journalists' often hostile jabs don't affect him, but his sensitivity is obvious in his sneering, humorless television appearances and in the crucifying glares he gives to publicity photographers.

His open contempt for the press has fed his spoiled reputation. His arrogance so disgusted *Private Eye* that the paper referred to him for many years as "Smarty Anus." The press has also resented his literary connections. From his father's milieu to his Oxford friends and premarital girlfriends, Amis's close contacts number practically the whole of "quality" British publishing, and an upmarket chunk of New York's as well. (He's associated with *The Observer*, *Tatler*, *Granta*, *The New Statesman*, *Viking Penguin*, *Jonathan Cape*, *The Nation*, *Esquire*, *Vanity Fair*, to name a few.) "His mixture of precocity, great intelligence, and wide sexual success is bound to provoke envy," says Julian Barnes. "People try to write like Martin. There's something very infectious and competitive about it."

Unlike many Englishmen, Amis doesn't apologize for his success. He now lives in a respectable family house in leafy Ladbroke Grove, but his work remains faithful to the esthetics of squalor. He's aware of leading something of a double life, and isn't completely comfortable with his new padding of wealth or the vantage de haut en bas. Never poor, Amis has become very well off. His advances have skyrocketed from a Dickensian \$400 to a Hollywood-ish \$150,000. According to friends, his wife, Antonia, is rich in her own right. Fame has not made him "grand," as some claim, but "busy," he corrects. His curtailed appearances on the London party circuit have given him a snobbish profile, but an old friend says: "Martin's actually quite bad at parties, so he doesn't go to them anymore. He usually ends up talking to the waiter."

In contrast to his allegedly wild younger days, Amis now leads a disciplined life. He breakfasts at 8:30 with the live-in nanny and children (his wife sleeps on), drives to the office via the boys' Montessori school, works until 2 or 3 (telephone off the hook). He is a serious tennis player; he drives to the Paddington Sports Club for his daily game. He is home by 6:15. When his wife attends the opera, Amis baby-sits, "earning brownie points so I can play snooker later in the week. Marriage with children is all credit and debit, you know. My wife is a strong character, and I don't get away with much," he confesses. "Some wives are rivals, muses, agents. My wife is just a wife. You don't get special treatment," he says in a rebuked tone. Amis is a hardened snooker addict. He joined a smart Pall Mall club not for prestige, he contends, but for its pool table. Sunday night is his regular snooker night.

FOR OUR FINAL RENDEZVOUS, I accompanied Amis to a book party for environmental causes. He picked me up in a taxi around 6 P.M., clutching a furled copy of *Tennis* magazine. His hair neatly combed, he was dressed almost smartly in a Prince of Wales plaid suit and dark coat - his white shirt bore a prominent stain. It was a rare, beautifully clear evening, and Amis was in a relaxed mood. South Kensington's facades flowed regally past the taxi window, transformed by sunlight. Kensington Gardens were overflowing with fresh summer foliage. London looked startlingly clean.

I asked Martin casually about his involvement with environmental issues. "Paradise is a toilet!" he exploded in a rehearsed way. "It's as if the planet had aged four billion

years in the last two centuries. If this had happened to a human being, you'd say, 'Jesus, what's he been up to? He looked like Apollo yesterday, now he looks like Methuselah!'"

So is it all over? Is everything for sale? I asked at a traffic light.

"The theme that the good is gone is as old as literature. Everything has been cheapened; the accumulation of experience is causing decay," Amis replied gravely, sounding like a skeptical dentist. And man's capacity to love? "Romantic love will always be there, but it's harder for it to flourish. As Bellow says, ours is a sclerotic Eros. I think there's a lot of romanticism in my work" - my eyebrows shot up involuntarily - "but it's thwarted by distortion and perversity, false commercial images in TV, literature, porn. The fact is, my satire wouldn't work if what I'm satirizing were not valued. Like Philip Larkin's poetry, love is conspicuous by its absence."

Martin Amis's instincts are chivalrous. By imagining the worst possible scenarios - addictiveness, child abuse, urban decay, nuclear holocaust - he seems to want to avert the impending disasters by giving us a test run, sending in his fictional characters to show the damage we'll run up. He knows he can't save anyone, but he wants us to see the danger and to experience fear squarely, not drunk on cheap deferral or delusion. But most of all he wants to deflate fear with laughter.

His prose style may shock, but the values behind it are surprisingly traditional: truth, love, compassion, integrity, family. "But it's no fun to read about, and no fun to write." He grinned and climbed out of the taxi. Some photographers were waiting by the party entrance, and a television crew stood nervously by; Martin Amis stood tall and scowled for the cameras.



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