

British novelist Martin Amis: The voice of a horrible era

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The undeserved prominence of British writer Martin Amis (1949-2023) epitomised a broad cultural crisis. Plaudits on his death have only revealed the slender basis of claims for his literary significance.

Obituaries largely skate over his longer career. They laud the *enfant terrible* and his scabrous satires of the 1980s/90s, then fall quiet about poorer later work. Even at the time reviewers were less charitable regarding the limitations. The prose now celebrated was once described as “Amis’s trademark gaudy, repetitive insistence.”

Obituarists cast a forgiving eye because to do otherwise would involve a broader critique of their own social, intellectual and artistic milieu, forcing most commentators to bluster, at very best, over his disgusting 2006 anti-Muslim diatribe, used to support the “War on Terror.”

Following a terror alert, he told Ginny Dougary of the *Times*, “There’s a definite urge—don’t you have it?—to say, ‘The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.’ What sort of suffering? Not letting them travel. Deportation—further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they’re from the Middle East or from Pakistan ... Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community.”

A year later, literary critic Terry Eagleton condemned his comments as “Not the ramblings of a British National party thug, but the reflections of Martin Amis, leading luminary of the English metropolitan literary world.” Amis responded with the assertion that “already by mid-afternoon on that day I ceased to believe in what I said.”

Untrue. He had also published a lengthy article commenting on being delayed at airport security while his daughter’s hand luggage was searched. He wrote of wanting to tell them to “stick to people who look like they’re from the Middle East.”

Amis’s racist diatribes in support of imperialism were no aberration. Of French novelist and future fascist Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Leon Trotsky once said, “Either the artist will make his peace with the darkness or he will perceive the dawn.” Amis was never in conflict with the darkness.

Eagleton’s observation that Amis was a “leading luminary of the English metropolitan literary world” was omitted by several obituarists. Amis published *The Rachel Papers* (1973) at 24. He was to become the literary embodiment of the 1980s and early ’90s, with the novels of this period—*Money* (1984) and *London*

Fields (1989), particularly—cited as his major achievements.

His writing was distinctive, but the novels were cynical scab-picking within the ruling class. They were marked by a pervasive sense of the moral corruption of society, but one accepted as integral to the modern world and even the human condition.

Although novels like *Time’s Arrow* (1991), set in Auschwitz, pointed to bigger questions, Amis remained a “celebrity author.” *The Information* (1995), about rival authors, is best remembered for its vast advance. He changed literary agents, joining Andrew Wylie, nicknamed “the Jackal,” to demand and obtain £500,000.

Many of his novels feature paired characters. But tellingly, Amis said of *The Information*’s that “if they’re anyone, the two writers ... are me.”

Later fiction was extremely variable, with one critic calling *Lionel Asbo* (2012) “basically incoherent.” Amis also wrote essays and reportage, but the transformation of his prejudices into characters was increasingly apparent. He knew that changing times were exposing his weaknesses in form and content. “A social change in the collective consciousness has happened,” he said, “and you feel you are not seeing it.”

Critics recognised his stylistic affectations, too. He commented, “Someone once said of my work ... that I deal with banalities delivered with tremendous force.” A reviewer of *The Second Plane* (2008), a collection around the September 11 attacks, said Amis’s writing “remains capable of anything, except perhaps humility.”

Changing times also exposed the social assumptions behind his work. The *Guardian* called him the “influential author of era-defining novels.” Given that he defined the era of rampant Thatcherism and a deep cynicism in prominent layers of the upper-middle-class literati, the comment was more damning than perhaps intended.

What will Amis be remembered for? He was aware of major issues, with novels haunted by the possibility of nuclear conflict and the Holocaust, but his relentless and wearing stylistic pyrotechnics showed an unhealthy obsession with form and not content.

His prominence and self-confidence as a writer made him a technical inspiration for younger authors like Will Self. But this also is hardly a recommendation.

Admirers suggest he was trying to invigorate English writing after the model of his idol Saul Bellow, but it feels too often like an empty technical brilliance. Writing himself as a character in his

novels reflected a general air of self-absorption.

Amis was the second child of novelist Kingsley Amis and his first wife, Hilly. Kingsley's breakthrough novel, *Lucky Jim* (1954), brought fame, financial success and family tension. Hilly left in 1963, when Kingsley moved in with novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard.

Martin's development says much of the cultural life of the British ruling class. Materially comfortable and intellectually feral, he moved between schools as a "semi-literate truant and waster." Howard gave him a reading list of novels and sent him to a crammer, enabling him to win a place at Oxford.

More significant for Martin than his father's fame was his political disorientation. Amis senior was one of a generation of writers who had joined the Communist Party. Stalinism sowed confusion and destroyed progressive sentiment. What followed was renunciation and a bitter, reactionary revolt against earlier leftism.

Martin imbibed this vicious anti-communism throughout his life, and it forms the bedrock of his own place in the literary establishment. He wrote later, "The ex-Communist [Kingsley] was developing into a reasonably active Labourite—before becoming (and remaining) a markedly noisy Tory."

The son shared everything about his father's politics aside from his later embrace of the Tory Party.

Kingsley was close friends with the right-wing libertarian Robert Conquest, who wrote on the Stalinist purges from an anti-Marxist perspective. They revelled in being called "fascists" in general political debate, naming their weekly meetings with other right-wing authors "the fascist lunch."

Martin joined their discussions in the late 1960s. He described himself in the 1970s as "unaligned, but ... in a sense, a congenital anti-Communist."

The most defining of Amis's books is the virulently anti-communist *Koba the Dread* (2002). Historically illiterate, and drawing heavily on Conquest's work, it portrays Stalinism as the inevitable outcome of Marxism, Stalin as the heir of Lenin and the Soviet Union as at least the equivalent of Nazi Germany if not worse.

Amis cannot disguise the real target of his hatred, which is Trotsky, Trotskyism, and socialist revolution: "Trotsky was a murdering bastard and a fucking liar."

Kingsley supported American imperialism in Vietnam, whereas his son expressed an opposition shared by many right-wing isolationists, arguing that "America had no business involving itself in a series of distant convulsions where the ideas, variously interpreted, of a long dead German economist were bringing biblical calamity."

His position on Iraq was similar. Seeing the invasion as a mistake, but fearing American defeat above all else, he went on to enthusiastically embrace the bloody imperialist War on Terror without a moment's hesitation.

This was in no way fundamentally in conflict with Amis's support for the Labour Party. In 1974 he joined the *New Statesman*, eventually becoming books editor. Founded by leading Fabians in 1933, the *Statesman's* veneer of reformist benevolence was a calculated weapon against socialism, as Amis (attacking

Jeremy Corbyn in 2015) recognised: "What the exponents of the old left were like humanly depended—with mathematical precision—on how doctrinaire they were ... you avoided the company of Corin Redgrave and Kika Markham."

Redgrave and Markham were members of the Workers Revolutionary Party, then the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

No challenge could be tolerated to the cosy world where Amis belonged. Whether "supporting" Labour (as in the 1978 election, when he did not vote) or backing Barack Obama, Amis was most concerned to preserve the world which afforded him his privilege.

He formed his own coterie, including James Fenton and his closest friend, Christopher Hitchens. As we noted on Hitchens's death, the grouping of these forces was "All one, if not happy, then reconcilable and amicable family."

Fenton and Hitchens were initially associated with the state capitalist International Socialists, precursor of the Socialist Workers Party in Britain. Hitchens later made his peace with imperialism. David Walsh observed that he "was the sort of private school 'leftist' that British society regularly turns out, essentially snobs and careerists, who ditch their former 'comrades' as soon as the wind shifts or more tempting opportunities present themselves."

Of the 1978 election, Amis wrote anxiously about "the social effect of trade-union ... ascendancy ... It made me believe that the people of these islands had always hated each other. And this isn't true. The hatred, the universal disobligingness, was a political deformation, and it didn't last."

No matter how explicitly Amis gave vent to his reactionary views, the old chums rallied round someone who was in all essentials a fellow thinker.

His accusation of the British left's "rampant" affinity with Hezbollah, for example, asserting that hostility to Israel is the only real expression of racism, fed into a broader smear campaign asserting that the "left" was deeply antisemitic, intended as a defence of the crimes perpetrated against the Palestinians by the State of Israel and as a means of denigrating socialism and relativising and apologising for the fascist right. It is a campaign that has brought together the Blairite right in the Labour Party, the Tories and various Zionist groups and prominent figures.

Amis was lauded in life and now in death because he was a man not simply of his time, but of a deeply reactionary upper-middle-class social milieu. He mixed in social circles where what passes for political divisions counts for very little, where art becomes artifice, and culture most often an expression of affectation and snobbery.



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