

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Martin Amis

Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes

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About the Author

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Vanessa Berman completed her M.A. at the University of London.

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Margaret Atwood

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VINTAGE
LIVING
TEXTS

Martin Amis

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE
TO CONTEMPORARY
LITERATURE

The Rachel Papers

London Fields

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VINTAGE

VINTAGE LIVING TEXTS

Preface

About this series

Vintage Living Texts: The Essential Guide to Contemporary Literature is a new concept in reading guides. Our aim is to provide readers of all kinds with an intelligent and accessible introduction to key works of contemporary literature. Each guide suggests techniques for reading important contemporary novels, and offers a variety of back-up materials that will give you ways into the text – without ever telling you what to think.

Content

All the books reproduce an extensive interview with the author, conducted exclusively for this series. This is not to say that we believe that the author's word is law. Of course it isn't. Once his or her book has gone out into the world he or she becomes simply yet another – if singularly competent – reader. This series recognises that an author's contribution may be valuable, and intriguing, but it puts the reader in control.

Every title in the series is author-focused and covers at least three of their novels, along with relevant biographical, bibliographical, contextual and comparative material.

How to use this series

In the reading guides that make up the core of each book you will see that you are asked to do two things. One comes from the text; that is, we suggest what you should focus on, whether it's a theme, the language or the narrative method. The other concentrates on your own response. We want you to think about how you are reading and what skills you are bringing to bear in doing that reading. So this part is very much about you, the reader.

The point is that there are many ways of responding to a text. You could concentrate on the methods you might use to compare this text with others. In that case, look for the sections headed 'Compare'. Or you might want to do something more individual, and analyse how you are reacting to a text and what it means to you, in which case, pick out the approaches labelled 'Imagine' or 'Ask Yourself'.

Of course, it may well be that you are reading these texts for an examination. In that case you will have to go for the more traditional methods of literary criticism and look for the responses that tell you to 'Discuss' or 'Analyse'. Whichever level you (or your students) are at, you will find that there is something here for everyone. However, we're not suggesting that you stick solely to the approaches we offer, or that you tackle all of the exercises laid out here. Choose whatever most interests you, or whatever best suits your purposes.

Who are these books for?

Students will find that these guides are like a good teacher. They introduce the life and work of the author, set each novel in its context, explain key ideas and literary critical terms as they arise, suggest comparative exercises in a number of media, and ask focused questions to encourage a well-informed, analytical approach to reading the novels in a way that is rigorous, but still entertaining.

Teachers will find in this series a rich source of ideas for teaching contemporary novels and their contexts, particularly at AS, A and undergraduate levels. The exercises on each text have been tailored to meet the various assessment objectives laid down in the subject criteria for GCE AS and GCE A Level English Literature, and are explained in such a way that they can easily be selected and fitted into a lesson plan. Given the diversity of ways in which the awarding bodies have devised their specifications to meet these assessment objectives, a wide range of exercises is offered. We've had fun devising the plans, and we hope they'll be fun for you when you come to teach and learn with them.

And if you are neither a teacher nor a student of contemporary literature, but someone reading for your own pleasure? Well, if you've ever wanted someone to introduce you to a novelist's work in a way that will let you trust your own judgement and read more confidently, then this guide is also for you.

Whoever you are, we hope that you will enjoy using these books and that they will send you back to the novels to find new pleasures.

All page references to *The Rachel Papers* and *Time's Arrow* in this text refer to the paperback Penguin editions. Page references to *London Fields* and *Experience* refer to the Vintage editions.

Martin Amis

Introduction

There are many important things to be said about Martin Amis and his work, but the first is this: that he is a great writer and his work will survive. There are reasons for this: instinct, intelligence, love of words, a commitment to form, what we can only describe as an 'eye' and an 'ear'. Amis sees, and Amis listens, never stops listening, to himself and to others.

It may be that one of the reasons why he is a great writer is because he thinks and feels about writing all the time. This is the remarkable thing about Amis – and that includes the person, the persona and the oeuvre. If you look at the interview with Amis included here, you will see what we mean. Amis is not so much a writer explaining his own work, as a highly intelligent and articulate reader examining good work with a dispassionate and a compassionate eye, and with a critical vocabulary capable of relaying that view and interpretation. Whether he's talking about voice, or method, about how the mood of a time is reflected in the works of an era, or about characterisation or narrative patterning, clear sight, clearly communicated, is always apparent.

When Frank Kermode reviewed Amis's collection of essays and reviews *The War Against Cliché: Essays and Reviews 1971-2000* (Vintage, London, 2002) he described Amis as 'a literary critic of startling power ... Often being right and being funny are, in this book, aspects of the same sentence'. If you want to see Amis the critic at work, it would be a good idea to read that collection.

Interestingly the double role that Amis plays, being both writer-creator and critic-reader, comes out in the patterns of his novels as well. If you look at the interview ([here](#)) with Amis you will see that he speaks about the revisions that he made to *The Rachel Papers*, his first book; this was, he explains, the only time he submitted to 'editorial advice'. The advice was about the time scheme: each chapter, as you will see, begins with a reference to the eve of Charles Highway's twentieth birthday. Then, in the continuation of the chapter, he picks up the story of his youth and the writing of 'The Rachel Papers' from the perspective of the older (if not wiser) Charles.

Though Amis may never again have attended to an editor, this piece of advice was taken over and again. In *London Fields* each Chapter falls into two parts, the first section consisting of the novel Samson Young is writing, the second section being an account of how he is writing it and his interaction with the 'real life' people who are being made into his fictional characters. In *Experience* doubleness is similarly exploited. Each chapter begins in an apparently haphazard, but actually highly contrived, stream of consciousness and each chapter of Part One ends with a letter - a purportedly real letter - written by the younger Amis from school or college.

The layering of selves and of time, and the layering of fiction over the 'real', parallels Amis's persistent double perspective. He writes and he analyses. He feels and he thinks. He creates and he criticises.

It can sound schematic: certainly it is contrived, for Amis is a self-confessed stylist. Even the briefest conversation with Amis will include extended metaphors, similes, puns, analogies and a sophisticated awareness of how language works. He never stops thinking about language. He never stops tuning the instrument.

That's the technical side, but it's one that contributes to his commitment to writing and to the intensity of the

experience of reading an Amis novel. The other side of his particular quality is achieved by the fact that he is always analysing, honing and discriminating, thought, feeling, consciousness, experience. He feels, examines his feeling, never letting up his attention to working out distinctions of emotions as he makes connections or discerns discontinuities. It's subtle, precise, relentlessly demanding and distinctive. If there sometimes seems a hardness, a grubbiness even, in Amis's subjects and style, there is also no waste, no flab and no sentimentality. His work will make you think. It may also make you cry.

In *Experience* Amis relates the occasion when he had an argument with his father, Kingsley Amis, about Vladimir Nabokov's famous – and infamous – novel *Lolita*. Martin admired it, Kingsley deplored it as 'thoroughly bad in both senses: bad as a work of art, that is, and morally bad'. Martin Amis tells how he tackled his father over this, quoting sentences which, he believed, were 'beautiful, dreadful, flinching and groaning with pain and grief' and which show us 'the moral soul of the entire enterprise'. He goes on to tell us that his father's reaction was: "'That's just flimflam, diversionary stuff to make you think he cares. That's just style'". Whereas I would argue that style *is* morality: morality detailed, configured, intensified. It's not in the mere narrative arrangement of good and bad that morality makes itself felt. It can be there in every sentence' (pp. 120–121).

It is a quintessentially Martin Amis statement: 'style *is* morality'. And if one were to apply this statement to Amis's own work, the most obvious place to locate it may be in a reading of *Time's Arrow*. The propriety of using an elaborate and contrived literary method in relating a subject so distressing and obscene as the horrors of Auschwitz is one that Amis had to deal with carefully. It may be useful to refer to the interview ([here](#) and [here](#)) to see how Amis discusses this. But, as he says, the separation

of style and subject is not one that should be acceptable in literature. In fact, the method leads directly to a moral point. If time works forward (in the normal way) then the Odilo we first meet would be young, innocent of the crimes he will commit. Because time works backward, he has already committed those crimes, but because we don't know it, we – the readers – judge him only on what is presented to us at the beginning of the novel in the story of his old age. Once we discover the extent of his crimes, we are forced to reassess our own reactions, and our relation to the whole question of guilt, complicity and punishment. A serious moral proposition if ever there was one, but one brought about specifically because of Amis's stylistic method.

Reading over Amis's work – with its glittery and relentless insistence on style, and its concomitant demands made on the thinking, analysing, feeling capacity of the reader – one might begin to wonder if it is this very highmindedness that some critics cannot take, even though his adherents love it.

Reviewers don't always know what to do with Amis's work, which often leads to oddly diverse opinions. When *Experience* was published in 2000, Graham Hassell, writing in *What's on in London*, complimented the book on its 'brilliantly original' structure, as 'a quasi-autobiographical valedictory to his old dad'. Yet William Sutcliffe wrote in the *Independent on Sunday* that 'despite the insistence of his blurb-writer that this is an autobiography, Amis is curiously reticent about himself and his life. Four hundred pages of this "autobiography" somehow go by without us ever learning very much about who Martin Amis is, or what he has done with the past 51 years of his life'. You could be forgiven for wondering if they were reading the same book. Other reviewers argued over the elements that seemed to be personal when they were essentially literary, or rather acutely literary-critical. It may be true, as Amis says, that

the memoir was designed to 'settle scores' with the fourth estate of hostile critics and reviewers, but that does not undermine the intellectual interest which Amis can bring to examining his own condition.

In *Experience* Amis speaks ruefully about this fact - 'my teeth made headlines' he says - but the very way in which he says this is a testimony to his writerly skills. The juxtaposition of 'head' and 'teeth', the pun in 'headlines', the simplicity, the judicious rightness, the wit - all of these exemplify the skills that make Amis into a first-class writer.

Amis has had a struggle with his critics. He struggles because he does take his work very seriously, as he takes fiction and words and literary language seriously. It's a lot to demand of the reader, but Amis intends to make demands on his audience and is unabashed about that. You have to work hard, there's no doubt about it, but the reward is a word-hoard pleasure on every page, and the sophisticated and yet compassionate encouragement to take on the examined life, as Amis himself takes it on.

Amis writes fiction because it gives him 'control'. He speaks about this craving in *Experience*:

The trouble with life (the novelist will feel) is its amorphousness, its ridiculous fluidity. Look at it: thinly plotted, largely themeless, sentimental and ineluctably trite. The dialogue is poor, or at least violently uneven. The twists are either predictable or sensationalist. And it's always the same beginning; and the same ending ... My organisational principles, therefore, derive from an inner urgency, and from the novelist's addiction to seeing parallels and making connections. (p. 7)

The comfort in the control offered by parallels and connections does not last long. A few pages further on and he says:

Over the Christmas of 1973, experience – in the form, as I now see it, of an acquaintance with infinite fear – entered my life and took up residence in my unconscious mind. This happenstance has shown me, through long retrospect, that even fiction is uncontrollable. You may think you control it. You may feel you control it. You don't. (p. 36)

It's another doubleness. The effort to shape, set against the acknowledgement that there will be no shape. Amis's enterprise – in his fiction, and in his attention to the processes of his fiction – is one that admits all risk, and yet, paradoxically, is all the safer, all the more secure for admitting that risk. In an interview published around the time of the publication of *Experience* he said:

The work at the desk was enjoyable, even though it was emotional. The emotion still stands, rich and good, even though painful. You're never over these things. I did do a lot of concentrated mourning, so I've gone a distance down the road. It's an endless road, but I have gone quite a distance ... There may be a second volume eventually.

In fact, it doesn't matter whether or not there is a second volume of memoirs. For there will always be more volumes where the risk is taken, the feeling felt then ordered, the process of life into art exposed, as Amis goes on with his transfiguring.

Interview with Martin Amis

London: 10 July 2002

JN: I'm going to start by asking you about *The Rachel Papers*. I was intrigued by that line in *Experience* where you say, 'In 1973 my life looked good on paper, where, in fact, almost all of it was being lived.' How far then, in 1973, were you actually creating your voice, your career, in the process of writing this story?

MA: I think with a first novel you just have a go, with the courage and folly of youth. You get going and see how you do. I had a sense that I wouldn't just write one novel, and in fact by 1973 I was well into my second novel. I'd finished *The Rachel Papers* early in 1972. It was a long time in production, and it was the only novel of mine that was significantly rewritten on the advice of the editor. So I was conscious of being there for the long haul – put it that way – but I wasn't career building. I didn't have any kind of overview.

JN: In what ways was it rewritten?

MA: Well, it has a kind of double-time scheme, in that in each chapter you see the narrator on the eve of his twentieth birthday. And my typescript when I handed it in was not consistent then, in that some chapters just ran on, and the editor tightened it up with this suggestion, and improved it by a good fifteen per cent.

JN: Fifteen per cent! That sounds very precise ...

MA: Well, that's what it felt like, and it's the only time that I submitted to editorial advice, and I could tell she was right straight away. So there was some tinkering going on with that, but I was already completely preoccupied with my second novel, and you're always wanting to move forward and not go back to what feels done.

JN: This very brittle, sardonic tone that is Charles Highway's voice ... is that your own voice?

MA: You haven't got much else except your own consciousness, and I've always felt my own books are very good and dutiful examples of this. Because the first novel is about me, my consciousness; the second is about a peer group; the third is about a city; the fourth and fifth compare one city to another, New York and London; then, by *London Fields*, I'm writing about the planet, and by the time you get to *The Information* then it's the universe; and my present novel is a bit about alternate universes. So there is a steady expansion here. But when you're twenty-one, unless you're very exceptionally empathetic, you're really trapped inside your own consciousness, and what you do, and tend to go on doing, is you take a little bit of yourself and push it very much to the forefront, and all the other facets of your character are suppressed, partly for ironic effect, and it has a stylising effect too. No, the only claim that *The Rachel Papers* has to originality is that it's not 'the portrait of the artist as a young man', it's more the 'portrait of the literary critic as a young man'. I made him much colder than I am, and also he's an anti-creative figure, he's a pedant, a nineteen-year-old pedant. But even when it came to *Money*, where I had a debauched first-person narrator, I still took that two percent of me. And what you hope is that everyone has a bit of that in them, and then the novel can claim to some kind of universality.

JN: *The Rachel Papers* does feel like a young person's book, I suppose partly because of that literary critical element of Charles always teasing ideas through literature. And there's that moment when he's advised to start resorting to his own self.

MA: Well, yes, he's a chameleon and a ventriloquist. Like most people of that age, they're trying on voices and personalities and don't have much idea who they really are, and I think that's a condition of being that age. You've got to pretend an easy and urbane acquaintance with the main currents of life without knowing anything whatever, so it's all a desperate bluff, being nineteen.

JN: There's something that goes through all your books, and that's the playing with words, the extended metaphor. For example, there's a bit at the beginning of *Experience* where you're having a conversation with Louis in the car, but then you get into a whole word-play about 'the Chauffeuring Years' and the 'autobahn' of life. Is that something that happens just because you like words, or is it something that you map out for yourself?

MA: It's all instinct. When anyone asks you 'Why did you decide in this novel to have ...?', the word 'decide' is always wrong. You grope around your own instincts and move forward reflexively rather than to a plan. Anthony Burgess years ago made the distinction between what he calls the 'A-type novel' and the 'B-type novel'. The 'A-type novel' being characterised by a strong narrative, characters, human interest; the 'B novel' being more an order of words. The ultimate 'B novel' is [James Joyce's] *Finnegans Wake*. And most literary writers are somewhere between the 'A' and the 'B', and I suppose I lean a bit more towards the 'B'.