



Martin Amis

One of the star writers of his generation who epitomised literary fame in an era of glitz and hype

The writer Martin Amis, who has died aged 73 of oesophageal cancer, delighted, provoked, inspired and outraged readers of his fiction, reportage and memoirs across a literary career that set off like a rocket and went on to dazzle, streak and burn for almost 50 years. His scintillating verbal artistry, satirical audacity and sheer imaginative verve at every level from word-choice to plot-shape announced a blazing, once-in-a-generation talent.

He seldom disagreed with Christopher Hitchens, the journalist and essayist who was his intellectual lodestar. But when Hitchens published a tepid review of a book by the American novelist Saul Bellow - Amis's literary idol and mentor, who ranked equally

high in his affections - Amis rebuked his friend for ignoring "all the pleasure he gave you". Amis stirred envy and emulation, ignited controversy, courted scandal. Above all, though, he gave pleasure.

He paid tribute to his father, the novelist Kingsley Amis, by praising his "superhumour: the great engine of his comedy". However grave its themes - later years saw him preoccupied with losses, partings, and deaths - "superhumour" likewise fuelled the zest of Amis Jr's prose. For him, "seriousness - and morality, and indeed sanity - cannot exist without humour". His gift of laughter followed him even into Auschwitz (in his 2014 novel *The Zone of Interest*). Critics could find its presence an embarrassment. Admirers never did.

He published 15 novels, from *The Rachel Papers* in 1973 to the hybrid *Inside Story* - which enfoldes fiction into memoirs and essays - in 2020.

Amis at his home in London, 1995. 'Superhumour' fuelled the zest of his prose, but later years saw him preoccupied with losses, parting and death

DAVID LEVENSON/
GETTY IMAGES

His essays and journalism stretch from an account of arcade video games, through literary studies and critiques of pop culture, to a meditation on Stalin's crimes: *Koba the Dread* (2002). Until a quieter last decade, spent largely in New York, he combined fertility and versatility with a reluctant role as a writer-celebrity who epitomised literary fame in an age of glitz, hype and frenzied prurience. Keystone novels of the 1980s and 90s such as *Money*, *London Fields* and *The Information* channel the raucous urges of their time, and kick against them in dismay.

To a degree, he played the celebrity game: he dissected showbiz phenomena in witty articles, often for the *Observer*. But he found, in his case, that others played with laxer rules. For decades, the life, loves and family of a gossip-fed tabloid entity known as "Martin Amis" ran in parallel with the career of the hard-working author of that name. His fiction abounds in games of doubles, pairs and twins. In his own life, too, Amis struggled to negotiate the gap between the mask forged by fame and the true face of a serious writer.

Being the son of Kingsley might have sent him early warnings of the bill that a stellar career in literature can present. Martin was born in Oxford a year after his brother, Philip. His mother was Hilly (Hilary, nee Bardwell), whom Kingsley had met while she was studying at the Ruskin School of Art. Their third child, Sally, followed in 1954.

Hilly recalled the young Martin,

bright and amiable, as "a child born under a lucky star". The spectacular success of Kingsley's debut, *Lucky Jim* (1954), brought prosperity but torpedoed family life. Kingsley's many affairs, and his mother's distress, became the background hum of Martin's youth.

As his renown grew, Kingsley moved with his family to Princeton, New Jersey, for a year. Martin loved the US: its speech rhythms rooted in his prose. In Britain, his father's best friend - the melancholic poet Philip Larkin - supplied not only paltry gifts of a few pence to Martin, but a dire example of literary greatness allied to emotional squalor. The siblings spent happier times with their cousins, David and Lucy Partington. Lucy's vanishing in 1973, and the final confirmation more than 20 years later of her murder by the serial killer Fred West, spread an ineradicable shadow over Amis's later writing.

In 1961, Kingsley took up a teaching fellowship at Peterhouse, Cambridge. A rambling house on the city's edge served as the rules-free, bohemian backdrop to the shipwreck of the Amis marriage. It ended in 1963 when Hilly moved to Mallorca while Kingsley began living with his lover, the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard (known as Jane). Disharmony at home disrupted Martin's education: he bounced idly from school to school. Relief came in the Caribbean when (for £50 per week) he acted in the film of Richard Hughes's novel *A High Wind* in Jamaica.

As teenagers, Martin and Phil lived mostly in Maida Vale, west London, with Jane and Kingsley. They scoured Kings Road, Chelsea, for girls, and kept drugs in the fridge. Kingsley, lord of misrule, once bought his sons a gross of condoms. Jane, the much-admired "wicked stepmother", finally presented the "semi-literate truant and waster" Martin with a reading list that ran from Jane Austen to Muriel Spark. She sent him to a Brighton crammer, where he thrived. Martin duly studied English at Exeter College, Oxford.

After graduation, in 1971, he joined the *Times Literary Supplement* as an assistant, then as fiction editor. Starting with *The Rachel Papers*, his own apprentice fiction - smart, knowing, super-cool - flowed with little fuss. For Amis *files*, "nothing is more ordinary to you than what your dad does all day". In 1974, he moved from the *TLS* to the *New Statesman*: as deputy to the literary editor Claire Tomalin, then (until 1979) as books editor himself.

The *Rachel Papers* won a Somerset Maugham award. And the model for the "Rachel" fictionalised in his debut - his first love - introduced him to the Jewish themes that would draw him with increasing force. For a while, though, his fiction declined to grow up. *Dead Babies* (1975) performs stylistic somersaults around a

The life, loves and family of a gossip-fed tabloid entity known as 'Martin Amis' ran in parallel with the career of the serious author of that name

country-house parody, although the warring foster brothers of *Success* (1978) inaugurate the trademark Amis play of pairs.

Two sides of the Amis myth, or mask, solidified. With male chums - always Hitchens, often the poets James Fenton, Ian Hamilton and Clive James, or the novelists Julian Barnes and Ian McEwan - he adorned a sort of kebab-and-chips literary salon. They derided the old guard and lauded brave new voices. Yet Kingsley, old guard incarnate, remained an honoured guest. Amis's deep affection for his father, despite political and artistic clashes (Kingsley scorned his boy's fancy technique, and reputedly chucked Money across the room), surprised and impressed their friends.

Like his father, Amis also picked up a reputation as an eager if inconstant lover. By his own account, he was a slow starter until the future magazine editor Tina Brown "rode into town and rescued me from Larkinland". Soon, columnists began to chronicle - or fantasise - the romantic life of this literary wunderkind. Tomalin herself, Brown, Emma Soames, Julie Kavanagh: his liaisons with high-achieving women were mediated by salacious reporting, attracted awestruck gazes but also evil eyes. (His longest early relationship, with the photographer Angela Gorgas, left fewer media traces.)

Too short, too clever, too entitled, too rich: Amis became the author-ogre many loved to hate. Even his father remonstrated to Larkin when, in 1978, the son earned £38,000: "Little shit. 29, he is. Little shit." Yet companions from that time recall no sneery seducer but a sweet, funny, sympathetic friend.

Come the early 80s, Amis as writer moved into higher gears. *Other People* (1981) heralded a mature interest in other minds and how to represent them. In 1984, the pyrotechnic satire and narrative trickery of the sensational *Money* both skewered an era of greed and glitz and, typically, embodied its appeal in the razzle-dazzle of its prose. The golden boy shone with a deeper lustre. His presence on *Granta* magazine's 1983 roll-call of Best of Young British Novelists sealed his position on the crest of a new, media-savvy literary wave.

Also in 1984, the writer who had fretted that "childlessness will condemn you to childishness" married the American-born academic Antonia Phillips. Their son Louis arrived the same year, followed in 1986 by Jacob. With parenthood came an investment in the planet's fate expressed in the bomb-shadowed stories of *Einstein's Monsters* (1987), and the apocalyptic weather that roils around the large-scale comic dystopia of *London Fields* (1989). That book's doomed antiheroine, Nicola Six, focused criticism of Amis as a serial fabricator of stereotypically damaged femmes



fatales. The complaint, and the grounds for it, would persist.

At the same time, the comic craft that forged the novel's darts-obsessed low-life Keith Talent could still make readers fall off their chairs with laughter. Visitors to the Amis work-flat in Westbourne Park loved to report on the blokeish impedimenta of dartboard and pinball machine. Fewer clocked the neat editions of Bellow and Nabokov, twin touchstones of his art, on the shelves. The Holocaust motif and reverse narration of *Time's Arrow* (1991) - shortlisted for the Booker prize - spoke of lofty formal ambitions, not laddish fun.

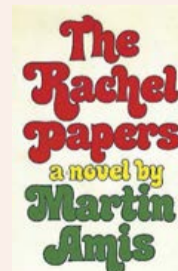
In journalism and fiction, Amis magnetised mimics and fan-boys (fewer girls) by the score. The essays gathered first in *The War Against Cliché* (2001) and, later, in 2017, *The Rub of Time*, recruited a tribe of wannabes - which rather missed their point. Hubris was ascribed to him, not espoused by him. Envious back-biters feasted on his every mishap or misstep.

The 90s saw his dental problems become a bizarre media fixation: he retaliated, gloriously, with the dentist-surgery horrors of his 2000 memoir *Experience*. Less repairable, his marriage broke up. He married Isabel Fonseca, an American-Uruguayan journalist and author, in 1996. Their daughters, Fernanda and Clio, were born in 1997 and 1999.

The media onslaught intensified with Amis's most elaborate novel of doubles and rivals: the death-haunted, long-winded literary

Kingsley and Hilly Amis with their children, Sally, Philip and Martin, right, in 1956. Above, Martin Amis, right, with his friend the writer Christopher Hitchens. Below, The Rachel Papers, 1973, and Money, 1984

DANIEL FARSON/
GETTY; ALAMY



satire of *The Information* (1994). Its large advance drew sniper fire. So did Amis's split from his agent Pat Kavanagh - and from her husband, Barnes - in favour of Andrew Wylie. Kingsley's decline, after his parting from Jane, darkened his son's horizons and turned Amis's mind to "the information" (about mortality) that struck as a "negative eureka moment" in his 40s. What Amis called, after Kingsley's death in 1995, the "passage to the main event" now suffused his work. He found death "always in my thoughts, like an unwanted song".

In 2000, his sister, Sally, died, aged 46, after periods of depression and alcoholism. Grievs accumulated: the 1994 revelation of Lucy's fate throws a pall over the superb *Experience* that wit can hardly lift. Still, in the mid-90s, Amis met his eldest child. Delilah was born in 1976 while her mother, Lamorna - who later took her own life - was married to the journalist-historian Patrick Seale. Larkin's bleak emotional wilderness had terrified Amis. If anything, he overcompensated: so much life, so much love, but so much loss as well.

Amis, Isabel and their daughters set up home in London, at the other end of the Primrose Hill road where Kingsley had finally gone back to live with Hilly and her third husband. Post-millennium, his writing took a more political turn. Hitchens had always figured for Amis as the ideal type of the public intellectual. Now, the virtuoso storyteller - who identified as a centre-left gradualist - craved a slice of that gravitas himself. In *Koba the Dread*, Amis's account of Stalin's atrocities paid homage too to Kingsley and the ardent anti-communism of his circle: notably, the historian Robert Conquest.

It was 9/11 and its aftermath that propelled Amis into front-line polemics. Islamist terrorism revived a catastrophist strain in his work: the concept of entropy haunts earlier books. In the topical essays collected as *The Second Plane* in 2008, it threatened to elevate political foes into demons. Rash interview statements prompted charges of Islamophobia. More soberly, *Inside Story* concludes that "the real danger of terrorism lies not in what it inflicts but what it provokes". Still, the op-ed pundit Amis could drop his verbal, even moral, compass.

By the later 2000s, Amis began to look fragile, with the stiff gait of a veteran tennis player (he enjoyed the game, and wrote well on it). His mid-2000s fiction - *Yellow Dog*, *House of Meetings* - revisited old haunts: celebrity excess and tabloid depravity in the former; the lingering horror of Soviet atrocity in the latter. Calm spells with his family in seaside Uruguay raised spirits, as for a while did stints as a creative-writing professor at Manchester University.

With *The Pregnant Widow* (2010), his ambitions climbed

Birthdays

Lynn Barber, journalist, 79; **Sir Peter Bazalgette**, former chair, ITV, 70; **Richard Benjamin**, actor and director, 85; **David Bernstein**, chair, British Red Cross, 80; **Cheryl Campbell**, actor, 74; **Lord (Menzies) Campbell of Pittenweem**, former Lib Dem MP and party leader, 82; **Louise Christian**, human rights lawyer, 71; **The Rev Don Cupitt**, theologian, 89; **Jerry Dammers**, musician, 68; **Novak Djokovic**, tennis player, 36; **Philip Hoare**, writer, 65; **Anthony Holden**, writer and journalist, 76; **Ieuan Wyn Jones**, former leader, Plaid Cymru, 74; **Lady (Maggie) Jones of Whitchurch**, trade unionist, 68; **Graham Linehan**, television writer and director, 55; **Morrissey**, singer and songwriter, 64; **GF Newman**, novelist and playwright, 77; **Prof Christopher Peacocke**, philosopher, 73; **Arlene Phillips**, choreographer, 80; **Sunand Prasad**, former president, RIBA, 73; **Evelyn Silber**, art historian, 74; **Jon Sopel**, journalist, 64; **Amanda Spielman**, chief inspector of schools, Ofsted, 62; **Irwin Stelzer**, economist, 91; **Bernie Taupin**, songwriter, 73; **Denise Welch**, actor, 65.

again. Within its comic-pastoral mode, the novel counts the costs of the sexual revolution that, for Amis, had devoured his vulnerable sister. To Amis, no longer a gleeful beneficiary of post-60s erotic liberation but its appalled historian, "the boys could just go on being boys. It was the girls who had to choose."

In 2010, the Amis family began the process of moving from London to New York: Cobble Hill, Brooklyn. In Amis's telling, the need to live near his elderly mother-in-law hastened the move. British media read it as a snub to his celebrity-mad homeland and its jeering fourth estate. Lionel Asbo (2012), with its scattergun satire on lottery-winning oiks in a plebeian nightmare, rather confirmed that view.

Amis enjoyed the Brooklyn weather, the freedom from spiteful gossip, his welcome on New York's literary scene. But he missed British backchat: his west London patch, from the pub quiz-machines of Portobello Road to the sports clubs of Paddington, had served well as scruffy muse.

Thanks to Fonseca's heritage, Amis now had Jewish daughters. Jewish histories, fears and hopes felt nearer than ever. Yet his concentration-camp novel *The Zone of Interest* affirmed that, for Amis, nothing stood beyond a joke. "How can you presume to laugh at Hitlerism?" asked a German critic. For Amis, how could he not? Any depiction of Nazi evil that overlooked its farcical absurdity lent it weight and credit it did not deserve.

His two wisest jokers had exited: Bellow, with dementia, in 2005; Hitchens, from cancer, in 2011. The loss of a virtual father and a virtual brother whetted fears of death but also (with Hitchens) sharpened the appetite for life: "the delight of sentience". Kingsley had called a late novel *The Anti-Death League*, but Martin would never have signed up. "Without death there is no art," he wrote. Bellow's and Hitchens's passing fed elegiac passages amid the multifarm miscellany of *Inside Story*, where tricky "autofiction" sits beside heartfelt, no-frills memoir.

With its musings on "how busy deathalways is, and what great plans it has for us", *Inside Story* felt like a valediction. If so, it was one in which Amis's acrobatic wit defied both gravity and solemnity. He wrote with discipline and dedication, and wrestled with all the anguish of his age. Yet that pleasure-giving principle makes his long shelf of books feel playfully, buoyantly light.

He is survived by Isabel and his children.

Boyd Tonkin

Martin Louis Amis, writer, born 25 August 1949; died 19 May 2023

'Damn, that fool can

He exploded into the grey, tweedy world of literature - a young, pouting and outrageously brash crusader for the finest prose. **Lisa Allardice** remembers all her encounters with Martin Amis, the writer who made everyone up their game

"You'll be reading me every now and then at least until about 2080, weather permitting. And when you go, maybe my afterlife, too, will come to an end, my afterlife of words."

S

o wrote Martin Amis in his heavily autobiographical final novel *Inside Story* in 2020. With a body of work spanning 50 years, he leaves 15 novels, two short-story collections, one memoir and seven book-length works of journalism and history. Did posterity matter to him? Hell, yes. "There is only one value judgment in literature: time," he insisted.

Back in 2009, I called Amis - as editors all over the world would have been calling or emailing leading writers on Saturday night - to ask if he might write a tribute to the American novelist John Updike, who had just died. Time was tight and we were aiming high, but as with every major (and not so major) event at that time, Amis was the writer everyone was after. And on Updike, the last postwar American literary giant? It had to be him. Happily, he felt a duty to contribute to what Gore Vidal called "book chat".

"Call me back in 10 minutes," he said in his unmistakable transatlantic drawl (he hadn't yet made America his permanent home). Had he said he would do it? Would he file in time for tomorrow's front page? I wasn't sure, but duly called him back 10 minutes later, hiding in a cupboard in the bowels of the Guardian, where we went to make private calls.

"Ready?" he said. And - I may have imagined this bit - lighting a cigarette, he proceeded to dictate a whole piece, replete with semi-colons, quotation and his hallmark neologisms (not for Amis the correspondent's punctuation-less cablese). He spoke and I typed. "There aren't supposed to be extremes of uniqueness - either you are or you're not - but

he was exceptionally *sui generis*," he drawled.

We repeated the exercise barely three months later when another of his great heroes and friends, JG Ballard, died. This time we made it to over 1,000 words. "Very few Ballardians (who are almost all male) were foolish enough to emulate him. He was *sui generis*," Amis enunciated with verbal italics. "What was influential, though, was the marvellous creaminess of his prose, and the weird and sudden expansions of his imagery," he continued. "Marvellous creaminess", "weird and sudden expansions" - how did he *do* that?

OK, so he had written at length about both Updike and Ballard before. And he was routinely invoked as a successor to both. But still. Of all the writers I'd worked with during many years as a literary editor, Amis was the only one I knew who could pull that off. The sheer smarts and chutzpah of composing a piece off the cuff, without even going to the bother of turning on the computer, was quintessential Amis.

He will for ever be remembered as part of the "Class of 83", the inaugural Granta Best of Young British novelists list that also included Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes, Salman Rushdie and Kazuo Ishiguro. "He has had a baleful influence on a whole generation," bemoaned AS Byatt of Amis in 1993, as one of the Granta judges tasked with finding successors a decade later. Not because he was a bad writer but because so many had been foolish enough to try to emulate him (to echo Amis on Ballard).

If, as is often said, this generation of writers were the closest the books world gets to having rock stars, then Amis was Mick Jagger. Those 70s photographs (The Rachel Papers years) of him pouting extravagantly at the camera, cigarette dangling - you can almost smell the smoke and ambition - announced a changing of the guard. His pose, like his prose, poised somewhere between provocation and seduction. Where the literary world had been grey and tweedy, presided over by ageing grandees (Amis Sr, William Golding, Anthony Burgess, Iris Murdoch), now it was



"There were places the English novel didn't go' ... Amis, who has died aged 73

write!

young and outrageously brash, and Amis was the frontman.

At an event in 2020 with Salman Rushdie, Rushdie asked him if, back in those heady days, he felt part of a gang. “That’s the way ‘movements’ start,” Amis replied. “Ambitious young drunks, late at night, saying, ‘We’re not going to do that any more. We’re going to do this instead.’” And with this “gang” - which also included his great friend, the late journalist Christopher Hitchens, and Ian McEwan - the young drunks went to become “the old devils”, to borrow a Kingsley Amis title, that pretty much comprised the literary establishment for years.

“There was a feeling,” he said of this time, “that there were places to go that the English novel didn’t go, and was being too fastidious about.” And he spent the next few decades making sure he was the first to go there. Who but Amis could have had such a firm grasp on the collar of what John Self, the narrator of Money, called “the panting present” to have written a novel of that title at the beginning of the 80s, that decade of Thatcherite greed? And then envisage ecological collapse in London Fields at the end of it? Which writer would have dared to take on the Holocaust (Time’s Arrow in 1991, and The Zone of Interest in 2014) and Stalin’s Great Terror (Koba the Dread in 2002), with, as Tim Adams put it in the Observer, “his full ironist’s swagger”? Or to have imagined the last 24 hours of 9/11 terrorist Mohamed Atta in The Second Plane in 2008?

In his crusade for fine writing and his declaration of war on cliché, Amis made everyone up their game. Over the years, critics have fallen over themselves trying to outsmart Mart: lobbing hyperbole and volleying adverbs (Amis was a huge tennis fan). “So just how good is Martin Amis?” “Why do we love to hate Amis?” they would come out, strutting, pistols cocked. But Amis was already in the bar.

For a time, he seemed happy to fill the role of novelist as public intellectual. He riffed elegantly on everything from the porn industry to the Royal family. “He is always

putting it up to you somehow, making the reader feel brilliant too. Or a bit stupid,” wrote Anne Enright of his collection of criticism The Rub of Time in 2017. “This is the best fun going when everyone is drunk, as they seemed to be in the 1980s, and literary London was like one long dinner party in which everyone knew where you went to school.”

Inevitably, the poster-boy turned into a target, and at one point Amis the dazzling young stylist looked in danger of being overshadowed by Amis the grumpy old controversialist, with ill-judged comments on Islamism and euthanasia. But after what he called an “eisteddfod of hostility” from the British press and his move to New York, he largely reserved his opinions for his writing. He was planning a collection of short stories on the subject of slavery in the US - “boy will I cop it,” he said in a recent Guardian interview - as well as returning to the Third Reich for a third time with a “modest novella”. And yet, despite many years as

Britain’s foremost literary celebrity and contrarian, Amis somehow managed never to win the Booker (he was only shortlisted for Time’s Arrow) nor to be cancelled.

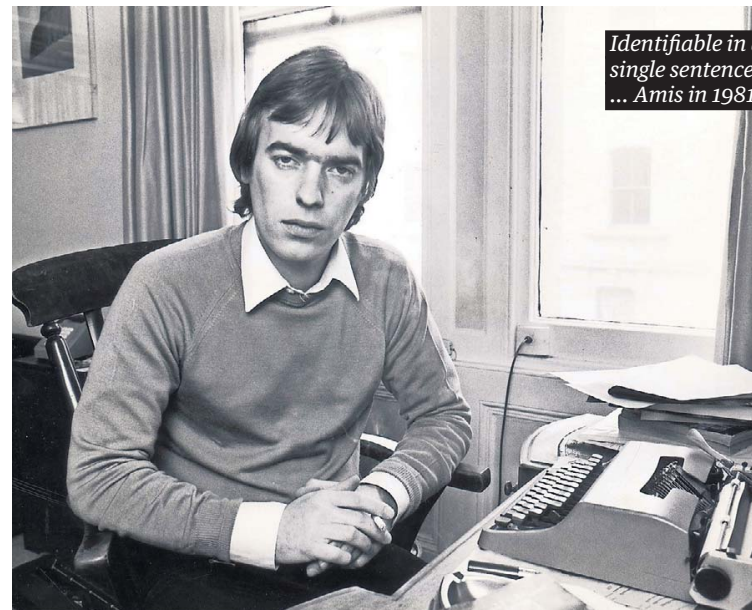
Of his instinct to shock, he observed: “Every novel worth reading is funny and serious. Anyone who’s any good is going to be funny. It’s the nature of life. Life is funny.” And it is clear from the irrepressible punchiness of his prose that he had a blast writing. “It seems to me a hilariously enjoyable way of spending one’s time,” he said. And so, at his daring comic best, he was great fun to read.

The insolence, the silliness, the seriousness, the grotesqueness, the erudition and audacity were all swept up in those inimitable sentences and corralled into order by his cleverness with form. As Enright summed up in her review: “Damn, that fool can write.” And, like an imposing building slightly worn with time, Amis changed the landscape of literature so dramatically that it is hard to remember what it looked like before. And for all the macho-ness of his writing, his influence can be seen in writers of the generation that followed, for instance his friend Zadie Smith.

“He was a talismanic figure for my generation of novelists, and an inspiration to me personally,” says another friend, Kazuo Ishiguro. “He was famous, notorious even, for his biting satire and swaggering prose, but there was always a surprising tenderness not far beneath that surface. His characters were always yearning for love and connection. I believe ultimately his work will age well, growing over the years.” We will be reading him for decades, weather permitting.

But to go back to 2009 and Amis’s closing words on Updike: “His style was one of compulsive and unstoppable vividness and musicality. Several times a day you turn to him, as you will now to his ghost, and say to yourself, ‘How would Updike have done it?’ This is a very cold day for literature.”

And so it is today. Younger writers will ask: “How would Amis have done it?” He was exceptionally *sui generis*.



Identifiable in a single sentence ... Amis in 1981

‘A ferociously intelligent and very funny writer’

Amis saw the world’s cruel absurdities through a comic lens, says his great friend and fellow novelist **William Boyd**. His unique voice will never be forgotten

The awful news of Martin Amis’s death prompts a rush of memories. I first met him in 1969, in Paris, when we both found ourselves staying in the same apartment on the Île Saint-Louis for a few days. I was 17, Martin was 20. I only realised who this Martin guy was four years later when his first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, appeared. In a strange but real sense, he was the first writer I had ever met. And thus began an acquaintance as an avid reader and later as a friend.

The remarkable thing about that first novel was the utter confidence and distinctiveness of the narrative voice. Martin found his style at the very beginning of his career as a writer and it never changed. That voice he had defined and charged everything else he wrote - fiction, essays, journalism, memoirs. Very few writers can be instantly identified by a sentence or two of their prose - Laurence Sterne, Charles Dickens, James Joyce, DH

Lawrence, Vladimir Nabokov - and Martin precociously joined that elite group and stayed there. His style became his unmistakable signature. And there was also the wit and humour. He identified himself as a comic writer, however serious his subject matter. He saw the world and its cruel absurdities through a comic lens. He was a very, very funny writer as well as a ferociously intelligent one and that should never be forgotten.

Because of the wonderful energies and original allure of his writing style, Martin became, over the decades that followed his first novel, a kind of exemplar of the contemporary British novelist, though he was not necessarily happy in that role. Having Kingsley Amis as his father also contributed: Martin was the one easiest to point to; the one easiest to place on a pedestal. And with good reason, in fact, because Martin was inimitable as a writer - though many people tried to imitate him, of course. That is his great legacy to literature and our great loss.

“He was planning a series of short stories about slavery in the US. ‘Boy will I cop it,’ he said



Five of the best

From Ronald Reagan’s hair to reviews that outlived the books they were about

Money (1984)

Ad-man John Self shuttles on the red-eye between London and New York, trying to make his first movie, but his appetite for booze, porn and fast food (he’s “addicted to the 20th century”) leads to his self-destruction. A 400-page riff with

“oodles of dash and heft and twang”, stuffed with unforgettable set pieces, Money is a comic masterpiece underpinned with sadness. *In a nutshell: his best novel; it’s not even close*

The Moronic Inferno (1986)

Amis loved America - “more like a world than a country” - and eventually settled there. This collection of interviews and journalism shows him at once wide-eyed with wonder (“What’s he got?” he asks of Steven Spielberg. “How

do you do it? Can I have some?”) and aptly sceptical: Kurt Vonnegut is a “playful infantlist”; Ronald Reagan’s “hair can’t be a day over 45”. *In a nutshell: capital entertainment on the world’s entertainment capital*

The Information (1995)

There’s a gentleness to the third part of Amis’s “London trilogy”. Hopeless, hapless writer Richard Tull hates his bestselling best friend Gwyn Barry and determines to “fuck [him] up”. It’s a comedy steeped in the approach of death, but still has

time to observe blossoms falling “in festive and hysterical profusion, as if all the trees were getting married”. *In a nutshell: his most underrated novel*

Experience (2000)

“My life looked good on paper - where, in fact, almost all of it was being lived.” Amis’s memoir introduced us to a kinder, more humane man - “easily moved to tears” - than we expected from the novels. His account of his father Kingsley’s death is exceptional.

In a nutshell: Amis for people who don’t like Amis

The War Against Cliche (2001)

Probably the most thumbed volume of essays and reviews on the shelves of Amis-admirers. He’s honest about some boring classics - Don Quixote is like “an indefinite visit from your most impossible senior relative” - and in many cases, his reviews have outlived the books they’re about. *In a nutshell: the most re-readable and best value Amis*

John Self