

Experience by Martin Amis (Jonathan Cape, R205.00)

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Preparing for his Oxford interview, the young Martin Amis wrote to his father and stepmother :
“Should I play the profound truth-seeker, the seedy anti-hero, the crusty society-observer, the all discerning beauty-appreciator? No, I suppose I shall end up . . . just . . . being . . . myself . . .”

Somewhat similarly, the older Amis claims, at the outset of these memoirs, that he wants “to speak, for once, without artifice.” But, of course, there is no such pristine essence of self: the writer, especially the autobiographical writer, invents and tries out a series of personae – perhaps more skilfully than the young Amis, but no less self-consciously.

Amis’s memoir, then, written just after his fiftieth birthday, reads as an artful compendium of personae in search of a self : the devoted-but-exasperated son, the young rake about town, the budding novelist, the controversial celebrity, the family man-turned-homebreaker, the friend, the lover. More specifically, three events dominate this book and inform its tone and tenor: the discovery, more than twenty years after her disappearance, of the body of his cousin Lucy Partington, one of the victims of the mass murderer Frederick Weston; the replacement of all Amis’s teeth and the reconstruction of his jaw, and the death of his father, the novelist Kingsley Amis. His divorce and remarriage are given comparatively little space.

Of these unifying themes, the most problematic is Amis’s recurrent concern with his cousin’s death. It is not to question the sincerity of his horror and grief to note that the appalling event and its aftermath elicit Amis’s worst writing. The description of the memorial service, after the discovery of the body, reproduces tributes to Lucy which, however heartfelt and appropriate to the occasion, come across here as simply mawkish: a school friend of Lucy’s, by now a woman of over forty, recounts how Lucy had enjoined her, as a little girl, to kiss a dead guinea pig, as proof that “everyone deserves to be kissed before going to heaven.” A former teacher of Lucy’s tells how Lucy, when asked where she was going after leaving school, had “thought awfully hard” and then said “Towards the light. . . Towards the light.”

Amis, who might have treated this kind of thing in a very different spirit in one of his novels, records “My body consisted only of my heart.” This may be the problem: in a work that for much of the time gets by on icy intellect, this wholesale surrender to the heart makes it difficult for us to take the event as seriously as Amis obviously wants us to. He quotes from Lucy’s sister Marian’s “justly celebrated essay” in the *Guardian* (*celebrated?* Is that really the word Amis wants here?), in which Marian tells how, having travelled to Cardiff to bless Lucy’s bones, she had “lifted her skull with great care and tenderness . . . [marvelling] at the sense of

recognition in its curves and proportion,” after which she had wrapped it in Lucy’s favourite blanket. Such terrible intimacies court the rude gaze of publicity at their own peril.

Readers of Amis’s novels, most notably *Money* and *The Information*, will have come to recognise the hard-bitten protagonist with not so much a heart of gold as a runny peppermint-cream centre. Amis himself also tends to liquescence under emotional pressure. “I am easily moved to tears,” he states, but it is not the tearfulness itself that seems indecorous, as much as the rather willed, we-must-do-this-more-often nature of the grief: “As I wept I glanced at my weeping brother and thought: how badly we need this. How very badly my body needs this, as it needs food and sleep and air.”

The tearful mode, then, is not Amis’s strongest. Speaking of a fellow-novelist who unfavourably reviewed one of his novels, Amis says “by calling him humourless I mean to impugn his seriousness, categorically,” and Amis’s own seriousness comes into question when he abandons the humour that is his most profound mode. Like his father, he is in essence a comic novelist, and in this memoir, too, his best effects are comic.

Reviewers have commented on the fact that Amis gives considerably more coverage to his dental surgery than to his divorce; this may be because the dental surgery, which in his account was truly terrifying, allows him to write about real pain and suffering and loss with the kind of outraged excess of tough comedy, exaggerated and yet finely controlled.

His relationship with his father, too, Amis treats as a chronic toothache rather than a divorce – and none the less traumatic for that. Kingsley Amis was a hard-drinking, irascible, adulterous, opinionated man with deeply unfashionable opinions. It must have been trying, for instance, for a trendy young man in the eighties to have a father who had erotic dreams about Margaret Thatcher – and who, left bereft of a hate object by the demise of the Soviet Union, fixed on Nelson Mandela.

Amis’s deeply engaging account of his father’s last days is interspersed with memories of the more vigorous Kingsley; the effect is both to stress the sadness of his decline and to preserve the comic register. “Always difficult, and more recently impossible,” Amis writes, “my father was now proceeding towards the unbelievable.” It is the mark of Amis’s skill that this phase of his father’s life, in his telling, is as believable as it is readable.

During his father’s terminal illness, Amis’s American wife suggests a second opinion; he demurs: “Isabel comes from a place where the first thing you do about death is throw your life-savings at it. . . .In England, when you see death coming, you just ask if you’ve joined the right queue.” This sharp, transcontinentally-knowing aphorism does more to convey the terror

of death and our helplessness in the face of it than any number of memorial service tributes. It also helps us to see why Martin Amis is one of the leading comic novelists of his generation.