

On Communists, Nazis and Many Other Topics

Martin Amis

*Elizabeth Roberts talks to Martin Amis
on Communists, Nazis and many other topics*

Interview

Martin Amis[1] is both a best-selling British novelist in his own right, and the son of one of Britain's most famous and successful post-WWII novelists, Kingsley Amis[2]. Martin Amis was the founder in his youth of what has proved a lucrative, persistent and fruitfully varied modern tendency in British letters: "ladlit", – novels about "asserting virility"[3] or "mildly pornographic"[4]. His darkly satirical sometimes macabre novels depict the contemporary world as being in a period of moral decadence and decay. A prime example of Amis's early style is *Money – a Suicide Note* (1984), written in a vibrant slang largely of his own invention, "the story of John Self, who is beating a retreat to London after several weeks of major degeneracy in New York". Martin Amis hit the headlines when he was reported to have signed the first £1 million advance for a book, and was then unfairly mocked in the popular press for spending a major initial tranche of the money on dental treatment in America. Martin Amis is also a concerned critic and commentator on – for example – the Holocaust and the threat of nuclear war. Amis's best recent book, in the opinion of many, is *Experience* (2000)[5] – an autobiographical memoir that bears comparison with that of one of his literary heroes: *Speak, Memory* by Vladimir Nabokov[6].

His most recent book of non-fiction is *Koba the Dread – laughter and the twenty million*. At its heart is a long section about the Lenin-Stalin terror: there is a picture of a grinning Stalin on the front cover of the book. *Koba*, unlike most of Amis's novels, was not well received by the British literary press. Reviewers were – fairly or unfairly – (given the wilful and widespread ignorance of the subject in the West outside specialist circles) scornful of his candour in admitting that he knew very little about the crimes of the Soviet period in Russia. Or they fixed on peripheral aspects of the book, which are concerned with his best friend and contemporary Christopher Hitchens[7], a self-proclaimed and unrepentant Trotskyist and the death of Amis's younger sister. Somewhere along the way, the message that no-one in the West is prepared to face squarely up to the central mystery of the love affair of the Western Intelligentsia with the Left – however pernicious in its consequences – was lost.

Amis at the time of this interview (early December 2002) was three quarters of the way through a new novel, a black comedy which he started before the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 on targets in the USA. His house is in a part of

London on the north-eastern edge of Regent's Park, a quarter much favoured by Britain's literary and artistic elite: amongst his near neighbours he counts Alan Bennett and Michael Frayn both fluent Russian speakers from their National Service days.

When I arrived at the Amis's house (he is married to the writer and literary journalist Isabel Fonseca), his youngest child, 3-year old Clio (named after the muse of history), was asleep under a coat on the kitchen settle, having earlier in the day narrowly escaped serious injury to her fingers while playing with the lid of a newly-delivered grand piano. A nanny and a secretary made brief appearances. A piano tuner was at work in the ground floor drawing room. An enormous 6-metre long saw, liberated according to Amis from an Italian workshop, adorns the wall behind the piano. Large abstract paintings by various members of Isabel's family hang on other walls. We go through the basement kitchen and out across a small paved back garden, to a study-writing room lined with books and with a laptop open on the desk.

ER: What struck me when I read that first excerpt from *Koba the Dread* in *The Guardian* was that at last somebody who would be listened to was tackling this question: why it is considered amusing (in Britain) to have been a Communist but disgraceful to have been a Nazi?

MA: Yes. And its all still there. And the way the book was received shall we say reflected that... That bias..

ER: Yes

MA: It's caused me to think again as well. And I just... I've read Robert Conquest's[8] *Reflections on a Ravaged Century*. There's a longish chapter... On a great good in captivation – a vast subject; of people getting it wrong. We always think intellectuals have the real prowess of wrong-headedness but it wasn't just intellectuals. Businessmen, sociologists, every kind of academic. Businessmen sunk millions into the Soviet Union and lost them, so it wasn't just a sort of dreamy misapprehension. And one can only conclude because the evidence goes on and on – its mind boggling in its perversity, really – that you have to assume that its at this particular stage of human evolution, that its in human nature to feel the bias towards the Left. Perhaps it was more in the nature of human... of humanity, of humankind centuries ago to feel part of a hierarchy, to take your satisfaction from obeying orders. And passing them on perhaps. And religion is an enormous manifestation of servility in the human being. But post-Enlightenment, the bias seems very much embedded the other way. And that's really all I can... you know... That seems to be the next stage of understanding that nature. And I had to examine my own feelings. The Left is where very largely... where creativity seems to come from in the post-Enlightenment era. So it's very hard to imagine an appropriate indignation for the Soviet Union in particular. Where the experiment went on for so long... and I do sort of get round to saying in the very last pages of the book that its... this is the joke: that human nature sets out to create a utopia and so quickly does it become a dystopia. But that's human nature too.

ER: Have you been to Russia?

MA: No. China...

ER: Are you drawn to Russian culture? As such?

MA: Not a sort of fanatical interest. As E.M. Forster said: “the English novel fears – is a bit wary of – the Russian novel and the French novel, whereas English poetry fears no man. But I do think we fear the Russian novel. It is the greatest expression of the form”.

ER: Was it deliberate, your calling one of your chapters *A Letter to A Friend* – *deliberately* after Gogol’s?

MA: Yes. I feel that the Russian novel is an enormous mentor in my life.

ER: Can we talk a little bit about your life? I was taken by your description of yourself as “a quietist”[9]. Are you still “a quietist”?

MA: Well I think everything’s changed. I think everything really has changed since 11 September. And quietism has been removed from the menu really. And I do feel actively not just anti-Islamism but anti-religion in general. It’s the same thing. Belief systems are our enemy. I wrote in a piece recently that the old argument about if God existed and if God were an eye and omnipotent – the usual thing – why does he give us plagues and famines. And I said that if God existed and cared about us he wouldn’t have given us religion. Which almost feels like a proof of the non-existence of God. That religion should be such a baleful thing[10]. Not just Islam but for instance the Catholic Church. What I said about that is that’s been going on for a millennium and a half. There’s something terribly dangerous about people as spiritual guides to others.

ER: How do you fulfil your need for a spiritual leg to your table?

MA: Well I used to do it via reading about cosmology. Which as you know no doubt is far more chilling and grand than religion – than any creation myth. And through literature and poetry.

ER: It seems to me that you’ve been trying to account in some places recently for the existence of evil. You know, the account of your cousin’s death[11] and Stalin.

MA: Well, yes. I quote Anthony Burgess as saying that as a Catholic, as he then was, as a new convert said that there’s no A.J. P. Taylorish[12] kind of explanation for what happened in Europe in the early years of the war – indeed the late years of the war. That nihilistic explosion of violence... the Holocaust. But I’ve got a suspicion – and that’s all it can be, a suspicion, it’s... um... I don’t think I do believe in evil as a sort of active force but I think death can get going; death can get rolling and create its own momentum. The analogy is, you know, in a particular murder you’re always reading about some wretch who’s stabbed someone a hundred and twenty three times. Why the hundred and twenty three? Because once you’ve done the first one, you have to justify that by doing the second one. And the first one sort of legitimises the second one and the second one confirms the rightness of the first one and then it becomes just sort of a frenzy. But I think that happens numerically with death too. That once it gets going, the value of human life sort of disappears. And Islamism, by which I mean Al-Quaeda, is attempting an unbelievably radical re-assessment of what life and death are. Death isn’t death, it’s something else. And life isn’t life either. A document found in the luggage of one of the 11 September hijackers contained the admonition – it was a bit of Islamist propaganda to stiffen the resolve of the hijackers – which said “Prepare yourself to leave that thing which is called “World”. Marvellously gruesome notion. I mean... «world», «life» is just a thing on the way to somewhere else. Infidels by definition are not worthy of life and the good Islamist is merely sort of getting past this great illusion called «World» to the true goal, which is Death. Enormously alien belief system.

Interesting, too, to follow it up, – because it wasn't in people's minds and I'd really finished the book by the time 11 September happened so I added a footnote about it: that the radicalisation of Islam is another crime of Lenin and Stalin. Religion but also Islam throughout south Central Asia, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan etc – they murdered clerics, prohibited even private worship and of course you can't eradicate religion, all you can do is radicalise it. That's what they did. And those who know say that the next great hell house on the planet is going to be south-central Asia.

ER: Do you discuss these things with friends?... I mean if Al-Quaeda dropped a bomb on this part of London, they'd probably wipe out the flower of English writing, you and the others who live near here... do you mix with other writers, do you meet others writers socially?

MA: Yes, most of my very close friends are writers.

ER: And do conversations tend to be more about this sort of thing than perhaps they were ten years ago?

MA: Yes. Or two years ago. Because after this weird hiatus between '91 and 2001 – the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Mutually Assured Deterrence (MAD) notion, which was apocalyptic, – then there was 11 years of... there was no attempt to capitalise on that evolutionary victory of coming through from the knowledge that $E=Mc^2$, then having this essentially preposterous arrangement whereby two superpowers make preparations to destroy the other and therefore themselves. If there were many worlds then you'd expect a healthy percentage of them not to pass that test; to have a nuclear winter and a huge reverse to civilization. But we didn't do that. We sort of blundered through. Then 11 years of feeling that genuine... another Enlightenment of a kind but now plunged back to unappeasable struggle, irrationalist struggle...

(the phone rings and MA answers it)

MA *(returning to the interview)*: It's snowing in New York.

ER: So, will your new novel reflect these thoughts, these feelings?

MA: Yes, but not in any way head on. It's actually a comic novel, largely. Sort of satirical. But it's in the background. I started it, started sketching it before I wrote *Koba*. It was strange going back to it after 11 September – that's when I started work on it again. And, I was thinking, certain paragraphs just didn't stand at all. (For instance) a description of happiness – middle-aged happiness – I'd actually written that happiness is a sort of paranoiac state; that when times are tough, you sort of hunker down and you're ready to take a few knocks. "But when you're happy, you expect an aeroplane to land on your head"...

ER: You'd written that?

MA: Yes, I'd written that.

ER: Spooky.

MA: It is spooky. So I squirmed about a bit but almost at once I decided that the comic novel was the right response. Not that there are any rights or wrongs but it was good that one's fighting spirit should take the form of humour whatever else we face with this adversary, massive humourouslessness is a part of it. And it's a part of what they can't bear. And what they fear most is being laughed at.

ER: When you write, do you have episodes when you're, like taking dictation...

MA: It can be like that, yes... But then that's on your first draft. You're writing as fast as you can, you know – the hand whizzing across the page. But when you

go back to that – when I do – to the second draft it's not good enough. You might have thought you were taking dictation but actually it was a sort of rough dictation. And then it needs artifice applied to it. And usually it needs a whole other dimension brought to it. It's not enough, the stuff you write fast. Occasionally you can get a lucky paragraph that can stand. But I mean there's always at least as much grindstone as inspiration.

ER: Were you upset by the reviews of "*Koba the Dread*"?

MA: Well, yeah, I had a general sense of getting mauled. But I didn't read much of it. And what kept me from getting distracted or incapacitated by disapprobation was going on working at the novel and making that the main thing. Regarding it a sideshow.

ER: When I read it and re-read it, it seemed to me that you were... I mean... obviously you were tackling the mystery of why people like your father became Communists. I mean he was a member of the Party for 15 years.

MA: I think he was pretty lapsed by the end. But he didn't renounce it until... (stops to think)

ER: Hungary? Yes, that was the great moment...

MA: Yes.

ER: When Hugh McDairmid[13] joined.

MA: When he joined, yes!

(quote from *Koba* of a conversation between Amis and his father:

"And what's his stuff like?" I asked.

"Oh you know. Nothing but Marxist clichés interspersed with "archaic" "Scotch" expletives.")

MA: He'd been banned for being too extreme, but so many people left in '56, he was allowed back in (laughing) to make up the numbers.

ER: I think I told you when I first wrote to you after I'd read the first excerpt (of *Koba*) in the *Guardian* that I went to a lecture only this February (2002) by a man who is a professor at Glasgow University who was still saying how wonderfully funny it was, and wonderful, that MacDiarmid was writing these things about stringing up landowners from lampposts as if it was a literary... a kind of device, rather than something that was, actually *had* happened and continues to happen under Communism. I mean, these people are actually incorrigible. This is the deep mystery, I think. I would take issue with you – somewhere in the book you say that this went on until the 1970s or maybe the 1990s. But I think it goes on...

MA: Yes, well, I think, the letters I've had... I've had one or two from politicians who say it's completely endemic... all political things in Europe are always biased to the left on every issue left position. I suppose because it's a great yearning isn't it, a great modern yearning for justice and equality which actually isn't an American idea, equality. They're not interested in that. Freedom is the thing there, not equality. But it's been a persistent European vision. And perhaps I didn't go into it enough or examine myself enough. But when in the old days, when I was at the *New Statesman* I felt myself to be a bit of a shit for not being enough "of the Left", only being mildly sort of just left of centre.

ER: Not wanting to overturn the "old regime"...

MA: Yes: “I’m alright Jack”[14] . “Cast off Bosun, I’m on board” you know. And if you weren’t “of the Left” you were “that” (makes a gesture of dismissive contempt), “I’m all right Jack” you know.

ER: I suppose it would have been a salutary experience for all of you to just go and live for a while somewhere where the Left was in power, and had been in power and just see what it felt like to be the winners rather than the people in the minority, protesting about the boring rule of law and constitutional monarchy etcetera.

MA: Although, I mean, one mustn’t give the impression at all that anyone at the New Statesman was rosy about the Soviet Union but that still, the idea was Socialism. It was never more than an idea had never been realised anywhere and as Martin Malia brilliantly put it: ‘in short, Socialism doesn’t exist, and the Soviet Union built it’. Which is a very good expression of the complete unreality of the whole thing and how it all just collapsed like a house of cards. One puff of air and it all came down. And sort of peacefully, too. Just scurried away like a leaf in the street.

ER: How is your friend Christopher Hitchens[15]... I mean how is your friendship with him?

MA: Oh, rock solid. Deepened, in fact

ER: Is he edging towards your position on it?

MA: Well, he is having a... He had a sort of spiritual hangover about Trotsky. He said that he thought there are bits in my book that he thought were impossible to justify. Trotsky, you know... this is all... well trodden ground... that he remains this idolon of what might have been. Although Molotov says both Lenin and Trotsky were both much harder than Stalin – really hard. But even someone like Saul Bellow went on romanticising Trotsky. There is something very appealing about him in lots of ways. – but he was completely hard and an awful liar, you know, just conscienceless. So there was always the idea that’s the reason why Hitchens hated Stalin because he was Trotsky’s murderer and had poisoned the Revolution. But what he wouldn’t have accepted was that Lenin poisoned it, although I think it is clear that he did. That power poisoned it. Once in, as Lenin said: “It makes your head spin”. To suddenly be on the street and, as Trotsky put it: “Picking up power like a feather”. Suddenly you’ve got the biggest state on earth under you. That’ll do it, you know.

ER: But to go back for a moment to the way that western intellectuals still really... I mean the reaction of the reviewers was “yes”, yes we know all about Stalin and his crimes or Lenin and his crimes...

MA: But they didn’t know. A great deal are pretending to know.

ER: You think so?

MA: Oh yes

ER: I had a similar experience. I read Russian at university, but I suppose I wasn’t particularly interested... (in the Purges)... I mean, it was unpleasant... it was a subject that didn’t interest me... (one could) grow up in England, even being interested in Russia and Russian literature, without necessarily wanting to know... or needing to know how they behaved after the Revolution... It came as a surprise to you did it?

MA: Yes it did. I started to look into it and I thought: this is the most interesting thing I’ve ever seen. I just can’t believe the sort of anti-world that was created, just how... I mean, boy they just didn’t give up. They went at it, they wouldn’t give

it up and that was the choice facing – supposedly facing Stalin – in 1931 or ‘30, ‘29 about whether to collectivise or not, and Martin Malia says and people think it could have been a gentler sort of – Bukharin sort of – system or continued NEP. But Malia says: “No, the choice was either doing what Stalin did, something like Stalin did or giving up the whole idea”. And they weren’t going to do that. Couldn’t give it up.

MA & ER (together): Because that was their legitimacy.

ER: But going back... still today. Its as if the obvious thing is to recommend to [*Vestnik Evropy*] that they translate this [book] into Russian so that they can see your argument in full, but is it [that] western intellectuals are in a state of complete denial about the results of socialism in practice or Communist socialism?

MA: That’s not... it’s not complete denial. It’s more like.... It’s not a complete denial of the dead. And of the numbers. By no means. But there’s still something vestigial, the lingering feeling that it was worth a try. And that’s where actually I fundamentally break away. Because when Hobsbaum[16] was asked [what] would have happened, if it... had resulted in paradise – it’s a ridiculous notion. 15 million dead. If paradise had sprung out of that abattoir it would’ve been a paradise! It wouldn’t have been a paradise. It would have been contaminated. What is this paradise anyway? Utopia means “nowhere”.

ER: So what is it will save us from the...

MA: Doing it again?

ER: The fanatics. Of Al-Quaeda or the fanatics of Communism. Or indeed the French revolution...

MA: Well, I think Communism is over now. What Putin said [was]: “Our country went down a wrong turning, putting it rather mildly. Socialism was a sort of dead end. And that much, you know, I think we have learned. But the human hunger to believe in something... And they were all as Orwell[17] said of Bolsheviks you know, this was in the ‘30s – that they are saints or sinners according to your lights, but they were not reasonable men. [This] enormous hunger for the irrational is actually the enemy.

ER: How do you explain – I mean, just to take three examples – Evelyn Waugh[18], Graham Greene[19] and T.S. Eliot[20] – all turned to Christianity.

MA: And John Updike[21].

ER: Oh, I didn’t know that.

MA: Well, I think he’s always been. There’s his remark: “there’s no proof of the existence of God except the universal human yearning that it should be so”. I don’t know...

ER: You’ve never felt drawn to it?

MA: Oh no. I’ve recently reclassified myself as not an atheist but an agnostic. That’s after I’d read a lot of cosmology and would just have been crabbed and premature to say there’s no controlling intelligence. Einstein[22] had a sort of... if you can have a kind of secular belief in a divine being. You don’t want to worship it but you know that human beings don’t know enough about the universe and there are indications of a huge design, and a very intricate design. But its what one does next that is the question. And some people I suppose just want to worship, want to praise. V.S. Naipaul[23], talking about... he said he had no religious feeling, he was

trying to see it for what it is: the incapacity to contemplate man as man. And I think one ought to contemplate man as man.

ER: Are there any figures in the Christian Church that you know or admire? I mean, would you be interested in meeting Rowan Williams[24] for example. Is he someone that would interest you?

MA: No doubt. No, I think Christ was interesting. And attractive. In many ways...

I mean his thoughts. And of course it's so intertwined with art. And what does one say about *Paradise Lost*[25]? The central English poem, perhaps the central poem, but by no means servile. I think servility is what draws you back. There's something very undignified about watching people praying. I mean you feel they are undignified. ...Solzhenitsyn[26] is another example... There's a rather funny report – some ghastly things in it – its in one of his books its got some nasty things in it which is the KGB report on him and I'm sure Solzhenitsyn liked this piece because it said what a good spy or what a good undercover man Solzhenitsyn was, how difficult to follow, he's always losing you and he's much smarter than other people. But there's one bit where the KGB man follows him into a church and is very shocked to see Solzhenitsyn abasing himself before God... that a man of that intellect should do that he found very shocking in his good Soviet way. But I find, I think it is kind of shocking.

ER: ...one prays standing up in an Orthodox church. You don't kneel.

MA: He genuflected. He didn't bang his head on the floor

ER: But there's this thing about service being the highest form of[27]... etcetera, etcetera.

MA: Well, that's the old hierarchical idea that's Ulysses' speech in *Troilus and Cressida*[28] about order: "Untune that string..." hierarchy "and see what discord follows"[29] everyone in this place... everyone finding meaning from being in this place... receiving from above giving to below. And religious, too. Will you conjure a deity out of the ether to have something to feel inferior to? Very human but weak. And also tremendously corrupting. When you come up against the fatwah and the jihad mentality its awful. You come up against something really hard in the human brain that isn't going to bend... Suddenly anything's possible. They can do anything and still be in the right.

ER: I was very interested in your comment that it was difficult to account for art or at least to understand most of Western art unless you have a grasp of Christianity in particular. For example, your children won't understand *Paradise Lost* unless they have some grasp of Christian...

MA: Sure.

ER: So – do they go to C of E (Church of England) primary schools? Or are they just... do they pick it up as they go along?

MA: Well, I hope nothing's forced on them. I remember my elder son who is now 18, I remember him coming back from school at the age of four or five saying with great indignation "Who's *God*"? Because he hadn't had any of that talk at home. But he was furious that we had left this enormous subject untouched. We had to say very apologetically that some people don't believe in this...

ER: Sometimes children who are brought up in households like that become very religious.

MA: No. They (meaning: his children – ER) are much too bright.

ER: I mean, Bertrand Russell's[30] son became a missionary. Probably to spite his father.

MA: Graham Greene – I interviewed him on the occasion of his 80th birthday and he said faith was like a talent, it was like a power that got weaker with old age, like all the powers. And that struck me as paradoxical. That faith was a power and a gift. Whereas what you are doing when you are having faith, you are renouncing power. You are not quite the master of your own destiny any more. Also, it's a herd thing isn't it?

ER: Not in the case of the priest in *The Power and the Glory*[31] – who was a lone operator...

MA: Well, yes. That's what he's interested in. People who can't quite believe, who are always struggling with their faith

ER: Or indeed Thomas Beckett[32] in *Murder in the Cathedral*[33] – is not... I mean, he's standing out against everything that would be commonsensical.

MA: Yes, those are appealing figures, those who are trying to believe and having the argument inside themselves.

ER: Would you regard that as being a kind of fatuous waste of a life, what Thomas Beckett did?

MA [*long pause*]: Primitive.

ER: You know he was the richest man in England by a long way – I mean, in terms of modern wealth he was much richer than George Soros[34], for example.

MA: So wasn't it hard for him to enter the Kingdom of Heaven?

ER: Well, I suppose what he did was he ditched it all when he accepted the (office of Archbishop)... having made that pile as the Chancellor of England.

MA: Like Wolsey[35].

ER: He sort of – it didn't appeal to him any longer...

MA: And did he renounce it?

ER [*doubtfully*]: I think he must have done. Solzhenitsyn is another interesting case... The fact that he must account for his own ability to be able to stand up to being in the camps and so on... something gave him the strength to carry on... But do you think that's just some kind of psychological aberration?

MA: I don't think he ever says, does he that religion... religion seems to have come late. He said what kept him going in the camp was a sense of his own innocence. A sort of quasi-religious feeling perhaps. But then he became... it was when he went to America that he became, I think, more "old Russia". And he became a very indulged figure by the regime his broadcasts from Vermont attacking America – he was known, always referred to as "Alexander Issayevich" in a rather intimate way and he was broadcast throughout the Soviet Union in the '80s and he became a figure of sort of – I mean he was himself and you can be used in ways you don't intend. He did become a figure of reaction, really.

ER: Yes, he's rather sort of discounted now isn't he as an influence...

MA: Yes... he had this TV show that sort of collapsed. I mean I still think he's an absolute giant of a figure. *Gulag Archipelago* is just absolutely stunning.

ER: And, if you re-read *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* there's a very striking passage where an elderly man lays out his little piece of bread on a piece of handkerchief which he keeps... and if you read it you can see that it could have been a priest taking communion...

MA: .Yes... a sacrament. He wouldn't have been... he wouldn't have become religious unless it was in him all along.

ER: Yes, I suppose that's something in (looks at her watch and sees her hour is nearly up) I'm going to turn into a pumpkin[36].

MA: Let's have a few last questions.

ER: It's really... what Russians should know about your take on this. I mean... there's your father and your friend and also the question of the death of your sister, which seem to have combined. I mean, the trigger for this book. What made you sit down and write this book? Did you feel it coming on for some time?

MA: No... I started to read about Stalin, and, you know, I said a lot of people have been pretending they know about everything he did, but I didn't know anything – you know, although I'd known Robert Conquest all my adult life. My father was, of course, very anti-Communist. When he stopped being a Communist he started being an anti-Communist as a sort of junior ideology. He needed an ideology, my father...that's certainly...

ER: As a substitute for religion?

MA: Something like that. He wanted a community of belief, almost a sort of language of belief, too. And he got it from Communism and then – when, as he said – totally un-ignorable evidence built up against the Soviet idea, then he switched to the reverse, a sort of distorting mirror of it. And I wondered why he needed that and felt this was a fundamental difference between us...

ER: Because you don't feel the need for a sort of framework to your life.

MA: No, I don't to be part of a... I'm not a joiner. And yet he clearly was. And we have this other remarkable thing in common, you know – both being English novelists. But this is a fundamental difference.

ER: And he wrote poetry. Do you ever write poetry?

MA: I published a couple of poems years ago. But I don't write poetry, no. And I sometimes get ideas when I think... I could write a poem about this but all I end up doing is writing a paragraph. But what the poet does is slow things right down so that its sort of second by second while the novelist is travelling at a faster clip, in general, than the poet. The poet is freezing moments in time. The novelist more generally is riding with time, and that's my natural pace.

ER: Have you ever been tempted to write a film script?

MA: I've had the usual sort of experiences with that. They're all very nice experiences usually, to begin with. I wrote a script of *Northanger Abbey*[37] last winter. Probably get made, simply because it's the last Jane Austen one you know it's the one they haven't done. And I liked doing that. But it's not a writer's medium, film.

ER: Its not your... I mean Harold Pinter – it seems to go very well with his style of writing. But perhaps yours is maybe more literary; it depends more on the rhythm.

MA: Well, he stylises dialogue downwards. I stylise it upwards... But I mean, Harold is a playwright so, its... which is rather more of a writer's medium than a film scriptwriters. But it's the same sort of thing. It's a part of a communal effort. But the novelist and the poet give absolutely no ground to anyone else whatever. One or two of them might listen to an editor, but they are the sun, the moon, the weather, the crowd scenes, they're everything – they do it all.

ER: Do you read your work to anyone while its in progress?

MA: No. No. No. It's all up here and no leaks.

ER: And when is it going to come out, the new book?

MA: Well, its not finished yet. I hope to finish it in the spring. And so it will come out in the autumn.

ER: If you could choose one of your novels to be published as it were to kick things off in Russia, which one would it be?

MA: I suppose *“Money”*. To kick things off. I have a feeling it has been published. I can remember holding it in my hand. One more question if you have any?

ER: Do you have any issues in your own life... what things really kind of bother you?

MA: What bothers me is violence.

1. b. 1949

2. Kingsley Amis (1922-1995). His most famous book was *Lucky Jim*, also made into a successful film, about the adventures of a lecturer at a provincial university.

3. Definition of “ladlit” according to critic and author Bevis Hillier in a recent (December 2002) *Spectator* review

4. Definition of “ladlit” by R.W. Holder in his study of euphemism *How Not to Say What you Mean* (2002).

5. Jonathan Cape 2002. Amis himself states in *Experience*, p.175: “The present phase of Western literature is inescapably one of “higher autobiography”, intensely self-inspecting...”

6. Vladimir Nabokov, Russian novelist, 1899-1977

7. Christopher Hitchens, British journalist and author, b.1947

8. Robert Conquest, b.1917, Anglo-American poet and historian. Among his many books on the history and politics of the Soviet Union are *The Great Terror* (1968), *Lenin* (1972), *Kolyma* (1978), *The Harvest of Sorrow* (1986). *Reflections on a Ravaged Century* was published in 1999.

9. Speaking of his early years working on the Labour weekly *The New Statesman* he writes: “Politically we broke down as follows: Julian (Barnes, the novelist) was broadly Labour – though Christopher Hitchens would tirelessly ridicule him for having once voted Liberal. I was quietist and unaligned. Fenton and Hitchens on the other hand were proselytizing Trotskyists who (for instance) spent their Saturdays selling copies of the *Socialist Worker* on impoverished London high streets “What do I call you if I write this piece? I said to Christopher on the phone to him in Washington DC! “Trotskyites or Trotskyists?” “Oh, Trotskyists. Only a Stalinist would have called us Trotskyites”

10. In *Experience*, MA quotes an exchange between Yegeny Yevtushenko, the Siberian born (1933) poet and his father: “Perhaps the most revealing thing my father ever said was in response to Yevgeny Yevtushenko’s question (King’s College chapel, Cambridge, 1962), “You atheist?” He answered: “Well, yes, but it’s more that I hate him”

11. MA’s cousin, Lucy Partington, disappeared on her way home from visiting a friend in Bristol on 27 Dec 1973. Twenty-one years later, it was discovered that she was one of the victims of local mass murderer Fred West.

12. A.J.P. Taylor. Popular English historian 1906-1990

13. Scottish 20th Century poet; Communist and champion of Scottish Independence “Hugh MacDiarmid (1892 – 1978): what a bastard” said my father in about 1972, referring to the man widely believed to be the greatest Scottish poet of the twentieth century. “He became a Communist in 1956 – after Hungary”. In *Koba the Dread* p.20

14. An expression of selfish satisfaction with one’s lot, immortalised in a satirical film of that title (date) about class and work relations in Post-WWII Britain

15. A significant chapter in *Koba* consists of a letter from Amis to his friend Christopher Hitchens

16. Eric Hobsbaum, leading British Communist historian (b. Vienna, June 1917)

17. George Orwell (real name Eric Blair) 1903-1950 author of *Animal Farm* and 1984
18. Evelyn Waugh English novelist (1903-1966)
19. Graham Greene English novelist (1904-1991)
20. T.S. Eliot American born English poet, critic and playwright, 1888-1965
21. US novelist, b.1932
22. Albert Einstein German-Swiss Physicist 1903-1950
23. Trinidad-born British novelist and belle-lettrist, winner of the Nobel prize for Literature b.1932
24. New Archbishop of Canterbury, officially took up office Nov 2002
25. One of the greatest long poems in the English language by the 17th Century poet John Milton (1608-1674)
26. Solzhenitsyn A. b.1918, Russian writer, author of several major works which exposed the Soviet labour camps under Stalin to the world – *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962). In 1965, his manuscripts were seized by the KGB but his wife hid the draft of *The Gulag Archipelago*. In 1968, Solzhenitsyn was attacked for aligning himself with “the enemies of the USSR” and neither of his next two novels could be published in his native country and he was expelled from the Soviet Writers’ Union. As a result of the foreign publication of the first of the three volumes of *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973) he was arrested and expelled from the Soviet Union in 1974. Solzhenitsyn was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1970.
27. ER had in mind the Collect for Peace in the Book of Common Prayer: “O God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom; Defend us they humble servants in all assaults of our enemies; that we surely trusting in thy defence, may not fear the power of any adversaries, through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen”
28. Play written c. 1603 by William Shakespeare (1564-1616)
29. “Take but degree away, un-tune that string, And hark what discord follows”
30. Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), British philosopher and mathematician
31. 1940 novel by Graham Greene about a priest on the run in a South American dictatorship
32. Archbishop of Canterbury assassinated 1270 on the orders of Henry II
33. Play by T.S. Eliot about the assassination on the order of the King of Thomas Beckett, – his oldest friend whom he had created Archbishop of Canterbury – who dared resist the King’s efforts to subject the Church to his will
34. Hungarian born financier and philanthropist
35. Another enormously wealthy servant of the English crown, Cardinal Wolsey 1475(?) -1530
36. In the fairy story, Cinderella is warned that at the stroke of midnight her coach will turn back into a pumpkin
37. Novel by Jane Austen 1775-1817. Published posthumously