

MARTIN AMIS – Author Bio

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Martin Amis was born in Oxford, England, on August 25, 1949, the second child of the novelist Kingsley Amis. His childhood could certainly be called “bohemian.” His father, even when married and the father of two, lived in a manner that any good-looking and lecherous bachelor could only envy. He did not bother with even the ritual of deceit for his many adulterous excursions. His wife Hillary did have at least one extra-marital affair of her own but made no attempt to begin to match her husband’s exploits. At one dinner party at their Swansea home, Kingsley went into their garden, for example, three times to have sex with each of their women guests.

Lying was such an integral part of Kingsley Amis that the essential Kingsley could probably only be discovered by a dedicated psychoanalyst.

The young family moved frequently at first to wherever Kingsley could find a university job – work that he needed to support his family. He was oblivious to the mechanics of day-to-day existence and contributed no effort to the tasks of house-hunting, moving, paying the bills, or how to budget to make the most of their meager funds. All of these concerns were left to his wife Hilly. It was not that he did not love his wife and two children – just that he did not associate with that love any responsibility for the tiresome tasks that came with them. Since his teaching salaries were always pitifully meager, his wife Hilly, as well as looking after their household and their two children, worked at whatever jobs she could find – the local cinema, local shops, a fish and chips shop – which also frequently provided from the day’s leftovers the family’s evening supper.

We should also note that when his son Martin grew to adulthood, Martin soon recognized that he saw in himself the same things he had seen in his father – taking, for example, every opportunity to avoid the tiresome responsibilities that came with having a family – and even when married the same dedication to a self-indulgent personal lifestyle. But even with that recognition he was unable to change.

For father Kingsley, his financial situation changed with the publication of his novel Lucky Jim. The book also brought him enough fame that he began to be treated as a minor celebrity. He was then still in his twenties – handsome, an excellent lecturer, charming, and with a dashing appearance. He would stroll onto the stage in front of his classes with an overcoat hung over his shoulders and a lock of hair falling across his forehead – the charming “bad boy” of literature.

They purchased their first home in Swansea, but even with Kingsley’s improved finances it still required a legacy from wife Hillary’s mother to manage it. The house soon became a magnet for visitors from the literary circuit. Their constant all-night parties would end with the bleary-eyed guests recovering amid a debris field of ashtrays, bottles, and half-empty glasses. The guests, hungover, would share cornflakes. Martin’s mother, Hilly, enjoyed the non-stop partying as much as anyone and would sit, totally relaxed, her feet on the table, shoes off, jazz music playing in the background. And the house and garden were always full of dogs. Hilly loved dogs and would adopt a continual flow of strays or abandoned litters of puppies. It was not unusual to have 20 dogs wandering around the house at any given time.

Martin and his friends saw this lifestyle as great, ideal, and could not understand why all families didn’t live this way.

The bohemian life of Kingsley and Hilly was not limited to their house in Swansea. The two of them would regularly leave Swansea for long weekend; and the children – Martin, his older brother Philip, and their sister Sally – would stay with the Amis’ part-time domestic helper, Eva Garcia, whose duties for the family included repairing all the post-party damage. For a period of some five years, the three children were in reality the unofficial foster children of Eva and her husband Joe.

This was the fifties, and Britain was still struggling to recover from the devastating economic burdens incurred as a result of World War II – with rationing, limited production of consumer goods, and draconian limits on the amount of currency that could be taken out of Britain for foreign travel.

Life in Britain was hopelessly dreary. But Kingsley and Hilly were determined to enjoy themselves. With Kingsley's new-found fame resulting from the publication of his novel Lucky Jim, he was offered a university position at Cambridge, and family moved house yet again. They continued life exactly as before, but now with the luxury of a larger house.

Hilly's tenderness for stray dogs also continued and was even supplemented. She added Debbie the donkey, who was stabled right outside the back door. Guests were encouraged to ride her around the lawn, and then through the kitchen and living room.

Martin, now 12, was sent to the nearby Cambridgeshire High School for boys.

Life changed again when his father Kingsley met Elizabeth Jane Howard in 1962 at the Cheltenham Literature Festival. True to form, within the month they were having an affair – but with one major difference – Kingsley was no longer content to sate his desire for uncommitted sex while remaining with his beloved family. He had fallen in love, and his marriage to Hilly soon ended.

Kingsley also gave up teaching. He could now live from his writing. He left with Jane for a month-long stay in Spain, and when he returned his family was gone. Hilly and the children had gone to Majorca. After six months they returned to England. Kingsley went on to marry Jane in 1965. Martin's mother, Hilly, also remarried, and she moved with her new husband to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he had been appointed to a full professorship at the University of Michigan.

Martin went on to attend Exeter College, Oxford, graduating in 1971, and began to write his first book, The Rachel Papers, which was accepted for publication by Cape with an advance of 250 pounds, some \$1,000 in U.S. currency at the time. This was considered to be a generous advance for a debut novel. In 1973 the book won the annual Somerset Maugham prize, the same prize his father Kingsley had been awarded for his book Lucky Jim. It was the first of a host of similarities between father and son in both their professional and personal lives.

Martin also was offered a salaried post at the Times Literary Supplement as editorial assistant. It began a pattern of writing books (both novels and non-fiction) as well as contributing articles and essays to literary journals that Martin continued throughout his life.

And like his father, until later in his career, this dual effort was financially necessary for Amis. Advances and royalties based upon an output of one book every two or three years could not provide a living income.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the many interesting aspects of Martin Amis's life is the abundant parallels between father and son – it reminds you of the film Groundhog Day, where every morning Bill Murray's character awakens in full knowledge of what fate has in store for him during the next 24 hours.

Kingsley was 40 when he met Jane Howard, his second wife; and Martin was exactly the same age when he first met his second wife, Isabel Fonseca.

Both men were also at the same stage in their careers at that time, with five and six novels published, respectively. Both were considered to have altered the literary mood and temper of their time.

Both their ongoing marriages were as a result of existing pregnancies; and both men had a second son born shortly afterwards.

For both father and son, their friends agree that their treatment of women left something to be desired, particularly because of leaving their first wives when their children were still young. Martin committed exactly the same offense of which he had earlier publicly accused his father. And he did it at a time when he avowed his undying love of his children in anti-nuclear diatribes. In his book Einstein's Monsters, he went on and on about how his commitment to nuclear disarmament was fed by his devotion to his children. And then he dumped them in exchange for a younger version of his existing wife, their mother.

Despite being an established and reasonably successful author, Martin Amis did not receive very large advances for each of his new books. Some 200,000 pounds would be respectable for a book which took some two or three years to write. But he hit it lucky with tonight's book, The Information. His normal publisher, Cape, was willing to go to 300,000 pounds, but his long-time friend, Christopher Hitchens, convinced him to look for a new agent who might negotiate a better advance. Amis did, dropping his life-long agent, Pat Kavanaugh, for the agent Andrew Wylie, and Wylie managed to get Harper-Collins to agree to an advance of 505,000 pounds. Why? It turned out that Harper-Collins had recently been purchased by Rupert Murdoch. He was building a gigantic media organization by buying a number of once independent publishers and suddenly the concept of "loss leaders" entered the Harper-Collins lexicon.

As much attention was now being paid to the publicity potential of the author as to the quality of the book. An advance of 500,000 pounds does not begin to compare to the 10 million pounds a Jeff Archer would receive, but for a literary author like Amis it was the talk of the town. Although publishers do not release the financials on individual books, it is unlikely that enough copies of The Information were sold to make the deal profitable, but it did provide to the author a substantial amount of publicity at the time.

Martin Amis is in many ways a very American English author. His first experience with the U.S. was when he was nine years old. His author father, Kingsley, was invited to Princeton University to be a Visiting Fellow, and the family spent a year there. Martin's mother, Hilly, shared with her children a great delight in the popular culture of America – everything from Westerns to crime movies to comic books. Martin and his brother even selected American names for themselves – Marty and Nick, Jr.

When Martin followed in his father's footsteps and became an author, his books always seemed to have a divided allegiance. Perhaps his most popular book (and I use the word loosely, since none of his books sold much more than 200-250,000 copies and 80% of them were in paperback) is London Fields. It's narrator and a main character of the novel is an American writer, Sam Young, who has come to London to write his next novel. An intricate tale of murder follows.

Both of Martin Amis' wives are American, the divorced wife as well as the current wife. His closest friend was the late Christopher Hitchens – English author and journalist – who became a permanent resident of the United States. Amis considers the American author Saul Bellows to be his true “literary father.”

In 2011 Martin bought a house in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn. He later moved to downtown Brooklyn to a posh penthouse and also added a summer place in the Hamptons. And he still maintains the same writing discipline as in the early 1970s when he wrote his first novel when he was 23. He writes every day.

In those intervening 50 years Martin Amis has written 14 novels, two short-story collections, a memoir, and eight books of journalism and history. His books include a variety of literary styles, including his latest book Inside Story, published in 2020, which advertises itself as a novel but includes many real people – Martin himself, Kingsley his father, Saul Bellow, his best friend Christopher Hitchens, and Philip Larkin the poet.

This last book might also be said to typify Amis as a writer – a 500-page miscellany of Amis-ness, a bristling compilation that cannot be classified – just as could be said of his total body of work.

He writes novels, but also wrote works on the Holocaust, the Great Stalin Terror, the godless universe, and Islam. He wrote a whole book, The Second Plane, about 9/11, again a mixture of novel and reality.

Writing is certainly Martin Amis' life, and he feels his talents can be applied to any subject. And he writes well. He wants, and expects, that his words will live forever. To this end he brings a level of perception, of dedication and effort, that always seem to be at a fever pitch. And perhaps that is what is needed to be a great writer.