



The War Against Cliche: Essays and Reviews, 1971-2000

By Martin Amis

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The War Against Cliche: Essays and Reviews, 1971-2000 By Martin Amis

In this collection of essays and reviews spanning twenty-five years of criticism, Martin Amis asserts the writer's obligation to battle "not just cliches of the pen but cliches of the mind and cliches of the heart." He marshals the forces of his infamous arsenal: his language, his wit, and his intolerance for suffering fools to review, consider, and in some cases, condemn. He takes to task the best and the brightest, including Cervantes and Milton, Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, and Norman Mailer and Elmore Leonard. From "Great Books" to "Some American Prose," from "Popularity Contest" to the "Ultramundane," Amis parses the classics and the unconventional with the subversive brilliance he brings to everything he touches.

He also skewers myths about masculinity, with great skepticism and more than a dash of nose-thumbing humor. Unflinchingly, he lambastes the "supercharged banality" of Elvis, the monumentally self-absorption of Andy Warhol, and American squeamishness about movie violence. Evaluating the present participle, casting a cold eye on the Guinness Book of Records, and the sacrosanct image of Abraham Lincoln, Amis astutely surveys our cultural landscape and fluctuates between celebration and castigation, with the precision of a hypodermic.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In Martin Amis's *War Against Cliché*, a selection of critical essays and reviews published between 1971 and 2000, he establishes himself as one of the fiercest critics and commentators on the literature and culture of the late 20th century. (He has already established himself as one of the most controversial and original novelists writing in English with novels such as *Money* and *Time's Arrow*.) In his foreword to the book Amis ruefully admits that his earlier reviews reveal a rather humorless attitude towards the "Literature and Society" debate of the time. Yet this only adds to the fascination of the collection, as Amis gradually finds his critical voice in the 1980s, confirming his passionate belief that "all writing is a campaign against cliché."

In the subsequent sections of the book, this war leads to some wonderfully cutting and amusing responses to whatever crosses his path, from books on chess and nuclear proliferation to Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and the novels of his hero Vladimir Nabokov. Praise for his literary heroes is often fulsome: J.G. Ballard's *High-Rise* "is an intense and vivid bestiary, which lingers in the mind and chronically disquiets it." But his literary wrath is also devastating in its incisiveness: Thomas Harris's *Hannibal* is dismissed as "a novel of such profound and virtuoso vulgarity," while John Fowles is attacked because "he sweetens the pill: but the pill was saccharine all along." Often frank in its reappraisals (Amis concedes to being too hard on Ballard's *Crash* when reviewing the film many years later), some of the best writing is reserved for his journalism on sex manuals, chess, and his beloved football. *The War Against Cliché* will provoke strong reactions, but that only seems to confirm, rather than deny, the value of Amis's writing. --Jerry Brotton, *Amazon.co.uk*

From Library Journal

Amis's critiques cover wide-ranging topics and are well worth reading, particularly when the erudition on display is liberated by humor, regarding not only the subject under examination but often the examiner himself. Amis, best known for his novels (e.g., *London Fields*, *The Information*), recognizes an authorial foible, then pounces on it not without grace, not without vigor. His evaluations are lively, scholarly, and, on rare occasion, numbing though probably less so for those few who know as much about literature as Amis. Requiring less literary background are his essays on poker or chess, Elvis Presley, or the sexual allure of Margaret Thatcher. The Amis view is at its best or at least at its most readable when he is chatting up such standards as *Don Quixote*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Ulysses*, and *Lolita*. His lengthy commentary on Nabokov, Larkin, and Updike certainly informs, as do shorter pieces on Roth, Burroughs, Capote, Burgess, and Vidal. To paraphrase Vidal, the best writing allows the reader to participate. Without question, Amis appreciates this concept and puts it into practice in his most accomplished criticisms. Recommended for academic libraries. Robert L. Kelly, Fort Wayne Community Schs., IN
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From [Booklist](#)

What makes a literary critic great? A deep involvement with literature, a genuine respect for writers, and the knowledge and confidence that enable the critic to take both micro and macro views of any given book. A vigorous, graceful, and witty prose style is essential, as is the piece de resistance, imagination. Amis, a literary journalist for nearly 30 years, possesses all these qualities, as well as a healthy eclecticism, and to top it off, he's British. Some of the shrewdest and funniest of his incisive reviews skewer American presumptions and naivete, starting with a hilarious takedown of Robert Bly's *Iron John*. Amis has a keen historical sense, writing brilliant assessments of books about nuclear weapons in which he savagely debunked the SDI fantasy in 1988. But the lion's share of this animated volume, a great feast for serious

readers, is his book-after-book reviews of the work of Murdoch, Burgess, and Ballard; his penetrating essays on Nabokov and Larkin; his piquant appraisals of Elmore Leonard and Tom Wolfe; and his annoyance that Roth writes so well. *Donna Seaman*
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Users Review

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