
Opening Extract from...

Martin Amis

The Autobiography

Written by Richard Bradford

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MARTIN AMIS
THE BIOGRAPHY

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For Ames and Harry.
And with thanks to Helen and Gerard Burns.

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Reference details of quoted works are provided in brackets in the main text. The bibliography is made up solely of works by Martin Amis. The following abbreviations are used: '*TWAC*', *The War Against Cliché*; '*VMN*', *Visiting Mrs Nabokov*; '*TSP*', *The Second Plane*; '*TMI*', *The Moronic Inferno*.

Introduction

I was on a plane somewhere above Continental Europe and a man, a seat away, was reading a book while sipping his something-and-tonic. I thought he was trying to control a hiccup or a sneeze but then his whole upper body began to shake and he appeared, to my alarm, to be battling with some sort of seizure. Soon after that he began to shake and within minutes the contents of his nose and throat left for various destinations on his trousers, tray and glass. He was now growling, screaming with previously suppressed laughter. The book, I noted from the cover, was *Money*. It was, I thought, odd. Nothing wrong with laughing in public, surely? But later I began to understand the poor man's problem. He didn't care what *anyone else* felt; *he* felt ashamed of what *he* was doing. The book, brilliantly, makes you feel complicit with the narrator, the hilarious (the sexist, obese, partially deranged, pornographer hero) John Self. Self isn't simply a one-off, a grotesque; he is an unapologetic representative of what Martin Amis calls the 'background'. And when you follow him there you feel uneasy about enjoying what, outside the book, you might profess to treat with disdain, or pretend to ignore. 'Suspending disbelief' is a familiar cliché. Upending, smothering disbelief, denying us a complacent immunity from the background is something else, something few

writers can achieve. I'd met Martin several times already but it was then, in his absence, that I became particularly fascinated by the relationship between the man and his work and decided to write this biography.

Biographers borrow from the recipes of fiction writing, with qualifications. You can give energy to verbal portraits but, unlike the novelist, you cannot alter fact. And here Martin Amis presents a severe, infuriating problem. You would think that for someone who has polarized the intelligentsia and held the attention of the media for so long that hyperbole would be superfluous. Unfortunately – at least for fans of celebrity biography – there are no extraordinary, portentous, shameful, let alone monstrous, aspects of him to be discovered. Do not misunderstand me: he is not a colourless, dull man. Quite the contrary, he is excellent company, by parts sagacious, funny and bewildering. He is kind, affably short-tempered and as a family man incomparably caring. If there is a mystery about him it comes from the anomalous relationship between his public persona, driven by his writing, and the private individual. It is almost as though he is the mirror image of his father, with everything in reverse. Kingsley's work is magnificently ecumenical; all human life is there but throughout there are sustaining verities. By contrast, Kingsley the man was a cabinet of fears and dilemmas, sometimes hurtfully unpredictable. His fiction was his refuge.

Martin projects his perplexities and horrors on to the fictional canvas, but not to dispose of them. He feels he has a duty to his audience, to challenge, infuriate, entertain, but not to use his work as a clearing house for his personal fallibilities and crises. His fiction is an index to his honesty. If in life he is confronted by moral and emotional perplexities – and there have been quite a number – he will not like many intellectuals smother pain with ideas. And this refusal to make sense of unkempt reality is the keynote of his novels. The parallels between his weird assembly of inventions and his personal history are fascinating. He is a great writer and the

retching man on the aeroplane reminded me of what he does indeed have in common with his father, something that has guaranteed for both a great deal of critical ire. Kingsley put it well: 'The rewards for being sane are not many but knowing what's funny is one of them. And that's an end of the matter.'

Martin certainly knows what's funny, which will not be a surprise to readers of his work. 'But,' asked an old friend of mine – we'd been admirers though certainly not unreserved fans of his fiction since the 1970s – 'but . . . what's he *really* like?' I paused for quite a while. I could have been honest, brief and a little cryptic (see above), or I might have offered a few anecdotes (see below), but I must admit that the question threw me. It pushed into unsettling relief a dilemma experienced by all biographers and rarely, if ever, acknowledged. Each of us – writers or not – will know a small coterie of people intimately, intuitively, but such is the nature of these relationships that the very idea of spreading their emotionally charged uniqueness across several hundred pages of print seems tactless; facts might be recorded but truth will remain elusive. The outsider cannot even claim access to tangents of shared experience, and I certainly belong in that category; I have known him for twelve years but I refer to him throughout this book by his first name for the simple fact that I need to distinguish him from Amis Snr, not because we are close friends. We have talked one-to-one at very great length, for which I thank him; we have talked about everything, laughed about his father's inimitable manner as a letter writer, argued over nuclear weapons, global warming and *Ulysses* (I advocate retention of the second, mock doom-evangelists of the third and am bored senseless by the fourth, and he despises my opinions accordingly). He has told me of his childhood, his various families, friends and peers, of how he writes, what he writes; and I have interviewed friends, lovers, intimates. But can I claim knowledge of what he's '*really* like'? Here we go.

He can be edgy, uncooperative, slightly neurotic. But which of us can say that we have immunized ourselves from these states,

particularly since we exist in a world that appears so programmatized and inflexible? And he has every right to be suspicious and begrudging. Through no fault of his own he became, has become, the victim of a disastrous intermeshing of previously separate cultural trajectories. He is a 'media star'; his divorce, various relationships and financial status falling prey to the gossip columnists of the tabloid press. It is unlikely that the writers, let alone the readers, of this dross have ever opened any of his books. At the same time his novels are not examples of avant-garde elitism. Some are more accessible than others, but in terms of versatility, a willingness to try anything, he is in contemporarary writing beyond compare. His life has been, still is, exciting and enviable. He is – though he remains ambivalent about it – a celebrity, and his ability with words elicits an exceptional level of jealousy from his peers and competitors. As a man he is equally enviable, because behind the media-generated image he is signally modest and thoughtful. How can these seemingly incongruous dimensions of his persona be compatible? Read on.

1

Before He Left

What makes a great writer? Being born into what would strike most as a scenario suitable only for fiction might play some part. Martin Louis Amis came into this world on 25 August 1949 at Radcliffe Maternity Hospital, Oxford. His father Kingsley reported the next day to his closest friend Philip Larkin that Martin 'was as blond as P [Philip, his elder brother by a year] and less horrifying in appearance'. His mother, Hilary Amis (née Bardwell), was just twenty. She was as Larkin would later remark, 'The most beautiful woman I have ever seen without being the least pretty', a woman, some would say girl, who had encountered as much in her teens as most of her peers would experience in a lifetime. The scion of comfortably middle-class home counties stock – her father was a senior civil servant at the Ministry of Agriculture with a taste for madrigals, folk dancing and 'traditional' English culture – she had been sent first to a St Trinian's-style boarding school for girls in North Wales (Dr Williams's School for Young Ladies) from which she frequently absconded, and after that to the more respectable Bedales where she was bullied and which she left, by mutual consent, after less than a year. She completed her education at Beltrane, Wiltshire, departing aged fifteen with no qualifications. She then worked, as general helper, with board and lodgings, at a

dog kennel in Bracknell run by two amiable lesbians, a period she enjoyed greatly. Aged sixteen Hilly enrolled at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art in Oxford and after six months, bored with her course, gave up the study of art to become their 'head model'. This, literally, meant that her head was the subject of paintings and sketches. Soon, however, she was posing in the nude, with little embarrassment or concern except for the draughty ill-heated studios where she was asked to sit for most of the day.

Kingsley was at this time in the third year of his degree in English, having returned to St John's after war service with the Royal Corps of Signals. In 1947 he gained a first, an achievement which he greeted with unconvincingly modest surprise. He had, he knew, a razor-sharp critical intelligence and his only flaw was a tendency to allow derision to intrude upon measured evaluation.

They met in 1946, via mutual friends, in a tea shop in the Cornmarket. Kingsley had noticed her before on several occasions, assumed she was an undergraduate and was mildly unsettled to learn that she was just seventeen 'and hence not nearly so depraved as I had hoped', he reported to Larkin. Within a year Hilly was pregnant and Kingsley, determined upon a literary or academic career, greeted the prospect of family life with horror. Hilly felt trapped and confused, pregnant by a man she had known for only twelve months, whose magnetic amusing social persona belied a well-protected seam of hapless despondency. At Kingsley's apologetic promptings they went in search of an abortion, not a locally sourced back-street termination endured by those with no alternative but the more expensive, almost legal services provided by indulgent, venal practitioners in West London. The operation was booked with a 'Central European Private Practitioner' who asked them for £100 in advance. Only after taking advice from a GP, a friend of his old army comrade Frank Coles, that such procedures even when practised by trained gynaecologists could be 'brutal and dangerous' having no legal protection, did Kingsley decide that Hilly's welfare should be given precedence. So began the brief,

one-month, engagement of Kingsley Amis and Hilly Bardwell. Their marriage in the Oxford Town Hall Register Office was attended by both sets of parents but only after Kingsley's mother had persuaded her husband and the Bardwells to lift their horror-stricken boycott. Nick Russel, a fellow undergraduate at St John's and the only other guest, treated the couple to dinner in The George, a nearby pub. Both sets of parents departed separately as soon as the brief ceremony was concluded. On the morning of his wedding day Kingsley composed a letter of application for admission as a B.Litt research student. He would for the time being survive on a grant in the hope that he would eventually obtain an academic post. The couple first took a flat in Norham Road but by the time Martin was born they had moved into a quiet nineteenth-century terrace house in Banbury called Marriner's Cottage.

In letters to Larkin written during this period Kingsley professes his happiness at being with Hilly, complaining only that marriage obliged him to spend inordinate and unendurably boring periods in the presence of his in-laws. What he also discloses without explanation or contrition is the Kingsley Amis he would have been had a combination of fate and social convention not contrived to turn him into a married father of two, desperately seeking regular employment. In one letter he offers an ardently detailed report on a dark-haired, slim, sullen-looking girl with 'noticeable breasts' who returned his stare 'disinterestedly, half-closing her eyes'. His prose discharges a hint of something much more intimate than glances exchanged in a dance hall, but most striking of all is the fact that Hilly was alongside him when this occurred. She knew nothing of it but the frisson of sharing this secret with his friend, fuelled both by guilt and excitement, would set the tone for much of their subsequent correspondence during Kingsley's marriage to Hilly.

Marriage and children created two versions of Kingsley Amis and by the end of the 1950s he would often allow them to coalesce. He had by then grown tired of the ritual of deceit which in any

event he practised with little competence. He frequently used Robert Conquest and even Larkin as bearers of alibis for his adulterous excursions, but Hilly too had become aware that her husband and the father of their children lived in a manner that any good-looking lecherous bachelor would envy. Despite an extra-marital affair of her own – begun much later and somewhat despairingly – and Kingsley's seemingly ingenuous apologies, Hilly never countenanced an open marriage. The dinner party at their Swansea house when Kingsley went into the garden three times to have sex with each of the women guests is a verified fact yet the implication that the non-participating observers were indulgent debauchees-by-association is inaccurate. Hilly struggled to control her distress. Martin: 'Hilly, a virgin when she met Kingsley, was a very reluctant ''swinger'', and never stopped minding the other women *a lot*.'

Even after much of the lying and secrecy was undone there remained in Kingsley's psyche, and certainly in his writing, a propensity towards guile and doubling. Whether his unplanned early marriage was the cause or a symptom of this is a matter for psychoanalysts but what is certain is that throughout his adulthood there was never one Kingsley Amis. He became a cabinet of gestures – some genuine, others fabricated – and release mechanisms, the latter allowing him to simultaneously advance and retreat from the same position. Friends, interviewers, critics; all would, for a moment seem to gain knowledge of the essential Kingsley Amis only to have the illusion dispelled by an act or statement variously moving, candid or quixotic, and on further inspection anomalous.

Martin was of course far too young to have knowledge of this aspect of his father's personality in the 1950s but later when he too had become a writer the past began to interweave with the present: he saw in Kingsley things that he recognized and wished if possible to suppress in himself. He succeeded only partially and his endeavours would certainly leave an imprint on his work.

During the summer holiday of 1949 Kingsley, faced with a

second child to support, scoured *The Times Educational Supplement* for any university jobs in English, anywhere. Prague and Buenos Aires turned him down, as did Bristol, King's College, London, Manchester and Durham. Then, on 23 September he was invited for interview at University College, Swansea and subsequently offered an Assistant Lectureship with the salary of £300 per year. He left Oxford within a week, alone, to begin work and search for accommodation while Hilly, Philip and Martin stayed with his parents. Impatient and anxious Hilly joined him, with Martin, in mid-November and found a flat within two days of her arrival. On 16 December she set off in a rented van with all of their possessions and two noisy infants to join her husband in the cramped second-floor flat of 82 Vivian Road, Swansea.

It is significant to note that Kingsley played hardly any part in the move having spent two months searching unsuccessfully for a suitable residence. He commented to Larkin that 'I need all the time I can get for *house hunting*, and thinking about house hunting'. The placing of this activity in italics, and the droll coda in which he admits to giving as much time to contemplating the task as executing it are revealing. Hilly stated to Zachary Leader that he was 'totally impractical'; a somewhat generous abridgement to what in truth was a predilection for selfishness. It was not that he did not love his wife and children, simply that for the time being he took every opportunity to postpone the tiresome responsibilities that came with them. Kingsley's salary was pitiable and Hilly, as well as looking after the children, worked part-time five days a week in the local cinema and later at a fish and chip shop in the Mumbles, whose leftovers were frequently brought home for family suppers. Nevertheless, Hilly later recalled the period as probably the most blissful of their marriage. 'We were perfectly happy. We saw the funny side of it.'

The death of Hilly's mother followed by an endowment in her will enabled the Amises to move from the cramped flat in Vivian Road – where the two baby boys were bathed in the kitchen sink,

recorded in the first ever photograph of Martin – to a house, 24 The Grove, for which they paid £2,400.

Even before *Lucky Jim* brought him fame Kingsley was treated at Swansea as a minor celebrity: still in his twenties, a first from Oxford, handsome and as a lecturer like no one that his students, colleagues or, to their unease, his seniors had previously encountered. He taught the canon but encouraged his students to question the apparently inviolable qualities of great authors. One of his first students, Mavis Nicholson, remembers his disparaging remarks on Keats – 'self-indulgent and impenetrable' – along with his dashing appearance at his first lecture, when he strolled on stage with his 'chic' overcoat hung over his shoulders and a lock of hair falling distractedly across his forehead. 'There's talent,' she commented to a friend.

Although he was not conscious of the parallels Kingsley was during this period becoming an almost exact simulacrum of the man who in 1954 would cause a minor earthquake in the otherwise torpid zone of English domestic fiction, Jim Dixon. The feature of Jim and indeed his quiet accomplice the narrator that made him so popular, particularly for those looking for something both unorthodox and selfishly optimistic in the still gloomy aftermath of 1945, was the fact that he was a magnificent fraud. He was an academic who loathed the pretensions of academia and most of all he was much more clever, and indeed cunning, than he pretended to be. The subtle alliance between Jim's sardonic, cutting private ruminations and the merciless orchestrations of the narrator was a kind of revenge against fate. He detested the provincial world in which the need to earn a living had placed him, treated those similarly grounded with a mixture of pity and scorn and dreaded the prospect of ending up in a long-term relationship, marriage, with the leech-like Margaret – a thinly disguised version of Monica Jones, with whom Larkin had recently begun a relationship in Leicester. The novel's conclusion was for some of its more scrupulous admirers its only weakness; even John Betjeman, hardly an advocate of harsh realism, found it slightly implausible.

Suddenly, Jim's dismal existence is exchanged for the realization of his fantasies. He is offered a job in London by a wealthy entrepreneur – well paid but with no onerous duties – and the girl of his dreams, the magnificently busty Christine, leaves with him arm in arm on the train for the capital. His loathsome Head of Department and his son – based respectively upon Hilly's father and her brother with some swipes at academic posturing and aggrandizement thrown in – are left standing, enraged and humiliated, on the platform.

Christine was a compromise. In part she was Hilly, the innocent but outstandingly sexy girl he had come across in Oxford, and married. She was also a fantasy endemic to maleness, the kind of woman that men long for but with whom they don't necessarily wish to have children and spend the rest of their lives.

He wrote to Larkin only six months after his arrival in Swansea to report on the weekend he had spent in London with his friend James Michie 'where I drank a lot, and talked to sweet ladies, and smoked a lot of cigarettes, and spent some money on myself'.[1] Already, it seems, the exercise in wish fulfilment so brilliantly realized in the novel four years hence was being played out in Amis's sullen frustrated disclosures to Larkin. He goes on:

> As I came back on the train on Sunday evening, sinking as I did so into a curious trance-like state of depression, some ideas began clarifying in my mind:
> (a) The proportion of attractive women in London and Swansea is 100:1 or more – this is a sober estimate;
> (b) Nobody in Swansea really amuses me;
> (c) Children are not worth the trouble;
> (d) I would rather live in London, than I would live in Swansea;
> (e) Consequently the best thing I can do in Swansea is to keep on shutting myself up on my own and writing poems and a novel . . .