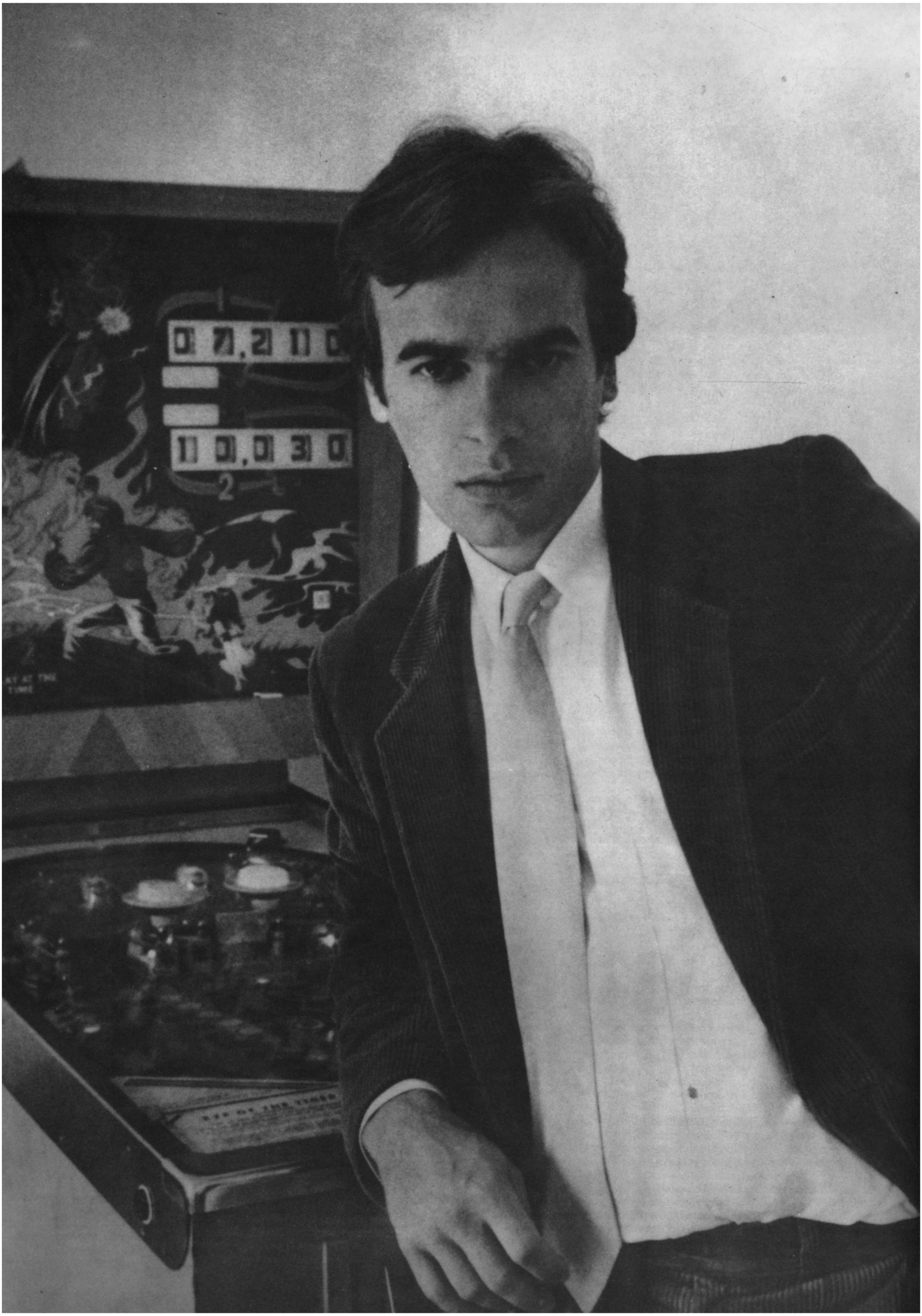

Interview by Patrick McGrath

MARTIN AMIS

Martin Amis is the author of a book of essays and five novels, of which the last, *Money*, is a vividly black comedy set in New York and London, featuring the misadventures of a large and ugly filmmaker named John Self, a man 'addicted to the 20th century.' I talked to Martin Amis in his working sock in Westbourne Park, and despite much scurrilous yuppie journalism to the contrary he is a nice man.

Patrick McGrath: I'd like to quote something you wrote about London in *Money*. John Self is speaking and he says, "Blasted, totalled, broken-winded, shot-faced London, doing time under sodden skies." But when he mentions New York, he has a somewhat more affectionate attitude, I think. He speaks of America as being "a vigorous mongrel."
Martin Amis: Yes, that's all slightly ironic. I think *Money* makes a break from the English tradition of sending a foreigner abroad in that (a) John Self is half American, and (b) as a consequence cannot be scandalized by America. You know the usual *Pooterish* Englishman who goes abroad in English novels and is taken aback by everything. Well, not a bit of that in John Self. He completely accepts America on its own terms and is perfectly at home with it. A bit shocked at some things, like taxi meters on ambulances. Personally,I love New York. I did find though that my attitude changed overnight when I went there with my wife and child. I just thought, "Well, it's a great place to be by yourself but when you've got your personal tribe with you, it's hard to relax." Everyone's windmilling around in this neurotic state. Some are just not up to it and are coming apart at the seams. When you stroll alone down the streets of New York, you take this on as part of the deal. But when you're wheeling someone that's four months old, it's rather more of an undertaking. It was actually in Cape Cod that I really fell out of love with America, even as I was experiencing it at its best. My wife's American and we were staying at her father's shack in Cape Cod. Provincial America can be wonderful. But then the child got ill. We got out the yellow pages—I'd seen these little greed parlors all over the place, these sort of drive-in health studios or whatever they are. We rang round to all of them and none of them would let us bring him in because it was a weekend and they were all golfing. You realize they're not doctors at all, they're people who hold the health concession on that little bit of the island. Health entrepreneurs is what they are. The baby was in a terrible state and we were in a terrible state. The next day we drove to New York, with him in a bad way. True, once you're in New York, it's a bit better; it costs a lot of money, as it does in Cape Cod, but at least it's there. I think that explains the poor morale of ordinary Americans. On that particular trip I was researching a long piece on AIDS that I wrote. It was being reinforced in me all the time, that when something bad happens to you in America it's a double disaster because they always clean you out financially. That's a terrible aid to neurosis.
PM: You'd finished *Money* by this point.
MA: Yes. In fact, *Money* was coming out. I'd noticed it before but it had never really struck me. You feel things so much more fearfully through your children. You take your own chances but when there's a child . . . it's the only developed country in the world, apart from South Africa, that doesn't offer a pretty good health safety net to its citizens and they don't seem to think that's odd. Have you heard about Joseph Heller's book about his illness?
PM: Yes.
MA: There were 250 pages of this stuff without it occurring to anyone that it's a grotesque system to promote. It cost terrible anxiety to Joseph Heller. One of his premiums had run out through sheer inadvertence. If he had just paid one $20 premium he would have had another $40,000 in coverage. He minds about that but he doesn't mind about the system. We all know that illness is very tied up with how your morale is generally and here you are getting charged for every kleenex. Of course Reagan is another reason for looking askance at America at the moment.
PM: The only tenderness and kindness John Self receives is in New York. In London he's treated pretty consistently with duplicity and brutality—by his lover, his supposed father, his step brother. . .
MA: Even by me. Even by the Martin Amis character.
PM: Even by you.
MA: Yeah, he's more at home there. I didn't follow all the implications of that. Although he does say at one point that if you're completely ruined in New York, people just think you're European and artistic—like when he goes to address that meeting of the moneymen in some hotel. He opens his mouth to start giving his spiel about how successful the film is going to be, and he starts making a noise that reminds him of trying to squeeze the last bits of tomato sauce out of a plastic tube. It's a terrible wheezing sound. And he sort of staggers into the bathroom and explodes and has to be helped into the Autocrat (the limo). At which point he says, "I don't think I did myself any harm. They probably just think I'm a bit of a genius." The reason he feels at home in New York is because of class, I suppose. There are people in England who do terribly well and even lead quite a patrician life, ride to hounds and have a very good collection of first editions and a good wine cellar—for whom every second of their lives is completely poisoned by the thought of their inferiority in class matters. John Self would never have felt okay in England but he might just have pulled it off with himself in America.
PM: In much of your work we find a contest between a suave upper-class decadent and an uppity yob, with no middle class in sight. And it seems the yobs are winning. There's a lovely scene in *Money* where John Self and his partners go out to lunch in a good restaurant. There's a respectable couple at a nearby table. . .
MA: Backing off with napkins round their necks.
PM: There's no hope. They're driven out as the lads get on with spraying champagne at each other. . .
MA: . . . and singing "We are the Champions". . .
PM: . . . and then falling into perplexed silence when the menus arrive.
MA: Yes, as if over examination scripts. I think that's a characteristic of mine, to leave out the middle class. Either a weakness or a shortcoming or at any rate an empty space. It's really because I don't seem to be interested in the norm so much as the extremes. It's something you begin to notice after you've written about three or four books. You look at the book you're writing and it's the same sort of thing. The novel I'm currently writing has a nuke background, but it's the same old story. There's a Dickensian lout who works as a cheat in London. That's his job.
PM: He's a cheat?
MA: Yeah. And there's a remnant of the upper classes who's sitting very uneasily on a pile of the dirtiest money there is. I mean, all money is dirty if you go back far enough. Someone in a sweatshop somewhere. And there's this girl that they're clashing over. So I think I'll probably go on writing like that right until the end. With regard to the upper-class figure, I think the idea of having confidence is in the margin of all my books: and being on top of things is finally identified in *Money* as being a cry for help. Confidence is an entirely inappropriate response to the sort of world we live in. But I think, too, that my imagination is very much rooted in the shuffling, unattractive figure.
PM: John Self winds up as a tramp, though there's the possibility that he will rise again.

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I've never understood why the idea of literature as religion was demolished so quickly.

MA: Yes, he gets a foothold just before the last gulch. I regard that as, in fact, my happiest ending so far.
PM: In the sense that John Self has a moral career and that there is a faint, tentative hope for him?
MA: Yes.
PM: That it will continue.
MA: Also that it did him a lot of good to be deprived of money. Which is the great fear of the world of money. And in fact, he bursts out of the novel in the end.
PM: Yes, he's all in italics.
MA: He was really meant to die but in fact he clawed his way out of the novel. John Self . . . One of the ways I manage this business of having a doltish narrator and yet writing at full steam is a quite simple device which I realized Saul Bellow was using in *Henderson the Rain King*. Henderson has the most elaborate and poetic thoughts, but every time he opens his mouth to speak, it's drivel. So everything in quoted speech is faintly embarrassing and tongue-tied, but the thoughts are allowed full justice.
PM: There's a moment when John Self marvels at the rewards of a relationship with a mature and graceful woman. He says: "It seems that all you've got to do to them is be nice, and candid, and faithful, and you get all this. What a deal." Is that the zenith of his moral career?
MA: (laughter) Yes. He's limited by thinking that everything is a deal. And he's flummoxed because she doesn't seem to want anything from him, he thinks it's sick that all she wants is friendship; she hasn't got any designs on him. I think it's all a bit hedged with irony. It's fairly clear that he doesn't know what he's missing out on. So there is a dormant morality. And, in fact, he never actually gets away with anything really bad. For instance when he attempts to rape his girlfriend Selina. It's meant to be fairly horrible in a comic way, but after the first attempt he calms down and apologizes. Then there's a line break and a new paragraph; and he says: "Then I tried to rape her again." Not learning from mistakes is one thing, but it's fairly carefully fixed that his attempts at real wrongdoing always rebound on him very quickly.
PM: Do you think this is why he's likable? Because otherwise he's a big, fat, ugly, greedy, violent man and there's no real reason to like him apart from the fact that he does fail and is victimized.
MA: I never had any doubts about him of course. I always adored him. I was pretty suprised that in America, particularly—America is not noted for a sense of irony—they had absolutely no trouble with him. But one or two reviewers in London, even intelligent reviewers, said that it is really very depressing, which I couldn't understand because I thought the book erred on the side of mad exuberance really. He's not very nice, it's true, but he's certainly generous, and he wants to get rid of all this money that he's somehow got hold of. He gives money away in the street. He's capable of generous thoughts. I think Updike said a good thing about this. He said it's very mysterious what we like and don't like in fictional characters. And he said what we like in the end, I suspect, is life. If they've got that, it doesn't matter. There's a bit of Nabokov that's very good on this too. He says that actually you don't punish villains, you certainly don't anymore, you show them wiggling a matchstick in a profitable nostril, you show them as ridiculous, and that's much better than portraying them as tiptoeing conspirators.
PM: You've written plenty of unlikable villains, though.
MA: I'm not sure how likable the one I'm doing at the moment is. Not very, would be my answer. One of the funny things that's happening in literature is that the genres are getting a bit distorted. Now it seems clear to me that I'm basically a comic writer. The shape of my novels are all comic, or anti-comic, but certainly not anything else, not tragic or even satirical. Whereas the butts of 18th or 19th century comedy were pedantry and pretension, particularly pretension, now the butts of comedy are criminals, wrongdoers. Dickens wouldn't be comic about his villains, for instance, and Jane Austen always gets very earnest when talking about villainy. The comic novel now seems to have gone into spaces formerly occupied by other sorts of writing, such as the melodrama; and nasty types are just laughed at. Though I think you can make everything very clear with style. *Lolita* is a very good example—you can see Nabokov really searching for the worst possible thing you can do to someone, and there's absolutely no ambiguity about that, even though the style *gloats* about everything.
PM: You're clearly fascinated with transgressors. Why is this?
MA: I don't know. The novel I'm writing at the moment is about a murder and it's not a whodunnit, it's a who'll-do-it, because the female character is that rare and possibly non-existent type of woman, a murderee—she arranges her own murder.
PM: Consciously and deliberately?
MA: Consciously and deliberately, yeah. It has to happen on a particular night. I think, in my case, and maybe this is terrible laxity—but what puzzles me is not my characters doing it, it's why I make them do it. Someone wrote a thesis about me. I don't think there are many, but she wrote asking if she could talk to me about it, and the title was so good I said sure. It was, *Victimization in the Novels of Martin Amis*. And I thought, "Jesus, man, she's ripped the hard covers off me!" And there is something in that. I wonder what I'm up to that I must arrange these things. What does it mean morally? Is one accountable for it? Because it's so clear to me that it's *not* happening, that it's my invention, and that perhaps I don't really consider what the characters are up to. Again, maybe it's the impacting and compacting, the whole process. How dare I do it?, is the way I feel. And then you have this very troublesome analogy, the equivalence of the writer and the godlike figure, in that they are entirely on a par. In *Other People*, the narrator is the murderer and the writer and the murderer are equivalent in that each has the power to knock Amy Hide off. Then, in this next novel, where there is a nuclear crisis going on, with the same old snap of my fingers I can have that happen too.
PM: You played a game of chess with John Self at the end of *Money*, and it was a very close game really. It was an exquisite game and he lost only because he had the last move.
MA: The chess game is parallel to the tennis game that occurs earlier in the book, Self is physically humiliated by Fielding and then mentally humiliated by me, as it were. What I enjoyed about putting myself in the book was that it was still John Self narrating. So, while Martin Amis was spouting off about the accountability of the author in fiction, and so on, John Self would be thinking about his toothache or his car. I do think that John Self is a representative figure and I don't want to say the *id* or anything like that. But he's who you are when you think no-one is looking. And the great, the horrible joke of the novel is that there's always someone looking. He is never just being a monster of sloth in his flat. And in a sense the novel is a suicide note in which he's offering this information.
PM: Yes, the bathroom Self. And his sins are to a large extent bathroom sins. His carnality and his excess are very private sins, aren't they? Victimless sins for the most part.
MA: Naturally, masturbatory. The element of lone gratification is bluntly stressed, as he says, in all his hobbies. And the drinking and the eating end up as bathroom events. He says at one point, "What did I do last night? I never meant me any harm." He is the victim of all his crimes.
PM: Do you think he'll return in your work?
MA: I don't think so. It's not entirely impossible. Something would have to come along that only he could narrate, for instance. You keep thinking you've come to the end of a certain vein. When I wrote *Other People*, which is the odd one out among my books, everyone said, "He's finally got all that adolescent nonsense behind him, let's see how he does now." And then—straight back, in *much* more detail than ever, in *Money*. I don't think many writers have an awful lot of versatility. There are these amazing virtuosos like Anthony Burgess, but even then virtuosity becomes the thing.

PM: One motive that recurs again and again is the mortality of the body—the rotting, the decaying, the baldness, the toothaches and so on.
MA: Hefty reminders of corporeal nature. I'm always amazed by how successfully we do in fact banish all that from daily discourse. We all have our little dramas in the bathroom most days. Something's not quite right. You can see the way a certain bit is going. And we've all got our back pains and our kneeaches and so on, and yet people can spend the whole day together and it's never mentioned—everyone's got their little cargo of health anxieties, their little cargo of entropy. I wonder why I've gone on about it so much because it's only in the last year or two that every time you bend over your age seems to come all at once. I play tennis a lot and suddenly instead of adding to your vigor, playing tennis subtracts from your vigor. So some evenings you're sitting around thinking "Oh, I feel really good today. Wonder why that is?" And then you realize it's because you didn't play tennis. It's a one way street really. In John Updike's new novel he says it's rather depressing when you realize that, genetically speaking, we deliver our mail very early in the day. The rest is hanging around . . . my father is certainly making that subject his own. There's a chap in his new novel that's so fat he has to clip his toenails in the garden. There's no way around it. With a mirror in the garden. But I think actually I really like decay because it's just comic. And again, it's an attack on dignity and competence.
PM: Are you close to finishing a new book?
MA: I've in fact finished a new book. Just handed it in. I wrote five short stories on the trot, which is more than I'd ever done before, and although it wasn't clear to me at once, they all turned out to be about the same thing, nuclear weapons. So I wrote a long introduction about nuclear weapons, and to my surprise it was a book. It clearly was. I'm also halfway through a novel, which has been going on for a couple of years now. Also set slightly in the future and with a nuclear theme or background. One of the things that struck me while writing the introduction to the stories is actually how difficult nuclear weapons are to write about. As evidenced by the fact that the major writers of a generation ago who lived through the strange metamorphosis between a non-nuclear and a nuclear world, who were there when it all changed, didn't, on the whole, write about it. With some hefty exceptions. In the end one attributes that to the power of the subject in that it couldn't be taken in all at once. It resisted being written about, perhaps until the generation who had lived their whole lives under them came of age. It's the one evolutionary thing that I'm absolutely clear has happened in this century. Post-1945 life is completely different from everything that came before it. We are like no other people in history. We somehow got ourselves on this great wobbling ladder thousands and thousands of feet above the ground. The thing is, how do you get down? Rung by rung? Or do you say the ladder was never there? And it is all so grotesque and fantastic that it's tempting to say that the ladder is just an illusion. These things are completely unusable. That's where the insane hubris comes in—the fact that you think you can enslave this cosmic force. It's clear instantly that we have become enslaved by it.
PM: How do you write about this without becoming didactic?
MA: Exactly. Well, the introduction to this book, for instance, is quite long, and it is didactic, even though I don't ever come out and say what I think should be done about it, although I do have some ideas brewing. That's why I think what you write about has to be partly accidental. And it was in my case. I feel the nuclear scene is a background that sneaks up on you as a writer. A background that insidiously foregrounds itself by the time the story or the novel is done. I don't think you can address it head on. If you try and look at it between the eyes, all you can say really is that you love your family, and what is this monstrous novelty you must consider? And I don't think you can get very far with that. One of the things, one of the handles on it, I believe, is that human beings and, in fact, humanity, have already been very gravely altered by the threat, by the possibility, by the change in the evolutionary pathway nuclear weapons represent. I think nukes are responsible for a very great many modern defamations, things that make you reel back from tabloid newspapers—"What the hell is *that* all about?"—some raping of a ninety-year-old woman. Our ideas about what it is to be human are much changed by it already. It's a very good point that Jonathan Schell makes in *The Fate of the Earth* when he says there won't be any experience of nuclear war. All it will be is different kinds of death. And it will take place in a world without discourse anyway. So *this* is nuclear war. What we're having *now* is nuclear war. Because it's the anticipation of it, that's the only kind of experience that anyone's going to get . . . It's not a bad war so far. There's plenty of stuff in the fridge I suppose. But psychologically, psychically, it's happening now.
PM: Are you moving away from that concern with individual morality that's present in the last few books? That concern with the venality, the corruption that comes in a character like John Self from simply choosing to do the bad thing when he knows he could do otherwise. Does that get dwarfed as you deal with nuclear issues?
MA: Yes, I think it's bound to. But then nuclear weapons are at heart a moral area. One of the things about writing about nuclear weapons is that I suspect I've been writing about them all along.
PM: How so?
MA: Well, people ask me—I've never asked myself—why do you see the world as being such a grotesque, venal, sordid place? I can now say, 'Well, that's one of the reasons.' For example, you can't believe in a central authority that's sitting round making plans for 50 million dead. Once that's happening, then morality just tumbles right down from the top. If at the top morality is so unreal, then this is going to have a pyramid effect right on down. Of course, there's a danger of submitting to one idea and explaining everything in terms of it. But for the time being, it works as worldview. Aligned to this world view is the entropy business. People ask me, "Do you really think the world is getting worse?" I came up with a perfectly good paragraph-sized explanation as to why the world always seems worse even if it isn't. Which is that clearly, demonstrably, even if the world is not getting worse all the time, it's getting less innocent. It's getting more beaten up, raddled, older. Everything it's been through before . . . You know, people say, "It seemed just as bad in the 19th century." Yes, well maybe it did, but we've had all that now. We've suffered all that and now we're suffering all this. And every day there's more, we take on more. The world is like a human being. And there's a scientific name for it, which is entropy—everything tends towards disorder. From an ordered state to a disordered state.
PM: So you would say that the past was probably a bit less bad than the present because we hadn't quite got so far.
MA: It was less bad, yes. I think it was a lot less bad five hundred years ago. Less bad things had been done. I look at it as an aggregate really.

Confidence is an entirely inappropriate response to the sort of world we live in.

PM: Evil accumulates?
MA: Evil takes it out of you. Evil's always been winning.
PM: Why should evil keep on winning?
MA: Perhaps because the brain is partly reptilian. I have a rather schmaltzy notion of human potentiality which is, in fact, embodied in literature.
PM: How do you mean?
MA: It's a commonplace that literature evolves in a certain way but it doesn't improve. It just stays there. It's a model. I think literature has not just been about, but embodies: the best. The best that humans can do.
PM: The best moral thought?
MA: The best moral thought. The representation of humanity at the crest of itself. Something like that. In fact, I've never understood why the idea of literature as religion was demolished so quickly. It seems to me that would be a tenable way of looking at it. It's a constant, making something out of the present and the past at the same time. Certainly an elitist thing, there's no question about that. But it's an elite open to everyone.
PM: Do you see it decaying alongside everything else?
MA: Literature? No. I mean, they say the novel is dead. Well, try and stop people writing novels. Or poems. There's no stopping people. I suppose it's conceivable that no one will know how to spell in 50 years' time, but not while the books are still there. You don't need a structure. The autodidact is omnipresent in fiction. ■