

Feeling blue Martin Amis at home in Brooklyn

I'm incredibly attached to England. What you miss here is the irony



Martin Amis talks to Bryan Appleyard

'I'VE DONE ALL THE AGONISING'

The controversial novelist comes clean about his terminal 'decline', missing Christopher Hitchens and home, and why he's written a novel about the Holocaust

At the restaurant (Watty & Meg, very dark wood, very Brooklyn), Martin Amis admits that America is beginning to get to him. "It's the penal system, the guns, the capital punishment." Later, back at his house, he turns passionately nostalgic: "I'm incredibly attached to England. I love the English. What you miss so much here is the irony. You will get that from anyone in the street in England. Everything people say is weighted by irony." Then there's the relentless upbeatness of the USA. "Oh, it all begins to wear a bit thin — 'How are you today?' 'Good!'" He grimaces. He also misses English wide boys, "roughs". "I've a distinct taste for hanging out with roughs, basically, which has not gone away, even now. I haven't been able to get a connection with those kind of people over here. I don't think they have the appeal of the English working-class, semi-criminal culture — which I think is a wonderful culture."

Amis arrived in the green, shaded and definitely not semi-criminal lanes of Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, in 2011. (The house was bought in 2010, but it took a year to do up.) It's a fine, tall, narrow house with a glossy blue door. Inside, he has staggily set up a light, a vintage table and two chairs for the interview. It's like a cafe, though he says it's an office. He is alone for the moment — his wife is away on Long Island and none of his five children is around.

He arrived here announcing that America was the place to be, where experiments were being conducted on the "near-future". Three years later, he doesn't quite say he is ready to come home, but I wouldn't be surprised. He's changeable, adaptable, restless... unbelievably restless. Perhaps it's the nicotine. He had asked me to take over some Golden Virginia rolling tobacco, explaining that he was down to four real cigarettes a day, subsisting with the rest of the time on a long, pen-like electric fag, which his wife keeps putting in her bag, mistaking it for a — er — pen. Mid-interview, the thought of the old GV overcame him, and he retired upstairs for a roll-up — three

filters and just a few filaments of the good stuff. At dinner, in spite of puffs at the pen, he had to go outside for a couple of real fags. Then there's a call to his wife, a beer, another beer, a pee and a few other mysterious exits, all leaving, on my recorders, just the hollow receding pock-pock of his boots on the white floorboards.

As he is the second most nicotine-addicted person I know, it is news that he is cutting down. I estimate he has torched up at least 300,000 gaspers since we last met — also in New York — 19 years ago. Well, he is 65 (on August 25), and death has been much on his mind, not least because of the cataclysm of the death of his dearest friend, Christopher Hitchens, in December 2011.

"In the year and a half it took him to die, I went straight to denial, and I stayed there until the day he died. Looking back on it now, I am appalled by my pusillanimous inability to face up to it. I couldn't have any conversation with him like, 'Now the curtain is beginning to fall.' I don't think he was in denial. About a month before he died, he sent me a note about his book *Arguably* going straight into *The New York Times* Best Sellers list. He said, 'It's all wormwood and ashes to me now.'"

In the interests of research, Hitchens had once volunteered to be waterboarded, remarking afterwards that he hadn't told the doctor who checked him out about the 17,000 cigarettes a year he had smoked since the age of 15. He died of oesophageal cancer, the same disease, Amis notes glumly, that dispatched Philip Larkin, his father's great friend.

As if that weren't enough death, his new novel, *The Zone of Interest*, is about the Holocaust, a subject he covered in *Time's Arrow*. He has also covered the Russian equivalent, the Gulag, in *House of Meetings* and *Koba the Dread*, his book on Stalin. Is there really more to say?

"There is always more to say. I liked what [the German writer] WG Sebald said when he was asked if it was possible to think too much about the Holocaust, and he answered, 'No serious person thinks about anything else.' I mean, I know you think about lunch and dinner and stuff, but there is something in that." Also, Saul Bellow, Amis's greatest literary hero and a constant character in his conversation, described the Holocaust as the terminal point so far in human evil. So, yes, there is more to say.

The Zone of Interest is, as one would expect, brilliant: a technical and aesthetic *tour de force* that

takes us inside the minds of the Germans who managed Auschwitz. The oddity of this perspective is intensified by the fact that the book is also a love story about a passion that flickers grotesquely against the background of the farcical practicalities of evil unleashed. "When I started writing, I thought maybe it was just a short story. I had my hesitations and confusions, but it wasn't difficult to write. I think I've done all the agonising."

This agonising included voluminous reading around the subject, which he did even before he knew he was going to write this book. He goes about his research with all the intensity of the smitten autodidact. Big books litter both his house and the novel's afterword. I sense that he felt a moral obligation, even when writing fiction about Auschwitz, to get the facts right. Different histories make different demands on the novelist, and this one is very demanding — as is Amis's own history.

"I was born four years after the death of the Little Moustache [Hitler] and four years before the death of the Big Moustache [Stalin]. They were these huge figures. I can remember when Stalin was referred to as 'Uncle Joe' in the *Daily Mirror*. When I was about seven, I asked my mother what all this stuff about railway tracks and smokestacks was all about, and

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» she said, ‘Oh, don’t worry about Hitler. You’ve got blond hair and blue eyes — Hitler would have loved you.’ I felt a kind of ignoble relief that Hitler would have been on my side.”

Also, there is always more to say about the Holocaust because there is always more to think about Hitler. Stalin was explicable, but nobody even pretends to understand Hitler. Amis makes the contrast in literary terms. “Stalin, from his youth, read Chekhov, Zola, Balzac, Thackeray, Dickens, Shakespeare. Hitler just read crap ethnology and the westerns of Karl May, a German. The point is, you can say that what Stalin did, except for the excesses, is not incompatible with reason and possible outcomes. You can’t begin to do that with Hitler.”

A certain type of Amis-watcher will be dismayed to hear all this. He suffers from the Woody Allen affliction — people keep saying they liked his “early funny ones” — and many years for the more humble delights of *The Rachel Papers*, *Dead Babies* or, if they are at all serious, for the street-smart apocalypses of *Money* and *London Fields*. And even the serious critics have given him a hard time from *The Information* (1995) onwards. He shrugs. “There’s a one-word narrative for every writer. For Hitchens, it was ‘contrarian’; for me, it’s ‘decline’. I would argue it’s Kingsley [Amis’s father] at work here. It’s as if people think I was born in 1922, and I wrote Lucky Jim at the age of six, and the whole thing has been going on too long. Now they’ve started saying ‘He’s back on form’ with every book except *Yellow Dog* — everyone who could hold a pen was queuing up to have a go at that one.”

“Anyway, it doesn’t feel like decline to me. When I look back at my early stuff, I’m horrified by how crude it is. I am appalled by the vulgarisms in my early books.”

That mention of Kingsley opens the gate into the well-raked-over — by Martin, in his memoir *Experience*, and by just about everybody else — field of the autobiography. There were the wastrel years of the late 1960s, when, suddenly, everything seemed permissible. “I kept on asking, ‘Where are the police? Why aren’t they stopping us doing this?’”

There was the initially disastrous education in multiple schools, from

which he was saved by the attentions of Kingsley’s second wife, Elizabeth Jane Howard. Then Oxford and, immediately afterwards, the dazzling debut of *The Rachel Papers*. There was the cousin murdered by the serial killer Fred West, and the rise to serious prominence with *Money* and *London Fields* (now being filmed; see right). There was his own marriage breakdown, the moves to Uruguay and New York with his second wife, the writer Isabel Fonseca, his falling-out with Julian Barnes, the epic of the dental operations, the long-lost daughter and so on. As a result, Amis



Street-smart apocalypse Amis, left, and the darts player Bobby George on the set of *London Fields*

When I look back, I’m horrified by how crude my early stuff is

is a serious writer who appears in the tabloids more than any other. Again, he shrugs (he does that a lot); again, he blames Kingsley.

“I’d be in a very different position now if my father had been a schoolteacher. I wouldn’t have been in the Mail so much... Because Kingsley was such a big figure, there is this difficulty I have in England that seems to be ineradicable. I’ve been delegitimised by heredity. In the 1970s, people were sympathetic to me being the son of a novelist. They’re not at all sympathetic now, because it looks like cronyism.”

He has lately been accused of turning into Kingsley, with some very right-sounding political asides — on Islam and

feminism — and I did notice at once that both his voice and his face have become Kingsley-ish. He rejects the charge.

“My father became a communist to annoy his father, and then, when the world turned left, he became anti-communist. I’ve never been anything but meliorist, gradualist, left of centre.”

I ask him about his subject matter in general. He summarises it as “high modernity”, the era when religion disappears from our lives. “Godlessness, I think, will reverberate even in Europe for another century.” But he remains an agnostic — he tried to convert the militantly atheist Hitchens — for the very sound reason that we still know so little about the universe. The most consistent theme, however, is innocence, the highest virtue in his work.

“All the doomsayers who say the good has gone, the golden age and all that — that may or may not be true, but it’s certainly true of innocence. The loss of innocence must be incremental. That’s why Bellow said we must try to see things with our original eyes. You have to retain your childish vision, which is sort of less glibble — it sees beyond the presented face of reality.”

He is now working on an explicitly autobiographical novel. It is, in fact, the retrieved material he dropped from 2010’s *The Pregnant Widow*. He should be doing his big American novel, but, he says, it’s not quite “there” yet. So that’s the Martin meeting, 19 years on; now a grandfather, still smoking, still restless and still, with that earnest autodidactic innocence, ploughing through the big books, looking for material and meaning, and still spinning the phrases like the master he is (“septic with dread” was his chilly summary of both our feelings during the Cuban missile crisis).

We shake hands at the glossy blue door and, as it closes, I pause to hear the hollow receding pock-pock of his boots on the white floorboards. We’re due for another session in 2033. I can’t wait to see what he will be writing then. **E**

The Zone of Interest (Jonathan Cape £18.99) is out on Thursday. To buy it for £14.99, inc p&p, call 0845 271 2135 or visit [thesundaytimes.co.uk/bookshop](https://www.thetimes.com/uk/bookshop). Martin Amis will be appearing at *The Times and Sunday Times Cheltenham Literature Festival on October 11*; [cheltenhamfestivals.com](https://www.cheltenhamfestivals.com) @BryanAppleford

The movie version of *London Fields* is set in the future and directed by a Yank. Should we worry, asks Jonathan Dean

The film of *London Fields* isn’t set in 1999, like Martin Amis’s book. Instead, it takes place in 2024. Or thereabouts. Out goes the pre-millennial tension of the novel, in comes a more general tension. We’re in a capital that wasn’t cleansed of its bad, sad people by Y2K, but rather just allowed said eccentrics to become even weirder. Amis has seen the trailer. “It’s fairly faithful,” he says. “It looked imaginative, so fingers crossed.”

Last October, I visited the shoot in east London, close to the real *London Fields* and nine miles from Notting Hill, where both book and film are actually set. Of course, the city has changed much in the 25 years since the first edition. For one thing, back then, the west was the hub for the creative and young. Now, they all live near the titular park, and their hipster chic dominates this heavily stylised film. DIY clothes, the stills suggest, are the future. Cara Delevingne — who plays put-upon wife Kath Talent — says the look is alive with east London’s “energy and colourfulness”. But, she adds, it’s also “very dark”.

On set, Jim Sturgess is tired. He plays Delevingne’s on-screen husband, Keith, the novel’s iconic lout: darts player, cabbie, conman. Sturgess’s black robe sparkles with the repeated initials KT, and his hair is thick and gelled. “It looked fun on the page, but it’s exhausting,” he sighs, taking a breather. “Keith’s always dominating the scene. He doesn’t have a mild day. If I’m not masturbating in my pants, I’m getting sexually assaulted by a truncheon. It’s a constant barrage of how mad can we go...”

He sounds broken — “What was the question again?” — and walks away slowly to his next scene, with the femme fatale Nicola Six (Amber Heard). “Today, I was licking Amber’s face,” he told me, and as I crowd behind the monitor, I see what he means. He holds a wad of high-denomination notes, gesticulates and licks Heard’s face. She’s in a black-and-white draught-board gown, black lingerie. Six’s flat is a tip, with a mannequin’s hand on the floor and a big bed straight from the



She’s a femme fatale Amber Heard playing Nicola Six

London calling

Don’t accuse it of being a thoughtless cash-in on a much-loved read

Tracey Emin range. It’s squat-like and squalid, with sweat on the walls, lots of vinyl and a new TV. Perhaps this is how you imagined the film of *London Fields*: set in homes lifted from *Fight Club*, directed by an American, Mathew Cullen, and starring famous models in bit parts. (“When I was told I had a chance, I cried,” Delevingne says. “It was the first role for which I hadn’t been typecast.” Her fellow model Lily Cole is in it, too.) Or perhaps

you imagined it differently. Either way, don’t accuse the film of being a thoughtless cash-in on a much-loved metropolis read — a *One Day* for the loveless, with the same actor, Sturgess, on the poster. Its writer, Roberta Hanley, has been working on the script for 12 years.

“We certainly aren’t out there to piss anyone off,” says Billy Bob Thornton, hiding in his trailer as the heavens open up and filming rumbles on. He plays the

He means Cold Mountain. “If anybody takes offence at that part of it, I would just tell them to go f*** themselves.”

Later, by sound stage six, I stand and watch Thornton wash blood off his hands. The film is spread across a few small setups. Talent’s porn-littered black cab is parked on the lot. My chat with Sturgess takes place in the office of Mark Asprey

narrator, Samson Young, an American writer who arrives in London, “dying very quietly”, and entwines himself into the messy lives of Talent, Guy Clinch (Theo James) and the soon-to-be-murdered Six. There is, as in Amis’s novel, a nuclear threat, but it’s enhanced here, albeit from an unspecified country. Some locations — Trelick Tower — are the same, while others — the Olympic stadium, for a darts match — are different.

I ask Thornton, who speaks and smiles so much like his sociopath in *Fargo* that I wonder how his family sleep at night, if it matters that an American is filming a British classic. “I don’t pay much attention to that kind of thing, in terms of the protocol or the ethics of it,” he begins. “I’ll put it this way. There’s an American Civil War movie directed by an Englishman, starring an Englishman and an Australian. So you know what I mean?”

Amis has a cameo, next to the darts legend Bobby George. “He’s as handsome as ever,” the author jokes. Thornton met Amis, too. “There is so much going on in his head — a certain world-weariness writers have,” the actor says. “His only concern was that I might be too vigorous, too full of life for the part. And I said, ‘Oh buddy, you don’t have to worry about that at all...’” He’s convincing, Thornton, saying every city needs a foreign eye now and then, to pick out details the locals have grown tired of and miss.

“I find London fascinating,” he says. “The people and language. We say, ‘How ya doing?’ You say, ‘All right?’ I pick up bits of what you guys say, and I know I’ll bring that home.” He sounds grateful to be here, on set, playing the part, but then, to rephrase Amis: actors don’t usually have it so good, do they? When something happens, something unified, dramatic and pretty saleable, they just act it out. What a gift. **E**

London Fields will be released next spring

ST DIGITAL

Exclusive stills of *London Fields*, with Billy Bob Thornton and more

On tablet, or at [thesundaytimes.co.uk/culture](https://www.sundaytimes.co.uk/culture)