

The Amises: *Lucky Jim vs. The Rachel Papers**

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Abstract:

With all the literary and political differences between father and son, what is striking about their literary careers is the way they parallel each other: Kingsley was thirty-one when his first novel, *Lucky Jim*, was published (1953); Martin was twenty – four when he published *The Rachel Papers* (1973). *Lucky Jim* was a runaway best seller and a book that defined a generation. That was not quite true of Martin's early books, but he had enough precocious reward. No other father-son tandem has produced a corpus as sizable and significant as that of Sir Kingsley Amis and his son. They have maintained not only a quality of writing, but also duration of productivity that other literary families have simply not matched.

Keywords: literary families, similarities, controversial novelists, satiric comedy

They seemed to think that it must have been extra difficult for me, coming out from behind my father, but it wasn't; his shadow served as a kind of protection. And I felt no particular sense of achievement either. It's a strange surprise, becoming a writer, but nothing is more ordinary to you than what your dad does all day. The pains and perhaps some of the pleasures, of authorship were therefore dulled to me. It was business as usual (Keulks, 2003: 101).

Released in print on January 19, 1954, *Lucky Jim* catapulted Kingsley Amis into literary fame. By the end of the year, twelve thousand copies were published, the BBC had inquired about radio adaptations, and the film rights were sold to the famed directors John and Roy Boulting, after Alfred Hitchcock and Sydney Bernstein reneged. When Martin Amis's first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, appeared in 1973, his father was firmly established as one of Britain's most important, popular and controversial novelists. Although Martin joked that having a name familiar with publishers and reviewers did not hurt his career, he nevertheless faced a difficult double burden, especially for

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an incipient writer. In short, it would be a dual battle, of professional and personal validation.

There are good reasons for comparing father and son, irrespective of their individual novels. Their early careers seemed remarkably similar. Although Kingsley later admitted that he did not consider Martin to be “universally material”, the son nevertheless retraced his father’s steps to Oxford, where he graduated with honours. Twenty years earlier, Kingsley had taken an honour degree there as well. From Oxford, both men successfully navigated from academia to professional employment. Although Kingsley had failed his bachelor’s degree examination when one of the examiners, Lord David Cecil, raised objections to his thesis, he was offered a lecturing position at the University College of Swansea in Wales. After graduating, Martin began reviewing books for the *Observer*. Like his father, Martin also began writing novels, working evenings and weekends to finish *The Rachel Paper*.

In 1963, after spending fifteen years lecturing at Swansea, then at Cambridge and Princeton Universities, Kingsley left the academic life, assuming the responsibilities of a full-time writer. He would return to the profession only once, accepting a professorship at Vanderbilt University, in 1967–1968. In 1980, Martin became a full-time writer, retiring from his journalistic career after nine years. The early careers of both Amises seemed to be similar: exemplary education, followed by rapid notoriety and lasting literary success. By the late 1970s, with Kingsley’s second wife, Elizabeth Jane Howard, also a writer, there is no denying that the Amises had become England’s foremost literary family, eclipsing Evelyn Waugh and Auberon Waugh, who had previously held this title. When Martin Amis won the Somerset Maugham award for *The Rachel Papers*, as Kingsley had before for *Lucky Jim*, the Amises became the first household in literary history who won major prizes for their debut novels (Keulks, 2003, 104). Martin’s first novel, *The Rachel Papers* (1973), caused a literary stir similar to his father’s debut. Eliot Fremont-Smith labelled *The Rachel Papers* as being “the best teenage sex novel”, and Peter Ackroyd (1973, 674) proclaimed, “Well, you old fogies, you were right after all. Martin Amis has exposed the younger generation for the evil and wretched creatures you always supposed them to be, and his only consolation for them is that, once over the hill of adolescence, they may perhaps improve.” Most reviewers agreed with Ackroyd, that Martin Amis had “fashioned a substantial character out of the rag-end of our frantic contemporaries” (Ackroyd, 1973: 674).

Although it is in most important ways a quite different sort of novel, *The Rachel Papers* evinces the same type of relationship to its own

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decade as *Lucky Jim*; it is a book which is characteristic for the 1970s, in spite of the fact that its social mores and points of cultural reference are those of the late 1960s, just as the 1950s. Jim is grounded in the post-war years of the late 1940s. It is another striking affinity with Kingsley's first novel: its hero, Charles Highway, is as ambiguously placed in relation to his author as Jim Dixon is; both are teasingly autobiographical. The difference is that Charles is very much easier to dislike. This is because he, like his author, is younger than Jim; the book frame is an hour-by-hour countdown to the midnight of his twentieth birthday, a landmark, given that the really significant birthday was always the twenty-first. According to Charles, "Twenty may not be the start of maturity but, in all consciences, it's the end of youth" (Amis, 1973: 7).

The short life on which Charles looks back is populated by caricatures and by characters adapted from actual people, a common strategy for young writers. Among these caricatures are his family: a wealthy successful father, a disorganized mother, and five siblings, including an older married sister, Jenny, and a nine-year-old brother called Valentine. The Highways live in the country near Oxford, the Entwistles in Campden Hill Square. Kingsley had stayed much closer to experience for the domestic settings of his early novels, adapting his first Swansea digs for Jim Dixon. Martin tried to distance himself from his character's experience, steering the novel away from autobiography while revising his own childhood experiences. At the age of fourteen, much earlier than Charles, Martin Amis had to witness the dissolution of his parents' marriage. Unlike Charles, who regrets he cannot use such tragedies as source material, Martin had experienced the effects of his father's affairs.

Like Martin, Charles decides to have "a crack at getting into Oxford". When his A-level results come through, his father is surprised and happy, as Martin's. Maida Vale, the place where Kingsley Amis stayed with Elizabeth Jane Howard, makes a brief appearance in the novel, and Charles's father, like Kingsley, once lectured at Cambridge. Later, when Charles speaks with his father about his Oxford admission, he dwells upon the corruption of the English language, criticizing Dr. Knowd, his Oxford interviewer, for using the word hopefully. Charles, like Martin, also suffers from painful, degenerating teeth; and he discovers at the age of thirteen, a year earlier than Martin, that his father has a lover. "I didn't want to see my parents this way, in sexual terms", Charles explains, "I was too young" (Amis, 1973: 9). To Richard Bradford, the novel is "unabashedly autobiographical, and its interweaving of autobiographical detail with comic invention reminds one of the father's" (Bradford, 2001: 247).

Stylistically, the two novels are very different. *Lucky Jim* begins in the following fashion:

They made a silly mistake, though, the professor of history said, and his smile, as Dixon watched, gradually sank beneath the surface of his feature at the memory. "After the interval we did a little piece by Downland" he went on; "for recorder and keyboard, you know. I played the recorder, of course, and young Johns ..." He paused, and his trunk grew rigid as he walked; it was as if someone entirely different man, some impostor who couldn't copy his voice, had momentarily taken his place; then he went on again."... young Johns played the piano. Versatile lad, that, oboe's his instrument, really. Well away, the reporter chap must have got the story wrong, or not been listening, or something. Anyway, there it was in the Post as large as life: Downland, yes, they'd got him right; Messrs. Welch and John, yes; but what do you think they said then?

Dixon shook his head. "I don't know, Professor", he said in sober veracity. No other professor in Great Britain, he thought, set such store by being called Professor.

As opposed to *Lucky Jim*, *The Rachel Papers* sets off with the following paragraph:

My name is Charles Highway, though you wouldn't think it to look at me. It's such a rangy, well-travelled, big-cocked name and, to look at, I am none of these. I wear glasses for a start; have done since I was nine. And my medium-length, arseless waist figure, corrugated ribcage and bandy legs up to dispel any hint of aplomb. (On no account, by the way, should this particular model be confused with the springy frames so popular among my contemporaries...) But I have got one of those fashionable ready voices, the ones with the habitual ironic twang, excellent for the promotion of oldster unease. And I imagine there's something oddly daunting about my face, too. It's an angular, yet delicate, thin long nose, wide thin mouth-and the eyes: richly lashed, dark ochre with a twinkle of singed auburn...ah, how inadequate these words seem.

The main thing about me is that I am nineteen years of age, and twenty tomorrow.

Martin's novel begins in the first person, with a clear-cut affirmation of identity. Proclaiming the discrepancy between his name and his appearance, Charles directs the attention to the contrast between appearance and reality, fact and fiction. Charles Highway has clearly read *Lucky Jim*, because through the novel he rejects Jim Dixon's maxim and replaces it with his own: "surely nice things are dull, and nasty things are funny. The nastier thing is, the funnier it gets" (Amis, 1973: 87). *The Rachel Paper* is a mass of self-contradiction. Charles Highway is younger than Jim Dixon; whereas Jim is a grown-up graduate with a job, Charles is an adolescent who has not even been admitted to university yet. Unlike Jim, he is too immature to have acquired a style of his own. Charles is supposed to be the child of well-off middle-class parents, and he detests Americans on grounds of envy: his memorable attack on them, which reads like a version of his father's set

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pieces, begins by citing their violence and racism (“go out Blowing niggers’ heads off, roast a Jew or two, disembowel a Puerto Rican”) and ends with his more vulnerable hating of “their biceps and their tans and their perfect teeth and their clear eyes” (Amis, 1973: 106). The book is full of things that do not seem quite right, “At the age of ten I must have had more teeth in my head than the average dentist’s waiting room” (Amis, 1973: 9). Most of Martin’s novels are centred on men who have not grown up: their games and their fantasies, their toys and their cars: all these are signals of retarded adolescence. They have no settled values and no cultural resources; they abuse what vestiges of literacy they possess.

The central scene in *The Rachel Papers*, the one in which Charles takes Rachel into his bedroom, takes place in the accompaniment of a specific soundtrack: the second side of the Beatles’ *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Charles is more cynical, more experienced and more competent than Robin Davies in *You Can’t Do Both*, though less sympathetic, and his concentration on sexual strategy excludes feeling and resembles that of Patrick Standish in *Take a Girl Like You*. Patrick would have settled for jazz, but Charles’s choice of background music is more appropriate.

“I still felt like a student”, he says in *Experience*. The post-university pressure on Kingsley, who, because of military service and postgraduate research, was slightly older, had been those imposed by marriage, a young family and a teaching job; a direct literary consequence of this is the early appearance of married central characters and family lives, in *That Uncertain Feeling* and *I Like It Here*. Martin’s post university pressures were completely different. He was single: his financial lurches were all his own. Before joining the *Times Literary Supplement* as an editorial assistant, he had worked for four months at a small Mayfair art gallery “showing the punters around the place, dusting frames in the basement, making the coffee, hand addressing the invitation to the private views and reading about a book a day” (Amis, 2000: 34).

The title of *The Rachel Papers* is similarly double-voiced. It comes from Charles himself, yet it evokes more famous predecessors: *The Bickerstaff Papers* (Jonathan Swift) and *The Aspern Papers* (Henry James). The “Rachel Papers” are the mass of notes, diaries, and memoranda that Charles spends the last five hours of his nineteenth year shuffling and reshuffling. “If I run though, let’s say, the last three months, and if I try to sort out all my precocity and childishness, my sixth-form cleverness and fifth-form nastiness, all the self-consciousness and self-disguised and self-infatuation, and self-...you name it. Perhaps I’ll be able to locate my hamartia and see what kind of grown-up I’ll

make (Amis, 1973: 4). The novel's twelve chapters are structured by the clock, beginning with "7 o'clock: Oxford", and ending with "Midnight: coming of age".

While *The Rachel Papers* can be read as a (male) adolescent coming-of-age story, it can just as easily be taken as a parody of the genre, not to mention a parody of the kind of comic romance Kingsley produced in *Lucky Jim*. Unlike Jim, who becomes the moral centre of *Lucky Jim*, Charles Highway remains something of an enigma up to the end of *The Rachel Papers*. The novel may be a satiric comedy. Author and reader may laugh at Charles's excesses, but they are also directly involved in them. *The Rachel Papers* is Martin's first achievement in the most demanding of narrative modes. "It is a form Amis raises to the level of high post-modern art in several of his later novels, when his narrators bear fewer resemblances to him than Charles does" (Diedrick, 1995: 38).

All the similar or contradictory points of view of different critics presented in this paper on the Amises and their works, which have greatly changed and improved along the decades, demonstrate the great interest literary critics have taken in analysing and developing different theories. At the same time, they also represent a significant aid for readers and allow them to see the Amises's literary works from a wider angle, allowing for more interpretative alternatives.

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