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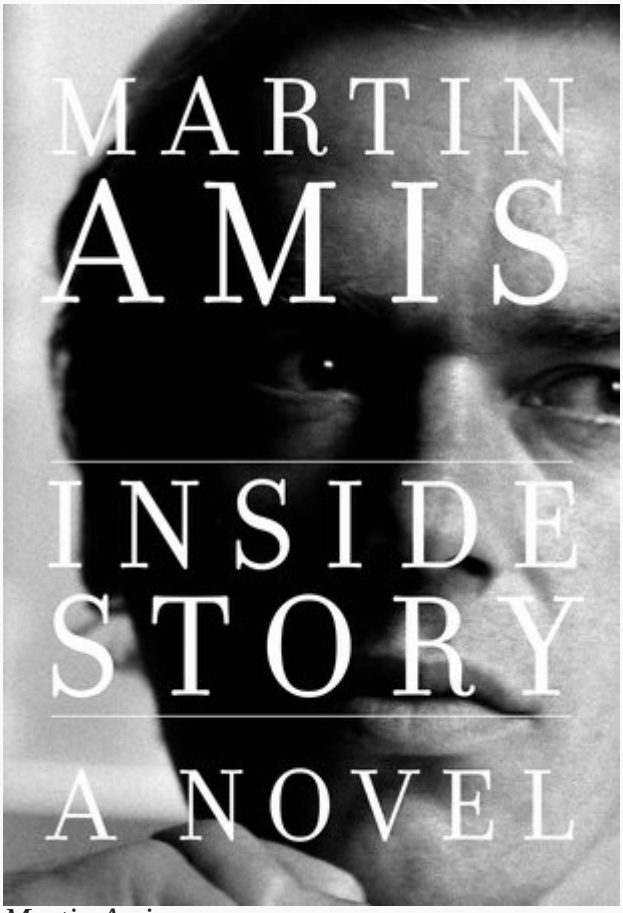
A Hitch in time

by *Kyle Smith*

A review of *Inside Story* by Martin Amis

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Martin Amis

Inside Story

Knopf, 560 pages, $28.95

Christopher Hitchens loved life, his great friend Martin Amis once observed. And Amis himself? "I like life." It was a typical Amis line: expertly grasping a cliché and turning its pockets inside out. I've met both writers and Amis is a bit phlegmatic—a calculating and wary cat as against Hitchens's bounding, irrepressible dog. The first time I met Hitchens, to interview him for the New York Post, he hailed me joyously across the lobby of the Royalton Hotel, as though we were old comrades who had been arrested together while tossing cobblestones at the police in '68. How he recognized me, I do not know. Amis, in interviews, is cheerless and hesitant. He speaks as though he is being charged by the syllable.

Though Amis is the more accomplished literary figure of the pair, his friend parlayed bonhomie and performative intellection into vastly larger celebrity—going back decades, Amis notes, the Hitch (as he had already taken to calling himself by young adulthood) could hardly walk a block in public without being greeted by a stranger. The pair's mutual devotion—"it is a love whose month is ever May," as Amis once put it—grew into a celebrated thing in its own right. I was present when Amis, on a book tour, appeared at the 92nd Street Y around the turn of the century. At the end of the evening, audience members were invited to submit questions to him on slips of paper. A publicist told me afterwards that most of the questions were about his relationship with Hitchens, who wasn't even there. This was years *before* Hitchens's fame climbed another level when he finally wrote a highly successful and much-discussed book, his atheism manifesto *God Is Not Great*. Over the decades, though, Amis published little about the pair's friendship, which began when both were Oxford students in the late Sixties and deepened when both worked at the *New Statesman* in the Seventies. Apart from casting Hitchens as the brother of the protagonist in his 2010 novel *The Pregnant Widow*, Amis seemed to guard his Hitchens stories closely.

At last Amis has answered demand with a memoir about Hitchens. Except it's not exactly a memoir and it's mostly not about Hitchens. *Inside Story* is, Amis tells us on several occasions, a novel, albeit one that contains lots of references to well-known people and well-known facts. Most readers will absorb it as a memoir with more-than-expected embellishments, such as reconstructed dialogue. (Accounts of many lively conversations with Hitchens are impossibly well-scripted, but given that both friends have justly been celebrated for their wit, one wouldn't have it any other way). In the book, as in life, Amis has been married twice; in both he has five children, one of whose existence he did not discover until she was a student at Oxford. In both cases he has an older brother, and a sister who died in 2000 after abusing alcohol. All of these people's names and more are altered in the book, though; Saul Bellow's fifth wife, for instance, is not named Rosamund, but Janis. Amis's second wife Isabel Fonseca is referred to throughout as "Elena." His sister Sally is called Myfanwy. This turns out to have been her middle name. Are the others simply re-branded with their middle names, too? If so, why bother with such fig-leafery? To muddle things further, Amis keeps switching, irritatingly, back and forth from third to first person, and even slightly misreports the date of Hitchens's death, which he identifies as December 23 (of 2011). The actual date was December 15. Is moving the event closer to Christmas supposed to add significance? That seems a stretch given that Hitchens, a godless ex-Trotskyist, must have hated the

holiday twice over, both for its religious observance and its celebration of capitalism. Or is Amis suggesting that he lost eight days in a haze of grief?

It's clear enough that Amis is telling us that we shouldn't trust anything he says, but the tactic seems like a thin effort to create plausible deniability rather than the hall-of-mirrors postmodernist effect that Amis is perhaps aiming for, and to which he has often turned in his novels. In contradistinction to Amis's Fifties English youth, we live in a confessional age, and reticence these days seems as outdated as a Packard. In his eighth decade there is no obvious reason for Amis to continue to be coy and tricksy, and couching the book as an equivocal, veiled, sort-of confession diminishes its impact.

The reminiscences about Hitchens are scattered over five hundred frustratingly digressive pages. Amis so adored his friend that even in an attempt to confront his worst trials (either those that he left out of his 2000 memoir *Experience* or that occurred thereafter), he seems unable to let the reflections flow for more than a few pages before he corks things up and turns to some impersonal, barely related matter. The same dynamic repeats when Amis writes about another good friend, Saul Bellow, whose decline and demise are also interwoven into the text. You'd be surprised how many times a man who sets out to look back at his life can veer off into the Holocaust, or 9/11, or the iniquities of private health insurance, or tips on the writing trade. Amis even tosses in a few slams at Donald Trump, because none of us has had our fill of *those*. Large portions of this book should have been shorn off as standalone essays or to form chapters in one of Amis's volumes of literary criticism or Shoah studies.

An illustrative example of the book's bumpy path: Amis (says he) frequently visited Bellow in Vermont as Alzheimer's began to unbuild the older man's dense mind and prodigious memory. As powerfully as he chronicles this interior siege, Amis keeps his emotions leashed. What, the reader keeps begging to know, did it *feel* like? Well, Professor Amis responds, *Let's repair to the study*. He has some books he'd like to quote for us.

Amis has a spirit-crushing discussion with Bellow's soon-to-be widow about how her husband has taken to accusing her of infidelity, which yields the telling detail that the lovers he accuses her of sleeping with are the likes of the "fat kid delivering groceries," she says. "It's never with anyone nice." Amis cuts away from this disorienting, strange, and telling moment to conduct a brief seminar on madness in literature, considering whether "organic insanity—like dreams, like religion, sex—is fundamentally impervious to literary art." Within this discussion there's a 170-word footnote recounting Amis's chats about the matter with a fellow novelist, Patrick McGrath, and within the footnote to the digression he pauses for a parenthetical: "The essential difficulty, we agreed, was this: a work of art needs to cohere ('together' + 'to stick') and organic madness is the sworn enemy of coherence." I don't think this is an elaborate joke Amis is telling at his own expense, because if so, it's an atypically flat one. To cohere is exactly what the reader begs *Inside Story* to do. Can Amis really be under the impression that his readers require him to pause to define "cohere"? A close friend and great artist is disintegrating, and Amis is paging through the

Oxford Concise in his mind. Amis holds that a writer's life is divided into thirds: equal time spent reading, writing, and living. But even when Amis is supposed to be living, he's reading and writing. He loves those two activities, after all.

The erotic charge of *London Fields* is present in *Inside Story* in the person of "Phoebe Phelps"—impossible to say whether this is her real name, or whether she actually ever existed—who shares the man-inflaming and man-devouring tendencies of the earlier book's femme fatale Nicola Six. She is a voluptuous tease and woman of mystery whom Amis describes meeting when he approached her as she was speaking in a phone booth in Notting Hill Gate in the Seventies. The sexual torture that follows yields several of the book's most uproarious passages, and the most embarrassing ones, if they actually happened. The humiliations Phoebe inflicts on the author in the book are the best answer to the question of why Amis needed deniability. Among her vicious sinister tricks was, perhaps, sleeping with Kingsley Amis and implanting in Martin the idea (supposedly pried out of Kingsley during a drinking bout) that his father was actually Philip Larkin, Kingsley's lifelong friend. Amis says he spent five years wondering whether the alternate-father story might be true, though he never could bear to question his mother Hilary Bardwell about the matter before she died. But the strong resemblance between Martin and Kingsley would seem to put the question to rest, and Martin acknowledges as much. Phoebe, or "Phoebe," was simply in the business of creating as much chaos as she possibly could, and she is as beguiling on the page as she must have been to Amis. As the book goes on, the way he gradually learns the answer to various questions about her provides the narrative's most enjoyable through line.

Knowing how Hitchens's story will conclude makes it less than congenial to page through, and much about Hitchens's swashbuckling ways has been reported before (not least by himself, in the autobiography Hitch-22 and in his many essays, interviews, and speaking engagements), but Amis's tribute to him is satisfyingly lovely. Hitchens—a longtime Marxist who argued vigorously in favor of the Iraq War, although today the thing about him that would mark him as a pariah is the column in which he contended women are not funny—struck so many difficult positions that he gave absolutely everyone grounds to hate him, and yet the opposite happened. He wore a halo of charm, and it stayed with him till the end. "When was an essayist last loved?" Amis wonders. Weighed down by illness in his Houston hospital bed, Hitchens continued to float like a champagne bubble. During one terrifying episode of dyspnea—inability to breathe—Amis himself was screaming for aid as Hitchens was rushed back to the hospital from a friend's home. When the crisis passed, hours had rushed by unnoticed by Amis. It turned out that time passed a bit more slowly for Hitchens. "He drew on his Rothmans [cigarette]. 'From my point of view there were certain, uh, longueurs. But I see what you mean—in the sense of never a dull moment.' " Then Hitchens excused himself to take a trip to "the rethink parlour"—the place where one goes to empty one's stomach. Others in his situation would say "Why me?" "The cosmos," Hitchens held, "barely bothers to reply, 'Why not?' " Suavely Hitchens welcomed the many nurses and doctors who came in to gouge and bleed him. As one arrived to administer the necessary preparatory work for a pic line—that's a peripherally inserted catheter—Hitchens warmly said, "My dear, how are you doing today?" Then he told Amis, "Blood work. I used to tell my visitors,

This'll only take a minute and it doesn't hurt. Both claims are no longer true." Amis and Hitchens shared the English gift for massive understatement.

As matters worsen, Hitchens suffers and suffers and refuses to be defined by it all. His last words were "Capitalism . . . downfall." Hitchens went to his grave arguing outlandish positions, declining to bow before death's tyranny. A few days earlier Hitchens had made the decision to "make the crossing," as Amis puts it, like this: "Christopher was as usual being prodded and tested and shifted and hoisted, and he said (in a very forceful tone), 'That's enough. No more treatment now. Now I want to die.' " Amis, hearing about this, flew down to Houston. By the time he got there Hitchens had curled up into a fetal position and averted his face from the many guests in the room. "I went straight to him and kissed his cheek and said in his ear, 'Hitch, it's Mart, and I'm at your side.' " Hitchens's wife (Carol Blue), his three children, two other relatives, and another friend were present. Death arrived the way it should, in a room full of loved ones. Amis had to be coaxed away from the corpse by Blue, who would have delighted her husband with her post-mortem unsentimentality. After "the continuously undulating line at the base of the heart monitor, like a childish representation of a wavy sea, stretched itself out into a dead calm," the freshly minted widow paused hardly a moment before she started collecting her things. "Come on. There's nothing there now," she told Amis. "There's nothing in it any more. It's just—rubbish."

Though Amis allows that the end came far too soon—Hitchens was only sixty-two—he notes that since the Hitch never slept, he lived as much as a man of seventy-five. Amis writes (as many others have observed) that after an outlandish bout of dining and drinking that staggered all others present, and sent all of them collapsing into their beds, Hitchens would instead frequently retire to his study to pound out a thousand or so words of salable prose. Many a man has had as many rousing nights out as Hitchens, and many have been as productive, but few have managed both. Hitchens even wrote a series of essays about dying and gathered them in the book *Mortality*, which appeared posthumously as if to prove that the supposed dipsomaniac could out-publish most writers even as he lay in his grave. Getting more out of each day, getting more out of life, even extracting a book from death: such was the way of the Hitch, and there is much to admire in it. Hitchens lived his life as extravagantly as he loved it, and Amis's elegant tribute to his friend is a monument to both of them.

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