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## Martin Amis: the Prospect interview

Web exclusive

TOM CHATFIELD 1st February 2010 — Issue 167 **FREE!**

Britain's most controversial novelist talks to Tom Chatfield about his new book, the sexual revolution, Philip Larkin's sex life, and why JM Coetzee is no good



Above: Martin Amis, mid-discussion at the *New Yorker* Festival

I spoke to Martin Amis at his house in January, shortly before publication of his twelfth novel, "The Pregnant Widow." If you're not familiar with the book, it may be useful to look at my review of it (available [here](#)) before reading the interview.

**Tom Chatfield:** I wanted to start off by asking you about the new book, which I've been very struck by. It has had an unusually long gestation, and yet it read very easily to me, in a way that I hadn't felt for a while: it felt very much of a piece.

**Martin Amis:** Well, that's an accurate apprehension on your part. I'll tell you exactly what happened. I struggled for years with a turgid autobiographical novel, with a fictional structure. It seemed endless and inert. And it's a funny thing about life that, when you put it in a novel, it's dead. None of the usual forces that are in a novel—to do with unities and metaphor and imagination—were there. There was this horrible Easter, the Easter before last, in Uruguay, where it seemed huge and endless, no end in sight. I just thought to myself, "my god, this is dead."

I had a bad couple of weeks, and there was a bit in it that I liked, which was the Italy bit. It was a big bit, but it was a tenth of what I had written. I took it out and it was about maybe 100 pages—and I thought, can I get this up to a novel size and expand it? It was a bit I liked because it was the most fictional: although it all seems very transparent now. And then I wrote for a year, 15 months, and when the proofs came in the book was 470 pages long, so 370 were new and recent. The bulk of it was the latest stuff. So it doesn't I hope have that feeling. In *Mao II*, Don DeLillo describes this block in writing a novel: "it was the colour of a monkey, it had alligator's feet, it was a monstrosity..." which is what that was. And I realised that it was two novels. The other half will be pressed into a literary novel about Philip Larkin, Saul Bellow and Ian Hamilton [the British literary critic]—he's the Neil Darlington figure [in *The Pregnant Widow*]. And there will be one novel in-between.

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Tom Chatfield is Prospect's arts and books editor, and writes on culture, media and technology. His book about the culture of video games, "Fun Inc.," is out now from Virgin Books. Follow him on Twitter at @TomChatfield



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TC: *State of England*.

MA: Yes.

TC: It felt to me that there was a lot of autobiography very close to the surface in *The Pregnant Widow*, in the character Keith Nearing especially: he shares your birthday, doesn't he?

MA: We have various bonds, like height, and birthday.

TC: And having a sister and a best friend who have been lost.

MA: A sister and a best friend, yes. The only people who are from life in the book are now dead—including Ian Hamilton. And the Kenrick character [Keith's best friend in *The Pregnant Widow*], and the Violet character [Keith's younger sister]. I felt I could, you know—that their lives were complete. And also slightly manipulable, for fictional reasons.

TC: It seemed to me to work very well with those characters: they felt fictional in the context of the novel, but the life was there.

MA: Yes. Because I had been living with these characters for so long that I did feel they were there. And when it switches to the coda, I felt I had sort of lived all that, even the bits that weren't true—like Keith going to work for an ad agency, which is diametrically not my life.

TC: It's a kind of shadow-life...

MA: Except that I did work for an advertising agency for three months before I got the job at the *TLS*, like Keith. But there was never the slightest question in my mind that I would ever be an ad man. Keith is different, he is in a different situation. What I find I had to do to him to really divest him of any resemblance to me was to completely remove his sense of entitlement. He has no sense of entitlement: he is an illegitimate orphan, a sort of *tabula rasa* in a way that I never was. My father was Kingsley Amis, and my mother was a very remarkable woman. So that was what I had to do. And I also had to make him sexually much more tentative, blundering...

TC: And this means that Keith was in a position to be profoundly deceived.

MA: Deceived, and also profoundly gratified in a way that he wasn't ready for, that ruined him for a long time.

TC: All the way through the novel I found myself sensing, as often in your books, lines and half-lines of poetry, from Larkin in particular. And then suddenly the Larkin erupts into this explicit vision of "Larkinland" at the end, this place that Keith is sent to by his own weakness.

MA: Well, that experience with Gloria [the character who violently seduces Keith] was too much for him really.

TC: This decision to make what had been a very dense subtext explicit, almost to show your hand...

MA: It's the most invidious of subjects. And that word, "invidious," is tailor-made for what we mean—that which is unfair, and wounding, and likely to cause resentment. And I think the sexually unhappy, which Larkin definitely was... It was weird, I spent an evening with Larkin and Monica [Monica Jones, Larkin's long-term companion], and it's described in my book *Experience* quite neutrally, as if they were both slightly eccentric. Years later, ten, 15 years later when the letters and the *Life* [the biography of Larkin by Andrew Motion] came out, I completely re-experienced that evening with horror. I didn't realise that he was sexually so miserable, and I have to say she looked like an *urka* [a Russian criminal from the bottom of society]: like a male *urka*. Really butch. And she dominated the evening in a weird way. She was awful. A *beast*. And I thought, that is the love of his life.

TC: The big one.

MA: The big one, yes. You know she was the model for the character of Margaret...

TC: ...in your father's *Lucky Jim*, yes.

MA: The terrible clothes. But it's more than that. A great sense of frustrated self-importance. And all Larkin's girls seemed to have that.

TC: It answered to something in him.

MA: His mum, I guess.

TC: "Dear old man," he called her in the letters. It seems remarkable that



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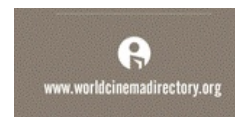
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**TC:** "Dear old mop," he called her in the letters. It seems remarkable, that correspondence with his mother—something entirely outside of the literary.

**MA:** Yeah. Some of the quotes from her letters. "I think you were most mistaken to sleep in those damp pants. I said so at the time."

**TC:** Bathos by the ladle-full.

**MA:** He was an old woman. He was an old *bag*. A sexual sloth. The bit from the letters where Kingsley writes to him—"I fucking give you up. I give up when it comes to you." "We don't meet different women, we meet them differently."

**TC:** Is that a line in Larkin's poem "Letter to a friend about girls"?

**MA:** It's not in the poem, but that's what he means in it.

**TC:** Sex, in both senses of the word, keeps coming through in this new book. You say Larkin was an old woman, but the sexual revolution as you describe it—is it about women becoming men, becoming able to behave like men?

**MA:** Well, that didn't last very long, that phase: the gaudy, equalitarian phase. And it's very understandable: what model did women have for being adventurous? Only the male model. And they took it up for a bit, and then they realised very soon that it wasn't in their interests. I remember during the equalitarian phase, you would meet serious people, serious women, serious men, who would say "there is no difference between men and women." But that phase ended. And during it, and thereafter, it was the women who had to do all the hard work, the adapting, the changing, the throwing off of what they had been taught with such consistency for hundreds of years. As is demonstrated by all the books in Keith's English literature reading course, from *Clarissa* onwards.

**TC:** All these women in English novels, where alcohol or drugs or hysteria have to be invoked in order to escape this structure.

**MA:** Or madness.

**TC:** Yes, the lunar influence, lunacy.

**MA:** It's sort of touching and desperate, really.

**TC:** In your discussions of your earlier books, it's often seemed to me that you treated the characters as though they are skewered on pins, wriggling: they were there to have things done to them, and if the audience chose to empathise with them that was a forgivable mistake on their part. But in this book there seems to be a lot of tenderness for these characters, especially when you open it up at the end. They are given a lot of space to live their mistakes, and some make it and some don't.

**MA:** Yeah, well. We are all quite sentimental, a word that Nabokov defended. He wrote of Dickens and the death of Little Joe in *Bleak House*, I will not allow you to describe this as sentimental: people who use that word have no idea what sentiment is. Also, the entirely pleasant feeling that I got after writing *Experience* was that we have all protected our emotion, it was the orthodoxy then that writing was tough. But writing *Experience* made me think that the emotion which I had always thought was present and detectable to a good reader should be given more room. It's partly getting older and you just think, it's all too plangent for words. As Kurt Vonnegut said, everyone thinks I'm tough and slick, but in fact I'm as soft as a sneaker full of shit. And you are, as a writer.

**TC:** You're not afraid to quote yourself, in the book, or to quote yourself quoting people: from the book of Job through Ovid and Shakespeare to Larkin. But another aspect of the confidence seems to be that you are unafraid to acknowledge explicitly the place of these things: they matter to you, they are important, so there they are in the book.

**MA:** It's rather like *Experience* in that way, in that there are lots of quotes: Herbert, Keats, Wordsworth, Blake, Auden. And actually, in the prose, Lawrence.

**TC:** Did Lawrence stay in that castle in Italy, where your novel is set, with Frieda?

**MA:** In a similar castle. They may well have stayed there. There was such a summer, for me. And it was with half as many characters, and nothing happened. It was pathetic.

**TC:** And nothing would really have happened in this book if it wasn't for Gloria, for this kind of *dea ex machina*, who parachutes in from another frame of reference and turns it, I suppose, into a Martin Amis novel, rather than a Kingsley Amis novel.

**MA:** Well, I mean, something might have happened there, it was very much in the air. Scheherazade might well have . . .

**TC:** . . . got it on with Keith.

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**MA:** Yes. But through various sorts of blunders it doesn't happen until Gloria manipulates it into being.

**TC:** Manipulation is another recurring theme in your writing: this idea that you create characters who – and I suppose Iago is a prototype of this – like Fielding in *Money*, or Quentin in *Dead Babies*, can just take the others and open up their weaknesses, who know their secret selves better than they do.

**MA:** That is what you are sort of doing, is putting your characters through it. EM Forster said that when he started a novel, he lined up his characters and said, no larks, behave. Nabokov was horrified by that: "my characters cringe when I come near them," he said, "they are galley slaves. I have seen whole avenues of imagined trees lose their leaves with terror as I approach." I think you do insert these characters into novels, and they are wised up, in the novelist's way, they know how people work. And Gloria comes from a fairly long line of girls in my stuff who know exactly what men are like; and that is a scary thing, and a funny thing, to have a girl who really understands all that.

**TC:** Who is a cock, as you put it in the novel.

**MA:** Yes, well, there haven't been any of them before. Right. But, in my own summer, there was no Gloria. She was made up: jerry-built to do this very strange job in the novel, being ten years ahead of the others.

**TC:** She's a sort of messenger from the future.

**MA:** Yeah. And there were none of the other incidental characters out there either, in my own summer: no Una, no Prentiss, that summer, no Rita, no Kenrick.

**TC:** There were the three leads.

**MA:** There were those characters. But it was such a relief to get back to fiction, because something else takes over: that's the marvellous thing, the exhilaration.

**TC:** It was a relief to read it, in that it felt like you were joining up a lot of dots: Islam was in there, war, appearances, morality, death, but with an elegant flourish rather than the sense of very hard work that can come with being non-fictional.

**MA:** It's certainly a real history, a real history of the golden age, this very specific period, and of this social convulsion. You get more and more interested as you get older in what actually you have lived through, historically. My grandfather lived through an enormous historical change, which was people giving up the land and going to live in the city. That was the big change for his generation, the really significant demographic change. In my generation it was the sexual revolution, that enormous convulsion.

**TC:** And what would you say it is for my and your sons' generation?

**MA:** Well I get the impression, when I teach and we have a lot of general discussions – three years now, and they impress me with being non-ideological – but they have been saying, actually, our ideology is Green. And there is a lot of social pressure about how often you fly and things like that. Maybe the Greening of people's imagination is the next thing.

**TC:** Yet again, it smuggles something rather apocalyptic and inhuman in scale into the psyche.

**MA:** Absolutely.

**TC:** A lot of the great themes of the 20th century have proved to be anti-human, ripping down those protections we had built around ourselves historically.

**MA:** And this sense of the exhaustability of the earth is a completely new idea, one that would have made no sense to anyone not born in or after the 20th century.

**TC:** In a sense we are fighting against a pre-20th-century attitude. And you might say that there are parts of the world where people feel they are entitled not yet to be forced to enter the 21st century.

**MA:** I thought George Monbiot made an interesting point that connects to my book, in that he cites the same book by Ernest Becker as I do, *The Denial of Death*. Monbiot wrote in a piece for the *Guardian* that what people are doing is denying something that's too horrible to contemplate. Becker is quoted, specifically and non-specifically, several times in that piece.

We had a ten-year holiday from this feeling in the 1990s. The nuclear cold war, then a ten-year holiday, then Islam. Islam only up to a point, one mustn't exaggerate: the number of people killed by terrorism in the west is the same as the number of Americans who drown in the bath. It's not apocalyptic. I remember Kingsley saying, of nuclear

weapons, "there's always something, it's the end, judgement day, something else."

But then again, the weather, climate change; I've talked to Clive James about this and to Nigel Lawson. I asked, why are 180 countries gathered in Copenhagen to do something they don't want to do? Politicians, Nigel said, love anything that makes them look busy. I say to Clive, don't you sense the incredible potential for violence in the weather, already—the storms, the snow? You can see the nature of what the future will be, and it's all terror and boredom all over again. You will be massively inconvenienced and appalled by the power of the weather. It's intuitively inescapable to me.

**TC:** You've been there before with apocalyptic weather, in fiction, in *London Fields*.

**MA:** Yes. And in *Yellow Dog*.

**TC:** Do you see yourself as a political writer, or feel that writers are inescapably political creatures?

**MA:** They are under no obligation to do politics. Some writers don't want to do it. If it doesn't coincide with their writerly urge, absolutely fine; they are enriching the perceptions of their readers, that's *pro bono* enough. It has to coincide with your writerly flow, you can't decide to write a political novel, it has to come on just like any other fictional situation.

**TC:** The big political situations do seem to have come on you over the years.

**MA:** Yeah. So far, the fiction has been nuclear weapons, the Holocaust, and the gulag. But the impulse each time was literary. I've just written a piece about writing *Time's Arrow*, and begin by quoting the often-asked question that I heard, "why did you decide to write a novel about the Holocaust?" I never did. I never decide to write any novel of mine. They emerge. "Decide" is completely the wrong word, and "about" is completely the wrong preposition. You find yourself writing around a topic, but not after thinking "someone ought to do something like this," nothing like that.

**TC:** You suggest in your criticism that the route to bad or dishonest writing begins when you start off from a set position, then write to fit.

**MA:** Then it emanates out from that, yes.

**TC:** You've also written about seeing your father's work going through a period where it was deformed by biographical or political circumstances. *Stanley and the Women*, a couple of other books where false assumptions came in.

**MA:** Well, yes. *Russian Hide and Seek*, that was a real wild goose chase politically. Predictive power isn't everything by any means, but you look at novels like Anthony Burgess's *1985*, which is about a trade union takeover, and it just looks sillier by the week and is of course dead as a doornail in the long term. Orwell's *1984* doesn't describe 1984, of course; barely even in the Soviet Union. But that is such a dynamic fiction, in its non-genius way. It's important to realise that Orwell is not a genius but he does do some things very, very well.

**TC:** I've enjoyed reading his diaries as a way of understanding the particular nature of his non-genius, that he had this enormous gift for the quotidian, of stacking it up...

**MA:** Jealously stacking it up, exactly.

**TC:** And then seeing the salience, picking out the detail: these ploughs in North Africa, wells. It's the highest pitch of journalism rather than literature.

**MA:** Yes. *1984* I've been looking at again. It is journalistic, but it's quite swift and direct, and has few false quantities.

**TC:** It may be an impossible question, but do you have any personal hierarchy of preference among your own books: ones that you feel more completely say what you wanted to say, or that feel like unfinished business you might want to revisit?

**MA:** Yeah. Burgess used to say, when asked which his favourite book was, "the next one." Which is sophisticated in a way, but I feel it. And I would grade my novels completely chronologically right up to the present one.

**TC:** A steady increase.

**MA:** I tried to read *The Rachel Papers* [Amis's first novel] recently, to reacquaint myself with what it is like to be 20 or 19, and I couldn't read it. I knew it quite well so I knew all the good bits, the not bad bits, but as a structure and as a . . . the craft is pitiful.

**TC:** It reads to me like a companion book to your father's *Lucky Jim*, or a riposte. Nice things aren't interesting, nasty things are interesting.

**MA:** Nice things are boring, nasty things are funny.

**TC:** Yes, sorry, I'm misquoting you.

**MA:** I just taught *Lucky Jim*, which went down incredibly well with my students. Kingsley says, in *Lucky Jim*, it all goes to shore up this view that nice things are nicer than nasty things. And actually that's contra Larkin, who took on the suffering inside himself.

**TC:** I suppose happiness is a talent, and Larkin lacked that.

**MA:** I attribute a sort of heroic strain to Larkin. He realised. Don't tell me that he died and left half a million quid. Poets were very popular with women in London. Women were very moved by poets. "What do you do?" "I'm a poet." That gets you a big start, or got you a big start; it probably wouldn't do you any good today. But women were very drawn to him. Some of them were terrible trogs and tyrants, but he had lots of women around him. Larkin, as the leading English poet, could have moved to London, in a Keith-like move, and become . . . women loved his poems, some of the poems. But he didn't. He's heroic in that he embraced that.

**TC:** And if he had done otherwise he would have had a different poetry.

**MA:** Yeah, and I wrote 20 years ago that he decided to cling, to wrap it round him, this peculiar misery, and to write the poems that belonged to it. And I salute him for it. Combined with sloth, it was actually a way of saying, this is my voice, the voice of failure.

**TC:** Do you have a characterisation of your own voice, a way you would describe your best literary self?

**MA:** I do think that Kingsley's value, the supreme value in his fictional world – not in his poetry, good little minor poet that he was – but the thing his fictional valued above all was decency. And the value my fiction values above all is innocence. Even the most unlikely innocence. I would claim that Violet in *The Pregnant Widow* is innocent.

**TC:** She's almost a holy innocent, isn't she?

**MA:** I have got a horror of that type from reading Graham Greene recently, and *Brideshead Revisited*. I loathe the idea of the degenerate who is awarded saintly status because religious novelists are trapped in this terrible tendentiousness where they have got to do that for religious reasons. It's so anti-artistic. Greene's *The End of the Affair* is a wild, hilariously incompetent and charmless book. And *Brideshead*, where even Sebastian in his "monk's cell" at the end and Julia has this great religious effusion, quoting the Bible, this sort of trance...

**TC:** It's a quintessential artist's cop-out, that you smuggle in a saving absolute. Suddenly, it stops you having to do the balancing act.

**MA:** I think religious novelists have the balancing act forced upon them. You see ponderous intrusions, they wheel it round: it's so anti-artistic. Religion is the enemy of art in fiction. Not in other forms, not in poetry.

**TC:** Is that because the novel post-dates the dissociation of sensibility? That idea of that dissociation crops up in your latest novel.

**MA:** It does crop up. But I don't think it's that. We did an event in Manchester on religion and literature with James Wood, and I said that the two things are co-eternal and come from the same place. As Flaubert said: all the artistic stuff comes, in post-Romantic cases, from frustrated religious feeling. It's fine for poetry and, obviously, for music and painting. But the minute you get into the discursive world of fiction, it's a disaster, because it runs the show, and it is the opposite of art: it is tendentious, schematic, predictable.

**TC:** Your father once said, it's not so much that I don't believe in God, it's that I hate him.

**MA:** It's more that I hate him. He said it to that poet. . .

**TC:** To the Soviet poet, Yevtushenko. Is that your position?

**MA:** No. In fact, I'm an agnostic, which is the only rational position. It's not because I feel a God or think that anything resembling the banal God of religion will turn up. But I think that atheism sounds like a proof of something, and it's incredibly evident that we are nowhere near intelligent enough to understand the universe. We are a dozen Einsteins away. It's pathetic. I feel very sorry for cosmologists. Only a couple of years ago I was told by one, Lee Smolin, he said they had just discovered that the universe is not only expanding but that this process is accelerating. For us, he said, that's like throwing your car keys in the air and them not coming down. And then, they've just been struggling to understand what dark matter is, which occupies 80 per cent of mass in the universe and

until the last year all they knew about it was that it was this “dark material.” The guy at *Playboy* magazine said that “Hugh is a great admirer of your material.” I mean, “material” is really telling you nothing at all. Paul Davies in the *Guardian* says that we now know it exists in massive particles that haven’t really gelled. But that’s 80 per cent of mass in the universe, and we have no idea...

**TC:** Of course, your fiction contains one of the few examples I can think of of death by cosmology: *Night Train*.

**MA:** Yeah, in a way.

**TC:** A woman who has everything to live for, but can’t face the insignificance of everything she knows in the context of the universe.

**MA:** A falling short. And there was one thing I mentioned in *London Fields*, where I got a very nice letter from a cosmologist. In this description of an eclipse I was saying, it’s amazing that you have this 93 million mile pool shot, and it’s absolutely straight, the balls fill each other, and maybe that’s a prerequisite of life on this planet. And I got this letter saying they were thinking about that, apparently.

**TC:** And then you have the anthropic principle saying that if things were any different, we simply wouldn’t be around to watch them. We can have no null hypothesis, there is just us.

**MA:** One observer per universe. But now we have the idea of the multiverse.

**TC:** Although a prerequisite for that seems to be that it’s an untestable idea.

**MA:** No contact possible, yes. Like super-string theory – they wasted a generation on that.

**TC:** And what does all this do to fiction, the state of what we know and what we think of as truth? Because literature is interested in containing rational forms....

**MA:** It has no effect on fiction. It has an effect on some writers. Writers are above all individuals, and above all writing is freedom, so they will go off in all sorts of directions. I think it does apply to the debate about religion, in that it’s a crabbed novelist who pulls the shutters down and says, there is no other thing. Don’t use the word God: but something more intelligent than us... If we can’t understand it, then it’s formidable. And we understand very little. We don’t understand the weak nuclear force, galaxy formation . . . so one should be humble.

**TC:** That does make me think of Larkin, looking at the stars: “Much less is known than not, More far than near.”

**MA:** And then there is “Solar.”

**TC:** I presume you’ve read it, the forthcoming novel from Ian McEwan?

**MA:** No, I haven’t, no. It’s very heavily embargoed. But I was also talking about the Larkin poem “Solar,” which is what McEwan is referring to. “Heat is the echo of your gold.” I mean, that’s really cosmically aware, it’s a lovely line. But I’m dying to read Ian’s book. And he’s done it the clever way, which is not to have the first sentence being “Splork tied his camel to the rail outside the Igloo and looked south.” No, it’s some guy who goes to all of these conferences. I am looking forward to that.

**TC:** As your career has gone on, I was also wondering how your attitude to your father’s work has changed. Do you feel differently now about it?

**MA:** I re-read *Lucky Jim* recently for the tenth time, in order to teach it. A first novel that was perfect would be a creepy thing: it’s not what you go to first novels for. You go for energy and freshness of voice, and Christ have you got that. But it’s 20 per cent too long, it’s got too much editorialising. He doesn’t yet know what you can leave out. My favourite novel of his is *The Old Devils*, which I think is fantastic. And *Ending Up* is great.

**TC:** It’s sad and delicate too. I found the dementia aspect very sad.

**MA:** But it’s antic, and it’s scurrilous, in a good way. A funny read.

**TC:** A very serious kind of fun.

**MA:** I guess. Yes, it’s awful. As Kingsley said as he began the address at Larkin’s funeral, all this is evidence for the terrible effect of time on everything we have.

**TC:** More generally, you and your father are often bracketed together as comic writers. Is that something you feel is getting harder to do?

**MA:** The comic novel is dying, because comedy is anti-democratic. Comedy is a smear.

**TC:** Inviting you to laugh *at*.

**MA:** Yes. But that may be turning around a bit. People assume that it's the gloomy buggers that are the serious ones—but in fact, anyone who has ever been anywhere in fiction is funny. Yet there are whole reputations built on not being funny. Who's that German writer doesn't even have paragraph breaks?

**TC:** I don't know him, I don't tend to read that kind of German writer.

**MA:** Coetzee, for instance—his whole style is predicated on transmitting absolutely no pleasure.

**TC:** Do you admire his books at all?

**MA:** No. I read one and I thought, he's got no talent. The denial of the pleasure principle has a lot of followers. But I am completely committed to it, to pleasure.

**TC:** Why have people felt the need to do this to the novel: is this puritanical?

**MA:** Dryden said, literature is instruction and delight, and there are people who think that if they're not getting delight then they are getting a lot of instruction, when in fact they're not getting that either. But it has a sort of gloomy constituency. If there is no pleasure transmitted then I'm not interested. I mean, look at them all: Dickens, George Eliot, Jane Austen, Smollet, Fielding, they're all funny. All the good ones are funny. Richardson isn't, and he's no good. Dostoyevsky is funny: *The Double* is a scream. Tolstoy is funny by being just so wonderfully true and pure. Gogol, funny. Flaubert, funny. Dickens. All the good ones are funny.

**TC:** Who do you really enjoy of the younger generation of writers?

**MA:** I don't read them. I read my friends: Will Self and Zadie Smith. But it's a fantastically uneconomical way of reading, to read your youngers. No-one knows if they are any good. Only time knows that.

**TC:** You say that in your Preface to the *War Against Cliché*, one of the most distilled articulations of your literary philosophy. I've always had a nagging question about that, the argument that cliché can be very powerful in the short term but that in the long term it inevitably looks ridiculous...

**MA:** I don't think it has any say in the short term either. These are two quotes from Coetzee. How does it go. Oh, yes. A woman is watching him closely. "She watched me like a..."

**TC:** "...hawk."

**MA:** Next sentence. He had said these words in a "voice loud enough to wake..."

**TC:** "...the dead."

**MA:** Consecutive sentences.

**TC:** Which novel is that from?

**MA:** *Waiting for the Barbarians*. You will get these people who are felt to be educational, even though, as Clive James said, a sense of humour is common sense dancing. Those who haven't got it, a sense of humour, shouldn't be trusted with anything. You're amazed they can get across the road. But proclaimed humourlessness has a constituency, I don't know why.

**TC:** One of the things you've often said is that the classic humourless form is pornography: it's a recurring theme of your work, this idea that the pornographic is a state where irony, wit and self-knowledge are entirely absented, and this is a cultural force that can be extremely dangerous.

**MA:** Let's not pretend. This is how young people get their sex education, from pornography. I don't think a liking for pornography obliterates your sense of humour, but it probably does in the sack. This is from talking to my grown-up daughter, who was very frank with me about the mores of her peer group. It dominates the style of the whole encounter. I don't understand that. I have had the dissociations of my generation but I don't have this, which I think is much more radical than we think, with unknowable consequences socially between men and women.

**TC:** The epigraph to *The Pregnant Widow* says that the transition in the social order caused by the sexual revolution involves a long dark night, rather than an immediate transition to an heir. At the moment, are we still in that long night of the 1960s and 1970s?

**MA:** The rise of women will take about a century, I think, to be complete. And will have to be global, and is barely imaginable, and we sometimes fear it. It's true that we like to have a panic. But if there is time for women to rise before life becomes just a question of dealing with survival, which is what's going to happen if there is a five per cent rise in temperature, that's how long it would take. It's a marvellous delusion that people can flip effortlessly from one deep ideology to another.

**TC:** Finally, is there a way you would characterise your own late style. What is late Amis, if there is such a thing?

**MA:** Kingsley definitely had a late style. It's hard to describe: it becomes sort of flatter, but interesting in a different way. You have to adjust to this terrible thing that happens to writers – when the talent starts to die. I've talked to Ian about this a lot. Everything I hope will be fine for another ten years. But then you have to start adjusting, and maybe working on short things. Chekhov said, and Saul Bellow very much agreed with this, that everything he read seemed not short enough. A long book is a big undertaking, a short story is a relatively carefree undertaking.

So there's that but, I don't know, I feel it's not as agitated, in a good way, as it used to be. But I can tell: it's now physiological, when you're reading a paragraph of a book, it's your body that tells you, you've got to bring it up to a point where you read it. So it's a bit quieter, my style, but I think rhythmically good. When I look at this latest book, which I've had to do to go through the proofs, I think, you keep the strongest bit of the sentence for the end, you keep the strongest sentence for the end of the paragraph, and when you come to the end of the section it has to end nicely, so you are satisfied. I'm impressed by how consistently that is done.

**TC:** And do you have any interest in the reviews, in how the book makes its way once you've signed off?

**MA:** You will read enough to see what kind of review it is, and then maybe read the end. Unless it's someone you really respect, and then out of comity you will read the whole thing and weight it a bit.

**TC:** But you don't feel at all anxious for your books in the world?

**MA:** Well, yeah. I mean, I have plenty of cause to be that. Kingsley used to say, once it's had a few good reviews, once you were over the hump, let it go. Julian Barnes used to have Pat Kavanagh, his wife, read things for him in a rather nice arrangement: she'd say, look at the *Independent*, don't bother looking at the *Times*. You have these filters. The trouble is, they can say what they like, but there are some things that stick in your craw, and then you've got it with you for the next week or two and you don't want that – you know, get out! As Craig Raine said, you're murdering people in your dreams.

I think the great bonus of being Kingsley's son is that I don't take these things very hard. I knew that was what you got. He never meant to give me this, but that turns out to be the gift.

## Prospect

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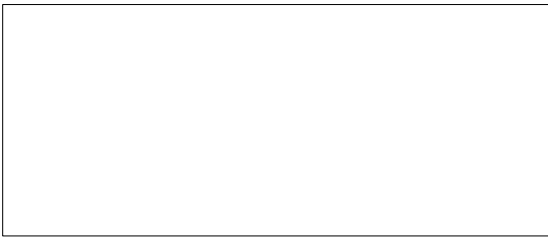
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COMMENTS (22):

Gregory Norminton says:

[FEBRUARY 1, 2010 AT 2:59 PM](#)

Would that Amis might turn his talent to the 'green' issues that he briefly touches on. The climate crisis deserves its own EINSTEIN'S MONSTERS: in which Amis created a model for writers to follow who would tackle the enormity of our potential for self-annihilation. The opening essay is in my view a masterful instance of engaged polemic: engaged because it dares to assert a moral course of action to avoid the unspeakable. Yet I fear that same anger which he felt about nuclear weapons is absent in Amis when it comes to the ecological crisis. He observes it with interest but without passion; and if he consults someone as ideologically motivated as Nigel Lawson [<http://www.desmogblog.com/nigel-lawson>] on the subject, that suggests we may have to look to Amis's students for that polemical and novelistic fire which, twenty years ago, their tutor might have turned on the subject.

Angel Bacon says:

[FEBRUARY 1, 2010 AT 7:07 PM](#)

This is a great interview. Thanks boys. Once the weeping and wailing is over, humour can be the silk-woven frame to a rewardingly philosophical vantage point ( albeit , sometimes limited to the beholder ? New Yorkers still aren't buying Eminem's Shady Bin Laden rap ? Arabs have never enjoyed cartoons – period ? ). I've laughed tears over, and later at, Amis' novels ( tho' hated Yellow Dog ). Vonnegut too was a high-wire comic ( " the good thing about suicide is you don't have to get your teeth fixed after all " ) but it is none the less just as scary to witness just how much of the school exam curriculum read Slaughter and Monkey House sci-fi novels now mirror the modern State, as indeed the 1989 London Fields ( and the Prince of Wales' ) climate change forecast...

Luckily for us ( if not always for them – enter 'the muse'? ) male writers do sometimes marry harridans ( aka hard core feminists ), perhaps because these women can enable free-form access to his essential creative innocence ( aka ethyl alcohol – Vonnegut quotes Ken Hubbard " Prohibition is better than no liquor at all " )to produce work worth publishing, while she gets to wear the grown-up swanky pants around the VIP-by-proxy lounge ?

Lismahago says:

[FEBRUARY 3, 2010 AT 6:22 PM](#)

'Yet there are whole reputations built on not being funny. Who's that German writer doesn't even have paragraph breaks?'

Amis probably meant Thomas Bernhard, whose gallows humour is always evident and in quite a similar vein to Kafka's. That moot point aside, a fine interview.

Tom Chatfield says:

[FEBRUARY 3, 2010 AT 6:48 PM](#)

Lismahago, thanks for that: yes, it looks increasingly like Thomas Bernhard (an Austrian writer) was whom Amis meant. I should probably have edited my response to make it look like I knew exactly whom he was talking about...

One note based on some of the analysis the interview has had elsewhere: I don't believe for a moment that Amis was criticizing Coetzee as a publicity stunt. I think he was offering a considered literary opinion—which one may disagree violently with, but it's absolutely of a piece with his beliefs as articulated elsewhere. In the footnotes to *Experience*, for example, he writes *pace Nabokov* that "style is morality: morality detailed, configured, intensified."

This has always impressed and alarmed me: the nagging question I never got around to asking him was about how he squared this view with the idea of style as something one can impose or remove upon ideas independent of it. If you take a profound, eloquent sentiment and ruin its wording, do you now have something morally ugly? Or, again, if you take a stupid or amoral idea and express it beautifully, does the content shift?

I'm sure that he didn't mean this—he's talking about one's duty to language as a writer, to every sentence, and often writes as though the best reader can invariably sniff out moral failings via an author's failures of style: Trotsky, for instance, Amis excoriates (in *Koba the Dread*) as a superficially good stylist whose moral rot becomes apparent on closer reading. All this continues to trouble me, partly because cliché will always be with us, wearing a new set of clothes for every generation, and partly because I simply don't trust even the most exquisite taste as an infallible moral compass (bad people can sincerely love great art, and aren't inexorably barred from creating it either; can we really tell from the *Odyssey* how good a man Homer was, or even if he existed?). Then again, if you are only interested in the very, very best, perhaps such battles become the only ones worth fighting.

vanessa says:

FEBRUARY 4, 2010 AT 1:13 PM

What a self-publicizing prat. The German writer with no paragraphs is probably the great Sebald: wouldn't expect Amis or Tom Chatfield to appreciate him. As for Coetzee, makes me think of margaritas ante porcos.

rae says:

FEBRUARY 4, 2010 AT 1:25 PM

I wish we had writers who were the unacknowledged legislators of the world – as they do in France – and made public pronouncements when demanded by what's happening in the world, rather than when they need to advertise their latest book. What a sad world we live in.

Could the German writer be WG Sebald?

total nosher says:

FEBRUARY 4, 2010 AT 1:34 PM

Come on, Bernhard is hilarious – Cutting Timber, the Voice Imitator, anyone?

Tom Chatfield says:

FEBRUARY 4, 2010 AT 2:37 PM

Vanessa—gosh, have we met? I like Sebald, and I like to think MA would have known who he is. I also enjoy and admire Coetzee, but I didn't go to interview Martin Amis to tell him what to read. Though I like to think I could have had him chuckling at "Disgrace" within the hour if I'd really turned on the charm.

Rae—er, hasn't Mart been trying to do exactly that for about the last ten years? He made a few comments about terrorism, religion, world peace, wrote some essays, made the headlines...



Jason Kennedy says:

FEBRUARY 8, 2010 AT 10:10 PM

I don't see that much innocence in Amis' work.

The thing about him is that he is articulate, like Will Self, but that his novels are not that interesting, like Will Self. Oh, they are friends.

The German writer sounds very much like Bernhard, who indeed has no paragraphs, just as the mind has no paragraphs, and happens to be a great writer, far greater than Amis, and who is extremely funny, though not across his whole output. Perhaps Amis only read Corrections, which is not that great (but is well regarded critically). Gargoyles, Walking, Old Masters, Yes, The Loser. All excellent.

Amis has spoken out on politics, terrorism, etc, but the unfortunate thing is the content of his words.

'Some societies are just more evolved than others,' he said. 'I am not saying these people are genetically incapable of not being terrorists.'

'These societies are arming themselves with weapons like the AK47 and blowing people up on buses and Tubes.'

When one member of his audience suggested not all Muslims were terrorists he retorted: 'No one else is doing it.'

Read more: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-488239/Martin-Amis-launches-fresh-attack-Muslim-faith-saying-Islamic-states-evolved.html#ixzz0eys9f4de>

Somehow Martin Amis thinks that the capacity to blow people up using bombs dispensed by pilotless drones is a measure of the West's moral superiority.

Irish, Greek, Basques, all are still employing so-called terrorism to achieve their goals. Mr Amis is factually incorrect, perhaps he would like to tell the above peoples of how morally superior he feels to them, also.

jethro says:

FEBRUARY 9, 2010 AT 12:58 PM

I enjoy Martin Amis enormously (although I do find his essays more enjoyable than his fiction) but I am also a huge fan of Coetzee. Mr Amis can obviously read what he likes but I think he errs by kind of suggesting Coetzee's fans are just a bunch of seriously gloomy souls (I read miserable Coetzee but I read all kinds of works, including many of the writers Mr Amis admires). Mr Amis is naturally able to read deeper than a lot of us, and I envy him this skill, but I don't think that the cliché phrases in Coetzee's work really deflect his admirers from the author's many admirable qualities.

Lawrence says:

FEBRUARY 10, 2010 AT 6:01 PM

I admire Martin Amis for his courage to go up against the tide of political correctness and moral relativism and Islamophilia that sickens the Dying Isle like a cancer. However Amis is no literary giant any more than his father was, so when he says a truly masterful writer, JM Coetzee, one whose place in the literary canon is assured (unlike Amis), is no good, one simply has to laugh. Amis only belittles himself, not Coetzee, in this regard. Do I sense some jealous hostility for the superior writer?

jorrocks says:

FEBRUARY 12, 2010 AT 6:19 PM

I don't think it can be said that Coetzee lacks a sense of humour. He is at least funny as Amis's friend, Ian McEwan. But then Amis doesn't think much of Beckett either, does he?

Malcolm says:

FEBRUARY 15, 2010 AT 9:28 PM

Yes I too think the German writer is probably Sebald. It's true he does not write with paragraphs ... but I'd challenge MA to write sentences half so beautifully organised and with such a melodious internal rhythm. In Austerlitz there is I think an 11 page sentence describing the clearance of a Jewish ghetto. One of the most breathtaking literary experiences I have ever had.

victor crebolder says:

FEBRUARY 19, 2010 AT 10:43 AM

Some sense of humour, even in the (darkest) hour, is of (pivotal) importance. Amazing this seems to be the one thing publishers tend to forget.

Seriousness is a (serious) disease, which gives us headache, suicide and what not...

So yes, how can those people with s. and without h. get across anything, really!

mark ramsden says:

FEBRUARY 22, 2010 AT 12:24 PM

The notorious 'house in order' comment about Muslims was a deliberate misquotation from senile Marxist Terry Eagleton, missing out the 'Don't you feel that...' beginning. Unfortunately his factoid will now be repeated till the end of time even in the broadsheets because journos can't be arsed checking. He's not upper crust incidentally, although he was fortunate to get a free pass from his father's fame it doesn't mean he's wrong about Jihad or Islamists. The Pregnant Women is superb, and as for (Ha!) misogyny, he loves women and they love him.

Sorry to post this here but then I'm a subscriber and, unlike MA, my Dad wasn't famous, I'm no longer published by Serpent's Tail and I need the attention! Martin Amis Jihad Rap MA quotes mashed up with lounge jazz. Just what the world needs right now  
...<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PfB5QxUZY0>

mark ramsden says:

FEBRUARY 22, 2010 AT 12:28 PM

and Tom Chatfield absolutely rocks...Thank heavens not everyone goes for the kneejerk Anti-Mart rubbish. MA is BURNING right now. Best he's ever been.

tempo dulu says:

FEBRUARY 24, 2010 AT 10:23 AM

Amis wrote some great early novels but his tendency to over intellectualize things can get boring. He's not as funny as he once was, unfortunately.

Paul Doolan says:

FEBRUARY 24, 2010 AT 10:28 PM

So MA thinks Coetzee lacks humour and is a bad writer. Well, hhe is not alone. In Coetzee's newest novel a biographer is researching a South African novelist called Coetzee. This is what she dhears from an old lover of his: "After Disgrace I lost interest. In general I would say his work lacks ambition. The control of the elements is too tight.....Too cool, too neat, I would say. Too easy. Too lacking in passion". Now, if that's not hilarious then I don't know what is.

Andy says:

MARCH 24, 2010 AT 6:13 PM

I've read both Amis's and Coetzee's literary criticism, and found both incredibly bland and shallow. I'm not a Brit, but I do admire and envy the quality journalism of UK, so many articles are well-written and interesting that I just can't get enough of them (if you're a snob, you still have something like The Economist to love). So I'm really surprised that Amis and Coetzee, as Literary Writers, can be so revered.

Ganpat Ram says:

APRIL 29, 2010 AT 5:56 PM

I am sure Trotsky would have been crushed if he had known Kingley's boy would sniff out his "moral rot". Terrifying.

Ganpat Ram says:

APRIL 30, 2010 AT 5:00 PM

Martin Amis complaining that anyone else lacks humour is just.....funny.

His solemn, fatuous self-importance is what strikes one about Amis.

Julie Burchill is usually wrong, but she was dead right about what makes Amis embarrassing: The spectacle of a light-weight mind struggling with heavy-weight topics.

Ganpat Ram says:

APRIL 30, 2010 AT 5:22 PM

Richard Preston in the Daily Telegraph caught the frivolity of Martin Amis very well:

"...maybe, unlike Amis's circle of Oxbridge baby boomers, Coetzee and other novelists from Africa and India and Eastern Europe have seriousness in their bones and aren't principally trying to show off when they write.

The old "Who'll be most read in 50 years' time?" test is not infallible – no one cared much about Bach until Mendelssohn revived him – but let's just say, quietly and calmly, that Disgrace and Age of Iron, to name just two, will be appreciated long after Amis is being footnoted as son of Kingsley, friend of Tina Brown."

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