

GAVIN KEULKS

Introduction

Sir Martin Amis. For readers over the age of forty, the honorific still seems unexpected, misplaced. The title is well-deserved, of course; let there be no misunderstanding about that: his ‘service to literature’ was tireless and unbroken. But Martin Amis, for those of us who spent decades reading his books, was a swashbuckling stylist and cultural iconoclast. In our minds, he will forever be remembered as an arch-satirist of class rather than its exemplar. Sir Martin Amis, by contrast, seems placid and staid. The honorific presents a classic Amisian conundrum in some regards: like so many of his characters, Amis too, even in death, seems to embody rival, incompatible energies. The quintessential novelist of doubles was himself one, it seems – a divided, contradictory character. He grew up amid literary privilege and aspired to literary royalty. He possessed an expert’s understanding of the literary canon. He was exceptionally well-read and set lofty standards for prose. But he was also, happily, an ambassador of the streets and pubs, a chain-smoking, drink-clasping, smirk-mouthed irritant of the establishment. That rebel image, of course, persists, almost phantasmal, from novels nearly forty years old – *Money: A Suicide Note* (1984) and *London Fields* (1989) – written during the apex of his fame. Later works *Yellow Dog* (2003) and *Lionel Asbo: State of England* (2012) reinvigorated the iconoclasm.

These contrasting images – Amis as double-agent, so to speak – symbolise something more sombre, of course: Martin Amis is no longer alive, and the time for seasoned assessment has arrived. Let’s state the facts plainly, then, as narrator Mike Hoolihan would have done in *Night Train*, Amis’s 1997 police procedural: celebrated author Martin Amis died in Lake Worth Beach, Florida, on 19 May 2023 from oesophageal cancer. One month later, his knighthood was posthumously bestowed, backdated to the day before his death. But even here, beneath static facts, literature lurks. The details suggest novelistic parallelism. He died at age seventy-three – like his father, Sir Kingsley Amis, who passed in 1995. Oesophageal

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cancer also claimed the life of Christopher Hitchens in 2011: ‘Mart’ (aka ‘Little Keith’) and ‘The Hitch’ were friends for half a century, having met at Oxford. On the exact day of Amis’s death, *The Zone of Interest*, an award-winning film based on his 2014 novel, premiered at Cannes. Had he lived to experience that event, he would have revelled on the red carpet, preening at paparazzi. It’s doubly disappointing he missed it because filmmaking, somewhat ironically, bookends his life. His first exposure to the industry occurred as a teenager, when he played the character John Thornton in *A High Wind in Jamaica* (1965). He also wrote two screenplays. As the Chronology section of this collection confirms, numerous of his books were adapted for film or television. Most were unsuccessful. His characters may seem cinematic, but his novels remained true to their creator, pledging service to literature, not film. *The Zone of Interest* was the anomaly, and Amis would have been a superlative emissary.

Long before his death, Amis’s literary legacy was secured: he was one of the most accomplished and controversial writers of his generation. From the publication of his first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, in 1973, to his last book, *Inside Story*, in 2020, he featured prominently in important socio-literary debates. Sometimes he led the way; other times he was the outcast. As usual, he resided between extremes. *London Fields*, for instance, was famously excluded from the Booker Prize shortlist, accused of sexism and misogyny. *Money*, his preceding novel, has been ranked by *Time* magazine among the 100 most influential English novels from 1923 to 2005. In 2008, *The Times* included Amis on their list of the fifty Best British Writers since 1945. That same year, however, Terry Eagleton and Amis feuded in the papers like tribal combatants, rather than university colleagues. Their topic? Islam and Islamism, immigration and neo-nationalism.

Indeed, issuing a definitive judgement on Amis’s career is no easier today than in previous decades. Granted, nobody needs definitive judgements on literature, as opposed to, say, law. But few writers have been so judged, so scrutinised, so cross-examined, and summoned to the bench. During the 1980s and 1990s, when his fame was ascendent, Amis’s potential seemed unlimited. ‘I see signs of a very large design’, Saul Bellow declared.¹ In 1983, when the literary journal *Granta* published its inaugural edition of the Best of Young British Novelists, it featured Amis alongside emerging luminaries Pat Barker, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie, Julian Barnes, Graham Swift, A. N. Wilson, and Kazuo Ishiguro. Pictured there, in seated form, was the future of English fiction, a spectrum of literary movements, theories, and traits: postmodernism, postcolonialism, feminism, all decidedly Anglocentric. Typical for the time, the list was predominantly heteronormative, cisgender, and masculo-centrist. Of those twenty writers

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spotlighted in 1983, only Salman Rushdie would exceed Amis in lifelong controversy and celebrity.

As is common, success invites detractors, and Amis's critics tended to err on the side of mercilessness. Amis's output was uneven, no doubt. But so too are the careers of every author. Amis could overstretch a phrase, a sentence, or even an entire paragraph. So too has every writer in history. Fond of dark humour, Amis himself couldn't resist joining the criticism. History, he explained, will always compress any writer's career down to 'a single word'. His word, he joked, would be 'decline'.² Indeed, *Schadenfreude* accompanied his career from the beginning. In 1973, *The New Statesman* held a competition for the most oxymoronic book title. The winning entry was 'Martin Amis: My Struggle'.³ The title alludes to Amis's literary lineage, of course, implying nepotism. But someone with Amis's erudition would of course appreciate that the title translates into German as *Mein Kampf*. Throughout his career, Amis published numerous works on the Holocaust. He would also know it translates into Norwegian as *Min Kamp*, the title of the celebrated set of novels by Karl Ove Knausgård that are considered the pinnacle of autofiction. Amis's last novel, *Inside Story*, adopted that genre. Here too, on multiple levels, Amis seems to have engineered the last laugh, over almost fifty years.

Through his novels and essays, his interviews and public comments, Amis arguably defined his era. Phrases like 'The Amis Generation' or 'The Amis Era' won't outlast the current decade, but he worked as hard as anyone to chronicle their duration.⁴ Author of fifteen novels, two short story collections, and eight volumes of non-fiction, ranging from essay collections to reportage, Amis's productivity continues to impress. The celebrated trilogy of *Money*, *London Fields*, and *The Information* solidified his fame, culminating in well-publicised upgrades to his literary agent, publisher, and contracts. *Time's Arrow* (1991), his first Holocaust novel, intervened between the latter two. At times the news coverage bordered on manic.

The small but successful novel *Night Train* followed, along with a collection of stories (*Heavy Water and Other Stories*, 1998), and an award-winning memoir, *Experience* (2000). *The War Against Cliché*, a collection of essays, appeared in 2001, followed by another non-fiction political book, *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million* (2002). Everyone in the literary world awaited Amis's next novel. Then, in 2003, *Yellow Dog* appeared. Reviewers feasted upon it. Amis never forgave them, especially Tibor Fisher. In many regards, reviewers never forgave Amis. For the first time, the Amis mystique seemed to have fractured. He became vulnerable to convenient criticisms and pocket provocations. The merits of *Yellow Dog* aside, his reputation would never regain its mid 1990s aura.

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Indeed, lambasting his works from 2003 onwards sometimes devolved into a competitive sport, or cottage industry, for reviewers. Some accused him of stylistic pretension. Many criticised his politics. Others asserted that he'd become self-derivative, a caricature of his younger, more successful self. Studying the reactions to Amis's work – and to his public persona – reveals one constant, however: even when a book displeased people, few denigrated his abilities. His execution could fail. His characterisations could disappoint. His social criticism could ostracise. But everyone agreed that Amis cared, supremely, about writing. Writers, of course, sensed this best. To them, Martin Amis remained a linguistic beacon, and an object lesson in steadfastness. His war on cliché is one into which every writer has been conscripted. Some return wounded from its front lines; others became memories. But regardless of race or gender, all writers understand they'll be judged by every sentence. Amis wrote a lot of strained sentences. But so many readers have had to sharpen their pencils while underlining their ways through his books. He is, without dispute, one of the most quotable authors ever. His craftsmanship could be fastidious, even frustrating: like a Swiss watch, you had to learn how to use it. But every writer understands that no one, regardless of last name, is gifted a fifty-year career. Amis knew this. Abhorring clichés and unchallenged conventions, he was obsessed with diction: words as agents, as atmosphere, as psychology – and as worldview. Emotions aside, not even his staunchest critics would deny his cultural presence or the propulsive energy of his words.

When you hear the name 'Martin Amis', who then do you imagine? The brash, swaggering stylist, once referred to as the Mick Jagger of literature? The serious author of sombre works on the Holocaust and Stalin's gulags. The man of letters, the essayist? The cause célèbre cultural agitator? The prized and provocative interviewee? What, in other words, will become of Martin Amis? Indeed, Amis's evolution as a writer is as complex – and contradictory – as his reputation. It would be a shame, and a mistake, if Amis were to become remembered solely for his stylistic bravado, his public persona, and his controversial comments. He was a unique individual talent. And one thing we can do, must do, to preserve him in his time is, paradoxically, to position him among the past. We must situate him within broader history, not only his own era. As T. S. Eliot famously advised: 'No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.'⁵ We will now undertake that task.

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Tradition and the Individual Talent

Hundreds of pages have been published on Amis's self-acknowledged, twin pillars of influence: Saul Bellow and Vladimir Nabokov.⁶ From both he inherited valuable lessons about aesthetic perspectives, expressed in one of his more durable quotations: 'style is morality. Style judges.'⁷ This line, from his crowing review of Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*, initially baffles readers, like a Zen koan. But Amis was consistent in its use. Note that the phrasing isn't hierarchical: moral judgement is embedded within, and intrinsic to, style; neither is subordinate. Elsewhere he aligns stylistic choice with one's idiosyncratic 'thought rhythms'.⁸ In other words, style was, for Amis, as unique as one's breath or heartbeat.

After graduating from Oxford, Amis began his career as an aspiring man of letters, reviewing books for the *Times Literary Supplement*, *The Observer*, and *The New Statesman*. A scholarly study should be written on how he revitalised the genre of the book review – not only with his own reviews but also those of his own works by others. Not since the Victorian era has the belletrist tradition been so combative. Kneecapping has always been a distinctively English literary pastime, and Amis could grapple with the best.

Conveniently, his essays and reviews help to situate him within literary traditions: he quantified his literary preferences through the frequency of his reviews. Not surprisingly, he wrote more on Bellow than anyone else. Nabokov and John Updike followed next, nudging Philip Larkin, Philip Roth, J. G. Ballard, and Jane Austen. All warranted at least five extended analyses within *The Moronic Inferno* (1986), *Visiting Mrs. Nabokov* (1993), *The War Against Cliché* (2001), and *The Rub of Time* (2017). Many received their own distinct sections. Two of them (Bellow, Larkin) are essential to *Inside Story*, his final book. As I have argued elsewhere, his father, Sir Kingsley Amis, is unquestionably his greatest influence.⁹

So those are the obvious, well-publicised influences. There's little need to retrace their impacts here. Suffice it to say they divide naturally into three subcategories: American fiction, especially the Jewish-American novel; comic and satiric social realism; and stylistic mentors. (Authors can of course straddle more than one category.) All provided Amis with models for rendering not only the external world but also, and crucially, his characters' inner psychologies. In Amis's fiction, psychology tends to outflank reality; cerebration outmanoeuvres representation.

Beyond these weightiest influences, however, what about secondary contributors, from earlier centuries? Similar to the subdivisions given here, here too we might observe a tripartite structure – with one divergence. The names in the pages that follow reveal affinities to Amis with regard to

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stylistic innovation, satire/dark comedy, plus – the one divergence – social commentary.

Four additional twentieth-century writers deserve immediate mention: Evelyn Waugh, Aldous Huxley, Anthony Burgess, and George Orwell. Like Amis's, Waugh's biting satires are carefully structured, finely written, yet socially devastating. *Vile Bodies* (1930) and *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) seem especially correspondent with Amis's portraits of social class, physicality, and the body, whether in *Dead Babies*, *Success*, *Money*, or *The Pregnant Widow*. Amis and Waugh both share a darkly comic vision, although Waugh writes with a conservative nostalgia that Amis doesn't share. For Amis, more so than Waugh, an existential fatalism suffuses many works.

There's no question that Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) influenced the linguistic inventiveness of John Self, the narrator in *Money*, and his later reincarnation, Lionel Asbo, in *Lionel Asbo: State of England*. But Amis's use of an idiolect is not as pure as in Burgess's pioneering novel. Instead, *Money* and *Lionel Asbo* are a blend of Burgess mixed with the psychological surrealism of J. G. Ballard and the hallucinatory disjointedness of William S. Burroughs. Readers who appreciate Amis's more incantatory narrators would benefit from reading Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) and *Crash* (1973) alongside Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959). Amis has acknowledged these affinities himself, as have select scholars.¹⁰

More important than Waugh and Burgess, to this editor at least, are Aldous Huxley and George Orwell. Orwell is naturally invoked in any discussion of dystopian social satire, due to his classics *Animal Farm* (1945) and *1984* (1949). But, like Amis, Orwell also had strong convictions about writing. His famous essay 'Politics and the English Language' stipulated six rules for prose clarity and concision. Amis, whose most famous collection of essays is titled *The War Against Cliché*, wholeheartedly adopted Orwell's first rule: 'Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.'¹¹ The other five rules, well ... Orwell and Amis didn't always agree. Amis had his own rules, and *Inside Story* contains extensive commentaries on literary craft. Amis and Orwell both share an outlook of moral seriousness and historical responsibility. *Koba the Dread* is a particularly Orwellian non-fiction book. *Money* enlists *Animal Farm* and *1984* as core texts for the self-edification of the narrator John Self.¹²

Huxley is the most interesting shadow-influence, in my opinion. He was the last of the great polymaths, equally skilled, as was Amis, with fiction, essays, book reviews, and social commentary. Both were quasi-prophetic authors, too, keenly attuned to personal and societal shortcomings. Huxley's books *Brave New World* (1932), *Chrome Yellow* (1921), and

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Point Counter Point (1928) are cautionary tales for unchecked consumerism and technological control. His tone is often lecturing, professorial, aspiring to a *gravitas* that Amis frequently shares. Amis's explicitly political works (*House of Meetings*, *Zone of Interest* especially) can be safely categorised as Huxleyan texts, and Huxleyan elements are prominent in *Money*, *London Fields*, and numerous other novels. *London Fields* especially mirrors *Brave New World*'s diagnostic dystopianism: both depict apocalyptic risks stemming from moral profligacy, dehumanisation, and existential indifference.

One clear difference, though, is illuminating: whereas Huxley was drawn to the novel of ideas, Amis prefers to let character and voice drive the plot. He exposes moral decay through his characters' conflicted psychologies, gritty articulations, and impassioned machinations. In this regard, he may be viewed as Huxley's rebellious offspring – a punk or heavy metal descendant, so to speak, stylistically more profane, irreverent, and aggressive. Whereas Huxley cautioned us about the future, Amis forces us to stare, unremittently, at the present. Huxley offered solutions, although his characters often overlooked them. Amis, by contrast, tends to present risks that lack easy cures, usually because the threat is existential or ontological. As an author who famously believed motivation was a 'shagged out force' in modern life, it's no surprise he was sceptical of solutions.¹³ Entropy prevails in his fictive worlds; event horizons and black holes can appear in one's personal (or inner) space as easily as in outer space. Whereas Huxley's fears are often intellectual, philosophical, and abstract, Amis's are raw and resonant, both emotionally and linguistically. Like Waugh, Huxley was a quintessentially English novelist. By contrast, Amis's Englishness is transatlantically contoured. Media-saturated, surreal, apocalyptic texts like J. G. Ballard's *Crash* and *High Rise*, when synthesised with Huxleyan prognostications, coalesce well into Amis's brand of iconoclastic, psychological satire and comedy.

Stepping backward into the nineteenth century, the most important influence would be Charles Dickens, without question. The critic and novelist James Wood was one of the first to propose the Dickens comparison, which is, like the novelists discussed earlier, predicated on social critique. James Diedrick also developed this line of analysis in *Understanding Martin Amis*, the first scholarly book on Amis.¹⁴ Dickens's precision with characterisation and voice made him an early master of the comic grotesque. Indeed, it's difficult to imagine Amis's early novels without Dickens's precedents with character development and setting. As with Huxley, Amis both extends and updates Dickens. Whereas Dickens lambasted the avarices of industrialism in Victorian England, Amis blasted

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the transgressions of late capitalism in London and New York. Huxley and Dickens both believed in the possibility for social reform. Amis, by contrast, revels in cynicism and moral ambiguity.

Although Dickensian characteristics are rampant in *Money* and *London Fields*, Amis's later novel *Lionel Asbo* is distinctly Dickensian, updated for the modern age. A 'condition of England' novel, *Lionel Asbo* can easily be viewed as a dark (or funhouse) mirror version of *David Copperfield* (1850) or *Great Expectations* (1861), where the *Bildungsroman* trajectory leads not to enlightenment and personal improvement but, ironically, to an intensified worsening. Lionel's lottery winnings are a pseudo-Dickensian plot twist, a perverse *deus ex machina* that mirrors (and mocks) the amorality of his fictive world. Although Dickens and Amis both target excess, hypocrisy, and greed, Dickens's humour is warmer, based on caricature and human foibles. Amis's comedy is darker, more corrosive, a by-product of contemporary (or postmodern) disillusionment and disorientation.

Considering earlier centuries, no discussion of satire would be complete without mentioning the Irish writer Jonathan Swift. In such works as *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and 'A Modest Proposal' (1729), Swift created famous models for exposing human folly through comic exaggeration and savage wit. As with Dickens, caricature amplifies the impact. Swift is invoked directly in *The Rachel Papers*: a chapter is subtitled 'The Dean of St. Patrick's', among other references. As many people have pointed out, *Dead Babies* indirectly summons 'A Modest Proposal' through its title, while characters such as Keith Whitehead epitomise Swiftian approaches to exaggerated caricature. *Money* can easily be seen as Amis's *Gulliver's Travels*, a grotesque voyage through the excesses of late capitalism.

Indeed, it is tempting to argue that the early examples of Swift and Dickens remain underappreciated in Amis scholarship. They've been discussed, of course, but too often they're subsumed by attempts to situate Amis within a postmodern agenda. Amis is without question one of the great postmodernists. But he is also an energised, hyper-perceptive social realist, as his comments in *Inside Story* make clear. If the realities, or zeit-geists, of his novels seem frenetic, that's perhaps because he wrote during an era when moral/ethical deformities themselves metastasised. His novels are character-driven, thematically indeterminate, and linguistically super-charged. Like a literary alchemist, he catalysed, one might say, the Swift and Dickens compound with additives from Nabokov, Bellow, and (of course) his own father, Kingsley Amis. But the source, or base metal, figuratively speaking, derives from Dickens and Swift.

Two other eighteenth-century influences conclude this historical trawling: Laurence Sterne and Henry Fielding. Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759)

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is one of the earliest novels to spotlight structural experimentation, through either narrative digression or sleight of hand. Its plot is associative rather than linear in ways that prefigure modernist and postmodernist texts. In many ways, the novel testifies to its own failure to become a proper novel. Additionally, it's arguably the ur-text for autofiction, which becomes essential for *Inside Story*. Sterne is one of the prototypical, self-conscious, digressive storytellers, a clear precursor to William Burroughs. But he lacks Amis's stylistic rigour; that's an essential divergence.

Like Sterne, Henry Fielding exemplifies the potential (and peril) of the picaresque mode. The titular character in *Tom Jones* (1749) is a roguish anti-hero, as are many of Amis's flawed male protagonists. Fielding's characters embark on episodic misadventures, ranging from the absurd to the repulsive, through morally indifferent environments, precisely as do Amis's. (The same could be said about Tobias Smollett, another eighteenth-century writer.) Elsewhere I've written about Fielding as a fiercely contested zone of demarcation between Kingsley and Martin Amis's comic and satiric approaches.¹⁵ Fielding actually provides Amis with named inspiration for characters in both *Money* (Fielding Goodney) and *Yellow Dog* (Joseph Andrews). He is alluded to, along with dozens of other writers, in *The Rachel Papers*, too.

In brief, Sterne and Fielding loosened the reins on the English novel, expanding its structural capacities and character typologies. There's a playful relativism in both authors' works that presupposes its opposite: the social seriousness of Dickens and the prophetic caution of Huxley and Orwell. If Nabokov exemplified, for Amis, the virtues of aesthetic precision, then Sterne and Fielding proved that novels could also be, well, a jolly, flabby mess. Fiction does need both extremes. When Amis was at the height of his powers, this expansiveness was well-controlled. When he lost control, his critics might say, the result could be a strained jumble.

To conclude this section on Amis's historical antecedents, one might return to where we began, with the triad identified at the outset: stylistic innovation, satire/dark comedy, and social commentary. Far from oversimplifying Amis's work, this triad reveals just how multifaceted his contributions to literature have been. Students and scholars who wish to position Amis as a postmodern provocateur will find ample support to contextualise his verbal pyrotechnics, linguistic excess, and thematic discontinuities. That line of argument extends from Laurence Sterne and Jonathan Swift to Vladimir Nabokov, J. G. Ballard, and William S. Burroughs.

However, a rival group of individuals could use the same preceding material to argue instead that Amis is better understood as an inheritor

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of the classical, English, moral-ironic tradition, which extends from Swift, Fielding, and Jane Austen forwards through Dickens, Orwell, Huxley, and Kingsley Amis. Almost certainly, this group would end up splintering, with a grouchy faction objecting that the moral-ironic tradition fails to differentiate between arch-satirists (like Swift and Dickens) and social commentary more broadly, irrespective of nationality. That pivot towards non-nationalised social commentary would allow Amis's Jewish-American influences (Bellow, Roth, Updike) to be included.

A third, smaller group might even suggest that Amis's non-fiction prose deserves greater scrutiny. He resides comfortably in the belletrist, man of letters tradition, joining literary essayists and critics alike. This camp could invoke comparisons to the non-fiction work of, at minimum, Orwell, Huxley, Nabokov, Bellow, and Updike. But famous critics like F. R. Leavis, Northrup Frye, and John Gross would also be tempting choices.¹⁶ As mentioned, an entire book could be written on how Amis revitalised the genre of the book review, both actively and passively. It is a tribute to his artistic range and canonical knowledge that he can thrive in so many literary modes and contexts. Although he was critically pigeon-holed throughout his career, a wider view confirms that his individual talent was as expansive as his range.

In brief, Amis's work resides at a crossroads between modernist ambition, postwar realism, and postmodern experimentation. He inherited, and subsequently reinvented, traditions of Anglo-American comedy, satire, and social scrutiny, in both fiction and non-fiction. His literary genes fused elements of British canonicity and class consciousness with American bravado and global urbanity. His work gleefully critiques the 'moronic inferno'¹⁷ of late capitalism while also providing a uniquely personal model for linguistic artistry, structural invention, and thematic ambition.

Overview of This Collection

The goal of this Cambridge Companion is to position Amis for scholarly posterity. From the beginning, my vision for the collection was equally retrospective and forward-looking. This book seeks to contextualise the key elements of Amis's literary and cultural contributions. It does not avoid difficult conversations about gender relations, race, politics, or celebrity. The chapters that follow will address his flaws as well as his achievements, his shortcomings as well as his accolades. Amis is a complex writer, and controversy is an intrinsic part of that complexity. Fittingly, the unevenness of his reception makes Amis *more* interesting, not less, and provides the most compelling rationale for this project.