

Martin Amis

Brian Finney

Routledge Guides to Literature

Martin Amis

Booker-shortlisted for *Time's Arrow* and widely known for his novels, short stories, essays, reviews, and autobiographical works, Martin Amis is one of the most influential of contemporary British writers.

This guide to Amis's diverse and often controversial work offers:

- an accessible introduction to the contexts and many interpretations of his texts, from publication to the present
- an introduction to key critical texts and perspectives on Amis's life and work, situated within a broader critical history
- cross-references between sections of the guide, in order to suggest links between texts, contexts and criticism
- suggestions for further reading

Part of the Routledge Guides to Literature series, this volume is essential reading for all those beginning detailed study of Martin Amis and seeking not only a guide to his works but also a way through the wealth of contextual and critical material that surrounds them.

Brian Finney has held academic positions in both the UK and the USA and currently lectures at the California State University, Long Beach. He has published widely in the field of twentieth- and twenty-first-century British fiction.

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Brian Finney

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Abbreviations and referencing

Throughout the text references to Martin Amis's works are abbreviated as follows:

- DB *Dead Babies*. New York: Vintage International, 1991.
E *Experience: A Memoir*. New York: Hyperion/Talk Miramax, 2000.
EM *Einstein's Monsters*. New York: Vintage International, 1990.
HW *Heavy Water and Other Stories*. New York: Vintage International, 2000.
HM *House of Meetings*. New York: Vintage International, 2006.
I *The Information*. New York: Vintage International, 1996
KD *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million*. New York: Vintage International, 2003.
LF *London Fields*. New York: Vintage International, 1991.
M *Money: A Suicide Note*. London and New York: Penguin, 1986.
MI *The Moronic Inferno and Other Visits to America*. London and New York: Penguin, 1987.
NT *Night Train*. New York: Vintage International, 1998.
OP *Other People: A Mystery Story*. New York: Vintage International, 1994.
RP *The Rachel Papers*. New York: Vintage International, 1992.
S *Success*. New York: Vintage International, 1991.
TA *Time's Arrow, or, The Nature of the Offense*. New York: Vintage International, 1992.
VMN *Visiting Mrs. Nabokov and Other Excursions*. New York: Vintage International, 1995.
WAC *The War Against Cliché: Essays and Reviews, 1971–2000*. New York: Vintage International, 2002.
YD *Yellow Dog*. New York: Vintage, 2004.

All references are to page numbers. References to other texts use the Harvard referencing system with full details of items cited given in the Bibliography.

Cross-referencing between sections is a feature of each volume in the Routledge Guides to Literature series. Cross-references appear in brackets and include section titles as well as the relevant page numbers in bold type, e.g. (see *Life and Contexts*, pp. 14–15).

Introduction

This book offers the reader an introduction to Martin Amis's life, work, and the wide range of critical responses to his work. Possibly the most outstanding, and certainly the best-known, novelist of his generation, Amis initially had to compete with his father, Kingsley Amis (1922–95), who was himself a leading novelist of his generation. In carving out his own fictional territory, Amis reacted against his father's realist form of social satire in favor of a self-conscious, ludic mode of fiction that was particularly indebted to Vladimir Nabokov (see *Criticism*, p. 89). This book is divided into three parts. Part 1 places Martin Amis's life in the context of the literary climate, both in Britain and the USA, and of the social, political, and cultural gestalt during his lifetime. As no biography of Amis has yet appeared, this part constitutes the most extensive biographical narrative about him to appear to date. Part 2 consists of a critical introduction to every book he has published so far—eleven novels, two collections of short stories, two autobiographical or semi-autobiographical books, and three collections of his nonfiction reviews, profiles, articles, and essays. These introductions are meant to inform the reader about the basic contents, themes, and formal characteristics of each book. Part 3 offers a more advanced examination of the major critical debates about the nature and value of his work that have appeared since he published his first novel in 1973. These debates range from Amis's rejection of British in favor of American novelistic models and the effect on the reception of his work of his superstar status in Britain, to his portrayal of women and his unique, comic use of language. Where the same book or subject is referred to more than once, cross-references have been provided in bold. The Index offers a full list of page numbers for each of these categories. So, this book is intended to offer students a comprehensive introduction to this author and to summarize and direct them to more specialist or advanced critical studies of individual works as well as of larger collections of works.



Life and contexts

The early years, 1949–73

Martin Amis was born on 25 August 1949. Looking back he reflects, “four days later, the Russians successfully tested their first atom bomb, [. . .] the world had taken a turn for the worse” (*EM* 1). As he grew up, Amis came to see himself as representative of a generation that had inherited a world radically different from that in which his father, Kingsley Amis, had lived, one threatened by nuclear annihilation. He concluded that his father’s generation “got it hugely wrong,” and that, in consequence, his own generation faced a drastically deteriorated stage of modernity, “trapped in the great mistake” (*EM* 13). Frequently Amis depicts his father’s generation as the last inhabitants of an Edenic state that they had been responsible for losing: “Post-1945 life is completely different from everything that came before it. We are like no other people in history” (McGrath 1987: 194). So much of Martin Amis’s outlook and work has been formed in reaction to the beliefs and writing of his father, Kingsley (see *Criticism*, p. 86). Martin has called his relationship to his father “a very enjoyable adversarial” one, “argumentative, but close” (Ross 1987: 24). When he came to write his memoir, *Experience*, as he was turning fifty, he significantly chose to organize the material of his own life in parallel to that of his father. The “Envoy” concludes: “I am you and you are me” (*E* 364). But the ways in which he fights off his father as much as he identifies with him are complex and contribute to the originality of the son’s fictional writing. A month after Martin’s birth Kingsley left Oxford with a BA to take up a position as an assistant lecturer in English at University College, Swansea, South Wales, “Swansea being the last unfilled English post of that year,” according to Kingsley (Amis, K. 1991: 120). Apart from a year in the USA (1958–9), the family was to live in Swansea until 1961, when Martin turned twelve.

Martin was the second son of Kingsley Amis and Hilary Bardwell. Whereas Kingsley’s father was lower middle class, a mustard manufacturer’s clerk, his mother’s parents were upper middle class, her father being a civil servant and her mother the daughter of a successful Victorian merchant (*E* 130). In 1946, while an undergraduate, Kingsley had met Hilary, a model, at the Ruskin School of Art. In 1948, she became pregnant, they married, and she gave birth to Philip, Martin’s older brother, who was to grow up to become a graphic designer. After moving to Swansea, the family was rescued from living in a series of cramped

flats (in one of which Martin slept in a drawer) when Hilary turned twenty-one in 1950 and inherited from her family £5,000 with half of which they bought their first terraced house. In 1954, the year in which their last child, Sally, was born, Kingsley published *Lucky Jim*, a novel that became a bestseller and was turned into a film in 1957. He won the Somerset Maugham Award for it, which required him to spend three months abroad. After much grumbling, he chose to spend the time with his family in Portugal. A comic satire on contemporary campus life in England, the novel propelled Kingsley into the position of a leading spokesman for a new postwar generation of disgruntled writers whom the media dubbed the Angry Young Men (others included John Osborne, Alan Sillitoe, John Braine, and John Wain). Kingsley stood for a rejection of the experimental tradition of modernism in favor of social realism and transparency. Like Charles Lumley, the rebel protagonist of John Wain's *Hurry on Down* (1954), Kingsley's Jim Dixon attacks society not in order to bring it down but in order to obtain a profitable foothold in it. Once Kingsley had done likewise, he exchanged his early left-wing views for a Blimpish reactionary stand in which he was to be joined by his closest friend, Philip Larkin, whom he had met at Oxford and who frequently visited Kingsley in Swansea and acted as Philip's godfather.

When asked in midlife about his childhood, Martin Amis exclaimed, "Childhood? What childhood?" He explained: "When Nabokov said a writer's childhood was his treasure chest, I thought 'Christ, what do I do? I haven't got one'" (Stout 1990: 34). There is little recollection of much of his childhood in *Experience*. Is this because it was so ordinary, which may be true of his years at Swansea up to the age of twelve? Or is it because once he left Swansea he went to some dozen different schools, which offered little narrative continuity? Amis has commented how, with each new school, "having to [re]make your personality [. . .] makes you conscious of how you're going down," which may explain his own later self-conscious approach to writing fiction (Ross 1987: 23). Going to so many schools also made him "quite expert at self-preservation," he has said, which he would need when faced with negative reactions to his work from his father and the press (Bigsby 1992: 169). His peripatetic schooling began when his father was invited to teach creative writing at Princeton for a year (1958–9) when Martin was ten. He recalls: "Soon I had long trousers, a crew cut, and a bike with fat whitewalls and an electric horn" (*MI* ix). The year in New Jersey, where he attended the Valley Road School, made Martin "fully Americanised, for now" (*E* 139). "America excited and frightened me," he recalled in later life, "and has continued to do so" (*MI* ix). His connection to America was destined to resume in his thirties and to play an important role in his development as a novelist with international appeal.

In 1961, Kingsley moved the family to Cambridge where he obtained a fellowship at Peterhouse. Looking back on his years at Swansea, Amis declared that life there was squalid and that he found the Welsh bitter and cruel (Michener 1986: 142). During his two years in Cambridge, where he went to Cambridgeshire High School for Boys, Martin writes that he was "overweight and undersized"—"averagely unhappy for my age" (*E* 102–3). Finding the fellowship too demanding on his writing time, Kingsley resigned in 1963 and took a year's rental on a house in Soller, Majorca, where the family met Robert Graves. But in October of the previous year Kingsley had met Elizabeth Jane Howard (b. 1923), an established

novelist, at the Cheltenham Literary Festival, and in summer 1963 he left openly with her for a holiday together. Martin's mother took all three children to the rented villa in Spain and the marriage was at an end. At the time, Martin remembers experiencing "a terrible numbness and incredulity" (Hubbard 1990: 118). One possible effect on him was to implant in him what he later recognized as "an unconscious distrust of love" (E 50). He simultaneously blames the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 for this effect, asserting that he, like all the "children of the nuclear age [. . .] were weakened in their capacity to love" (E 138). Both boys pined for their father. Eventually in November 1963 their mother packed them off on a plane to London and sent Kingsley a telegram that never arrived warning him that they were coming. When they turned up at Kingsley's house at midnight they were met by their father in pajamas and Jane, as Kingsley called her, in a towel bathrobe. Both boys were shocked, and, in their ensuing talks with their father, Philip tearfully called him "a cunt" (E 144–5). Still, Martin quickly grew to like Jane. During their five-day stay with their father they learned of President Kennedy's assassination. Between autumn 1963 and spring 1964, the two boys attended the International School in Palma, Majorca, "full of glamorous foreign girls" (Michener 1986: 142). After moving to the Fulham Road in London with his mother and two siblings and being enrolled in Battersea Grammar School, Martin was offered a part in the film *High Wind in Jamaica* by the director Alexander Mackendrick, a friend of Elizabeth Jane Howard's. Martin, accompanied by his mother, spent two months in the early summer of 1964 in the West Indies shooting the film. On returning to his tough Battersea grammar school in the autumn, he was immediately expelled for chronic truancy. During this period, Martin went through a "mod" phase ("too many scooter crashes") and a hippie phase ("flowered shirt, velvet suit, far more relaxing"). Looked at with hindsight, "it was all a pose," he reflected (Stout 1990: 34). In *Experience* he calls his earlier teenage self "Osric" after the highly pretentious courtier whom Hamlet calls a "water-fly" in Shakespeare's play (see Works, p. 74).

So, Martin's mother enrolled him in a crammer (tutoring school) in Notting Hill, West London, the first of many over the next three years. Instead of studying, he spent his time reading comics, "going to betting shops, smoking dope, and trolling up and down the Kings Road, looking for girls" (Michener 1986: 142). With his earnings from his part in the film he got himself a drumset and a guitar and formed various rock groups that played the youth-club circuit around the Fulham Road. The headmaster of one of the crammers he attended declared that Martin was "unusually unpromising" (Michener 1986: 140). By the time he was seventeen he had managed to pass only three O-Level examinations, one a year. He did manage to lose his virginity at the age of fifteen. When he was sixteen his father bought him and his brother a gross (144) of condoms—"it represented the all-clear," Amis explains in his memoir (E 168). In 1967, he had a six-month affair with a beautiful Jewish teenager a year older than he was. He calls her his "first love" (E 264) and would use her as a model for Rachel, the heroine of his first novel. This is the first of numerous love affairs lasting a matter of months. He was to remain a bachelor for another seventeen years. This could be a result of the model his father provided him, with his reckless philandering (which, Martin writes, "often approached the psychotic" [E 81]), and of the trauma Martin experienced when his parents suddenly separated.

When he failed his A-Level exams, which he took in the early summer of 1965, he and Philip moved into the household his father and Elizabeth Jane Howard had set up in Maida Vale (they were married that June), while his mother would remarry an academic and take Sally with her to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where her new husband was offered a teaching position. Martin and Philip continued to lead a life of truancy, drinking, girls, and dope. The next year, when Kingsley and Jane found drugs in Philip's clothes drawer and tried to ground him, he left home permanently. Martin, a year younger, was not so rebellious. Maybe this was because his stepmother took him in hand. At this time, his reading consisted almost entirely of comics and science fiction. When she asked him what he wanted to be, to her astonishment, Martin answered, "Be a writer." "But you never read anything," she said. When Martin asked her to give him a book to read, she handed him Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and refused to tell him how it ended (Howard 2003: 358). That's when he got hooked, and she proceeded to feed him books by Evelyn Waugh, Anthony Powell, and Angus Wilson. One could speculate that Martin's acquisition of a well-known novelist as his stepmother allowed him to stop rebelling against the world of literature, which, until then, he had associated primarily with his father. In the autumn of 1967, Jane found a boarding crammer called Sussex Tutors in Brighton which Martin agreed to attend and where he was coached intensively to take the O- and A-Level exams needed to qualify for Oxford University's Entrance Paper. He passed all of them, being the only one at the crammer to obtain an A in English (see *Works*, p. 35). During his time in Brighton, he acquired a taste for nineteenth-century literature, not just George Eliot and Dickens but also Tolstoy ("bloody good") and Henry James ("Eloquent + rather funny + polished" [E 109]). On securing a place at Oxford, he wrote to his stepmother at the beginning of 1968 attributing his success entirely to her influence (E 150). Before starting his university life, he worked in his step-uncle's record shop in Rickmansworth and went with his closest boyhood friend, Rob, to Spain, where they ran out of money and then typically waited to be bailed out by their parents. His hippie lifestyle was representative, largely a middle-class phenomenon and rarely self-supporting.

This was the 1960s, the decade of the Beatles, rock, and political activism including the *événements* of May 1968. Amis represents himself as partly the product of this era:

In 1968 the world seemed to go further left than it had ever gone before and would ever go again. But this left was the New Left: it represented, or turned out to represent, revolution as play [. . .] There were demonstrations, riots, torchings, street battles in England, Germany, Italy, Japan and the USA. And remember the Paris of 1968: barricades, street theater, youth-worship [. . .] The death throes of the New Left took the form of vanguard terrorism (the Red Brigades, the Baader-Meinhof gang, the Weathermen). And its afterlife is anarchistic, opposing itself to the latest mutation of capital: after imperialism, after fascism, it now faces globalization.

Amis's account of his later teens in *Experience* show him as an unconscious participant in both the popular culture of the time and, to a lesser extent, the politics of his generation, which set him in conflict with his increasingly reactionary father who had become a vocal defender of the Vietnam War (1964–73). Martin claims that, after he had detached himself from Kingsley's pro-war stance, he and his father argued, often bitterly, about Vietnam for thirty years (KD 12–13). Kingsley and Philip Larkin had been inexorably egging each other on to adopt increasingly reactionary right-wing views over the decade. A representative letter from Larkin to Kingsley on April 8, 1969 dismisses Harold Wilson's Labour government: "Fuck the whole lot of them, I say, the decimal-loving, nigger-mad, army-cutting, abortion-promoting, murderer-pardoning, daylight-hating ponces, to hell with them" (quoted in Motion 1993: 409). Subsequently, Martin has asserted, "There are many aspects of the left that I find unappealing, but what I am never going to be is right-wing in my heart" (Morrison 1990: 102). In his first term at Oxford he joined a demonstration against the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, affirming his distance from the Communist Party line. Although he says that during this period of his life he was politically "quietist and unaligned" (KD 22), his father always considered his son's political views "a lot of dangerous howling nonsense" (Stout 1990: 35).

In the autumn of 1968, Amis went up to Exeter College, Oxford University on an exhibition (financial scholarship). Almost a decade later, he contributed an essay to a book of recollections titled *My Oxford*. In it he claims to have been torn between two antithetical groupings of undergraduates: "'gnome' people" who studied all the time and never left college, and "the 'cool' people [. . .] the aloof, slightly moneyed, London-based, car-driving, party-throwing [. . .] elite" (Amis 1977: 207). He spent the first term in gnome-like isolation reading English classics avidly and preparing for his prelims (exams held at the end of the first year), concentrating on Latin, Old English, and Milton. His tutor was Jonathan Wordsworth whom Amis appears to have liked and learnt from. According to John Walsh, another student of Wordsworth, their tutor "said literary criticism started in establishing whether a piece of writing moved you or didn't, and writing about your personal response" (Walsh 2006: 7). Amis was to use him as the model for Charles Knowd, the English tutor in his first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, who at the end of the book sees right through the protagonist's literary pretensions (see *Works and Criticism*, pp. 37, 124–5). In his second term he did manage to acquire a girlfriend for a couple of months and passed the prelims. In his second year he began a longer affair with Alexandra Wells ("Gully"), a history fresher whose stepfather was A. J. Ayer, and led more of the life of the "cool" set of students, "[p]unting drunkenly up the Isis [. . .] stealing the odd drug from the trusting, ponderous pushers at Hertford, rather shining in classes with my derivative and journalistic essays" (Amis 1977: 212). He moved out of college, sharing a cottage with Alexandra and three others whose bizarre behavior would provide him with some of the material for his second novel, *Dead Babies* (E 270–2) (see *Works*, p. 39–40).¹

1 In *Experience* Amis provisionally dates the undated letter referring to this period "[Autumn 1971]". But by then he had left Oxford, while in the letter he refers to it being "Finals Year," that is, 1970–1, which would place this letter in Autumn 1970.

But in his third year (1970–1) he reverted to the life of a gnome to prepare for finals. In the process, he left Alexandra and the cottage they shared to live once again in college. Although he was to continue the relationship with her on and off for several years, he showed a characteristic ambivalence about being “tied down” to her and “wasting the best years of [his] life” (E 232). Alexandra said that while he was “very funny, very intense, romantic,” the problem was that any minute he would take off, which meant that “while you’re with him, you’re obsessed” (Shnayerson 1995: 160). His attendance at a series of seminars given by Northrop Frye began his separation from F. R. Leavis’s moralistic approach to literature. Frye’s definition of literature as “a *disinterested* use of words” (E 30) made a big impact on Amis (Wachtel 1996: 53) (see *Criticism*, p. 138). In summer 1971 came finals: “The nine three-hour papers came in a heroic blur. I got a formal first, coming in third in that year” (Amis 1977: 213). A formal first is the highest bachelor’s degree awarded.

In the autumn of 1971, Amis first planned on staying at Oxford to write a post-graduate thesis on Shakespeare. But when Jonathan Wordsworth, his tutor, challenged him to take a year off to write a novel, he accepted it and left both Oxford and the parental home. He notes in *Experience* that he was now addressing letters home exclusively to Jane, his father having opted out of this parental chore. His comment (“So Dad has dropped out, rather hurtfully in retrospect, now that I know how many letters he wrote to everyone else” [E 250]) indicates the extent to which he repressed his sense of rejection at the time. In fact, Kingsley was opting out of all things to do with running the house, parenting his children, or his shared social life with Jane—one cause of her eventual break with him. But his son proved more forgiving. The absent or indifferent parent tends to become by default unusually powerful. Such a figure can leave the child seeking throughout its life to win that parent’s love and approval. Martin was no exception. As he told one interviewer, “I suppose we all are trying to please our fathers” (Trueheart 1991: B2). *Experience*, his memoir, is as much about his father as it is about himself: “it feels like a duty to describe our case,” he explains as part justification for the book (E 7). *Koba the Dread* ends with an “Afterword: Letter to My Father’s Ghost.” In it, he admits that six years after his father’s death he still spends a lot of time in his father’s mental company (KD 271). This difficult, compelling relationship with his father becomes even more complex once the son has established himself as a novelist of equal or greater stature to that of his father. Near the end of *Experience* he has a dream a year after his father’s death in which his father appears to him not as a shade but as a “messenger from my own unconscious, naturally.” “But,” he continues, “that’s all right. Because my mind is his mind and the other way round” (E 363). Martin’s father alarmingly appears to have entered and become a part of his unconscious.

Amis worked for four months in an art gallery in Mayfair, in the heart of London’s West End, and for another three weeks for a Thompson advertising agency that “seemed to be entirely peopled by blocked dramatists, likeably shambling poets, and one-off novelists” (E 34n). He happily left the ad agency when Terence Kilmartin, the Literary Editor of the *Observer*, hired him as an untried book reviewer. Kilmartin was impressed with the businesslike letter of application that Martin sent him in which he abstained from presuming on Kilmartin’s long acquaintance with Kingsley. When Kilmartin showed Martin’s first review

around, “[p]eople thought it was the work of someone who’d been reviewing for twenty years” (Michener 1986: 140). From November 1971, Amis reviewed for the *Observer* works of literary criticism and novels by such authors as William Burroughs, C. P. Snow and Alan Sillitoe. In *The War Against Cliché* Amis writes that “[e]njoying being insulting is a youthful corruption of power” for which he has subsequently lost his taste (WAC xiv). In these early years, he will dismiss a novel by Iris Murdoch in a scathing sentence: “On the face of it Miss Murdoch seems to be doing little more than guiding the pens of a few Texan thesis-writers” (WAC 86). J. G. Ballard’s *Crash* is even more economically put down in a brief phrase: “an exercise in vicious whimsy,” an opinion he later revised (WAC 97).

The reviews of his apprentice period already show the sophisticated wit and linguistic facility that characterize his later writing. For instance, he is unsparing in his treatment of the sixty-seven-year-old C. P. Snow’s attempt to portray the younger dissident generation in *The Malcontents* (1972):

During a party in which LSD is being doled out, one of the boys, Bernard, wanders out of a fifth-floor window. The protagonists spend a lot of time musing about whether someone might have spiked his beer with acid (thus perhaps giving Bernard the impression that he could fly), but finally dismiss the idea as too fantastic to be true. Unless they had spent their university lives entirely behind drawn blinds they’d have dismissed it instantly as far, far too *corny* to be true. If the publicity were anything to go by, you would barely be able to step into the street nowadays without seeing some drug-crazed youngster being hosed off the pavement.

(WAC 130)

Here Amis sweeps aside as archaic the older generation of writers, while already displaying his comic penchant for verbal excess that marks his difference from his predecessors. Style is the key to the judgments he makes. After expressing grave doubts about the moral tenor of Angus Wilson’s *As If By Magic*, Amis confirms his feeling that the novel is a failure by pillorying what he calls “the scruffiness of much of the writing”: “Americans saying ‘Noo York’ and ‘anyways’, hippies using ‘like’ as if they were rustics, the word ‘delicious’ appearing seven times in as many pages, the whole book riddled with repetitions, unintentional rhymes, jangles, even solecisms” (WAC 75). For Amis, style is inseparable from what it conveys (see *Works and Criticism*, pp. 82, 147).

His contributions to the *Observer* included twelve reviews of science fiction between April 1972 and May 1974 under the pseudonym of “Henry Tilney” (a character in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*). This use of pseudonym suggests that from the start of his literary career he was shaping his public persona. It was not until August 1974 that he felt sufficiently confident to allow his own name to be used for a review of science fiction (see *Works and Criticism*, pp. 67, 134). By the summer of 1972, Amis was working full-time as a trainee editorial assistant with the *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS), the most prestigious British publication in the field of quality book reviewing. It still published only unsigned reviews (until 1974 and the arrival of John Gross as its new editor). In *The War*