

## Literary Brooklyn Gets Its Leading Man



Jennifer S. Altman for The New York Times

Martin Amis at home. His new novel, titled "Lionel Asbo," is to be published in August.

By PETER STEVENSON  
Published: June 22, 2012

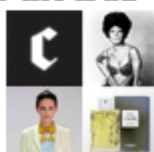
ON a late afternoon in May, [Martin Amis](#) gestured toward the tall, sun-filled parlor windows of his Brooklyn brownstone.

## Related

Times Topics: [Martin Amis](#) | [Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, N.Y.](#) [Real Estate](#)

## The Collection: A New Fashion App for the iPad

A one-stop destination for Times fashion coverage and the latest from the runways.



Download It From the App Store

## Follow Us on Twitter

Follow @NYTimesfashion for fashion, beauty and lifestyle news and headlines.



Enlarge This Image



Jennifer S. Altman for The New York Times  
Martin Amis at his home in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn.

Enlarge This Image



Chris Ware/Keystone Features/Getty Images  
Kingsley Amis with his sons in 1961.

Enlarge This Image



Ian Cook/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images  
Martin Amis on the tennis court in 1990.

Enlarge This Image



Dave Benett/Getty Images  
Martin Amis and his wife, the novelist Isabel Fonseca, with their daughters in London in 2003.

o'clock in the morning. And the girls, they were always going to go to St. Ann's, the famous progressive school."

Mr. Amis came to know Brooklyn slightly by visiting from London at a cousin of Ms. Fonseca's for Christmas dinners. The couple has also spent summers in East Hampton, where Ms. Fonseca's mother owns a two-bedroom house and some cabins in a potato field. And when Mr. Amis covered tennis for The New Yorker in the 1990s, he thrilled to the guttural [United States Open](#) crowd at Flushing Meadows.

Even before he moved to this country, Mr. Amis nursed a fascination with it in his fiction and journalism. He titled his 1986 collection of pieces about America "The Moronic Inferno," a phrase he took from his friend Saul Bellow.

These days, he can't take his eyes off the presidential race, in particular "the incredible convulsions of the Republican Party," he said. "It's completely fascinating. What a great time to be coming to America.

"Is Mitt Romney electable?" he continued. "On the face of it, he looks presidential and he's not stupid. But he lets himself down hideously whenever he has a victory. He looks as if he's had five grams of coke — he's shaking with a power rush. And that was always the most impressive thing about Obama: how he didn't let that happen to himself. As if he didn't feel it."

Mr. Amis also knows something about playing it cool. It's been 38 years since he proved to the world he wasn't just the heartthrob son of the celebrated comic novelist Kingsley Amis by publishing "The Rachel Papers," a novel that still sends would-be fiction writers into twisted bedsheets of self-loathing.

He followed with the novels "Money," "London Fields" and "The Information," each of which hoisted him higher. He became not only the talk of the town but also the life of the party — a particularly quick-tongued party of rising British writers including Mr. Hitchens, Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes and the poet James Fenton.

"The world of those literary lunches was very much organized around Martin," Mr. Fenton said recently. "And when the books started coming out, Martin's entrance, his approach to all of this, became absolutely pervasive among young writers. And in this circle of friends, there was a kind of way of speaking, there was a whole vocabulary, that Martin had invented. There was a sense of humor that went with it. And it was incredibly influential. In fact, it was the kind of influence that really, for their own good, novelists or prose writers would have to get away from. Because it was Martin's."

The influence went beyond the boys' club. "Martin was a terror for the women, as they say," Mr. Fenton said. "And he had as much success as he could possibly have wanted. But when he was in love with someone, it was most passionate. He might well have got himself into awkward situations, but he was not a sort of casual abusive lover."

Once the dashing enfant terrible, Mr. Amis is now being cast as a dignified, albeit provocative, elder statesman.

A few weeks ago, he and the journalist Ian Buruma chose some of their favorite films for a discussion at the Morgan Library moderated by Antonio Monda, the ebullient Italian artistic director of Le Conversazioni literary festival. Mr. Amis chose "The Godfather," "The Wild Bunch," "Raging Bull" and "Blade Runner," and got things rolling by saying, in his opinion, no good movies were made before 1966.

After the event, Salman Rushdie, a beautiful young woman in tow, sailed up to Mr. Amis and said hello. Then Mr. Amis and Ms. Fonseca headed to Mr. Monda's Central Park West apartment, where bowls of piping-hot pasta and glasses of Chianti were passed among a shoulder-to-shoulder crowd that included Robert De Niro and Isabella Rossellini.

At a certain point Mr. Amis unwedged himself and slipped out to smoke a cigarette on the sidewalk, looking vaguely menacing under a street lamp. "I've sort of hung out with a few thugs all my life," he said later. "I love thugs. I'm keen on them."

A thug is at the core of Mr. Amis's new novel, a satire titled "Lionel Asbo," which will be published in the United States in August. The main character of the title feeds Tabasco to his pit bulls and can't understand why anyone would have relationships when pornography is available. Given its subtitle ("State of England"), the novel slots neatly into an argument that Mr. Amis's move to America is a bitter "goodbye to all that" severing from home soil.

The real reason is more pedestrian, Mr. Amis said. Ms. Fonseca was homesick for America, and her husband is mostly happy to let her choose where they live, as long as he can write. "That's what I do all day, wherever I am," he said. "By now, where you live has nothing to do with it."

But it's unlikely Mr. Amis will miss the British press, whose feverish obsession with the writer exploded like a boil in the mid-1990s. It was a time when his marriage to Antonia Phillips dissolved, as did his long friendship with Julian Barnes, whose wife, the literary agent Pat Kavanagh, Mr. Amis fired in favor of Andrew Wylie, known as the Jackal, who was able to secure Mr. Amis a reported 500,000-pound advance for his novel "The Information."

"The press are altogether gentler here," Mr. Amis said. "In Britain, they have more respect for the man in the street than they do for writers. They have deep suspicion of writers. And I think that's probably because when America was becoming self-aware in the 18th century, they wondered what America was.

"Was it just a collection of Italians and Jews and Brits and Germans, or was it a nation with a soul and an identity? And everyone, not consciously, intuited that writers have something to do with defining what the country was. But England's never needed any defining, thank you very much."

He drew himself up in mock seriousness. "We know who we are."

As he spoke, Ms. Fonseca, a novelist herself and an editor at the Times Literary Supplement when she met Mr. Amis in 1993, came to tell him that she was going out and that he would be giving the girls dinner.

"I was 50 when Fernanda was born," Mr. Amis said. "I said to my wife, 'I'm going to be a very emeritus kind of father.' I was quite hands-on with my sons. But the girls have had to fend for themselves." Louis and Jacob, from Mr. Amis's marriage to Ms. Phillips, are in their 20s and live in London.

"It's a very different part of the heart that girls appeal to," Mr. Amis said. "When they cry, you don't say, 'Come on, get yourself together, be a woman.' Although that's not a bad bit of advice. I was a soft touch with my boys. The first time I tried to read the riot act to them when they were staying up much too late and disobeying their mother, I went in and raised my voice. And Louis said, 'Ah, taste the wrath of Daddy.'"

Asked how he sees the next 30 years (Mr. Bellow was still procreating at age 84, after all), Mr. Amis said: "There are a few more novels I want to write. It would seem to be the case that writers actually go off around the age of 70. The novels die before the novelists do. They're dead — they haven't got that insufflation, the breath of life. Once that happens, then I suppose you'll see if reading, alone, if that's compelling enough by itself. I think it will be mortifying if you can't do what you've enjoyed doing for 40, 45 years.

"I think when your head goes, there's no excuse for being alive," he continued. "But the trouble is, you've got to know that that's what's happened to you. You've got to do a very firm deal with your wife. Help you starve yourself to death like Gogol or something."

"But what happens — it's already started happening to me — is that you turn 60 and there's this: 'This is going to turn out well. This can't turn out well,'" he said. "But life grows in value because of your leave-taking with regard to it. Not very significant things suddenly look very poignant and charming. This particular period of my life is full of daily novelty. That turns out to be worth a great deal."

The wine was almost gone and Cobble Hill was receding behind the windows. Asked about his beloved game of tennis, Mr. Amis said: "I hate it, because I always lose. You can still run a bit. It's just that your reflexes go. And you're always in the wrong place. And that scything slice backhand I used to have, now it doesn't matter how I hold the racket, it always goes up in the air.

"My only shot is the lob. And it's humiliating. I've given up tennis. I used to love it and now I hate it, so I've stopped it. But there is a tennis court in Long Island, so I may find myself waddling out there."