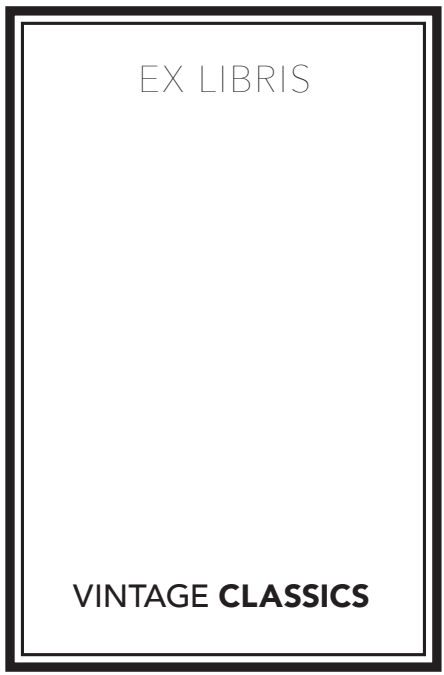
The Rachel Papers

'A masterpiece… energetic, angry, honest and so funny'
The Times

Martin Amis

VINTAGE CLASSICS



MARTIN AMIS

Martin Amis was twenty-three when he wrote his first novel, *The Rachel Papers* (1973). Over the next half century – in fourteen more novels, two collections of short stories, eight works of literary criticism and reportage, and his acclaimed memoir, *Experience* – he established himself as the most distinctive and influential prose stylist of his generation. To many of his readers, Amis was also the funniest. His intoxicating comedic gifts express a profound understanding of the human experience, particularly its most shocking cruelties, and Amis wrote with pathos and verve on an astonishing range of subjects, from masculinity and movie violence to nuclear weapons and Nazi doctors. His books, which have been translated into thirty-eight languages, provide an indelible portrait and critique of late-capitalist society at the turn of the twenty-first century. He died in 2023.

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Introduction to the 50th anniversary edition

The book you are holding in your hands would not, could not, be written today.

'Great novels are shocking; and then, after the shock dies down, you get aftershocks,' wrote Martin Amis of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* in 1992. 'People are still wandering up to Dmitri Nabokov and asking him what it was like, having a dirty old man for a father.'

This is not to compare Charles Highway, the over-sexed teenage protagonist of *The Rachel Papers*, to *Lolita*'s child-molesting Humbert Humbert; or Amis's precocious debut to Nabokov's divisive masterwork. But both books are preceded by their bad reputations. One shared assumption is that, morally, their characters are given a free pass – which leads to a still more dangerous, pervasive belief, conflating the authors themselves with their fictional creations.

The Rachel Papers was published on 15 November 1973, when Amis was twenty-four years old. It won the Somerset Maugham Award, though contemporary reviews were mixed, and fixated on the Martin–Kingsley connection. Fifty years later, to the post-#MeToo ear, the subject matter sounds unpromising. Charles Highway looks back at his adolescence on the eve of his twentieth birthday. 'The Rachel Papers' are the extensive files he's been keeping about Rachel Noyes, the girlfriend he's just broken up with, detailing his seduction tactics, the sex they have, and his critique of her physical and mental shortcomings.

In my early twenties, I suggested *The Rachel Papers* to an all-female book club. I'd read it before, in my teens, and found it full of edgy humour and daring, unsayable truths. I was sure that my friends would love it – but at the book club, Charles was in the stocks. The charges against him? Cruelty, misogyny and generally

being way too gross. My friends were particularly bothered by the fact that Rachel is given so little airtime. They were angered by a dream Charles has in which Rachel is sexually demeaned, and outraged that a large spot on the end of her nose is the beginning of the end of his attraction to her. Mostly, though, they just didn't *like* him.

Before I re-read the novel in my late thirties, I talked to a friend who'd heard of the book – that bad reputation – but never read it. She asked me what it was like. 'It's a really good portrait of adolescence,' I insisted rather lamely. 'And it's very funny.' Unfortunately, the only bit I could quote from memory was the riff where Charles compares female genitals to a wet Brillo-pad and a paper-bagful of kedgeree.

'Oh,' said my friend. 'So you're an apologist for *The Rachel Papers*.'

I approached the novel with some trepidation. Why had I loved it so much? Was I going to have to apologise, not for the book, but for my callow, unenlightened younger self?

Of course, the novel itself put me straight to rights. If it were merely a book full of gags about a manipulative, misogynistic monster, it wouldn't still be in print after fifty years. I was amazed by how much I'd forgotten. I had remembered the grotesquery: the paper-bagful of kedgeree, and the 'worms of dirt' that Charles notices when he glances down 'at the undulating area between my stomach and the stomach of a girl I just so happened to be poking at the time'. I remembered that he'd been a bit unfair about Rachel's spot, and hilarious about some of his own ('a fine double-yolker'). But I had forgotten that for most of the book, Charles is in love. He tells Rachel he loves her before she does! I'd forgotten how hard he is on himself: no one in this novel is more pilloried than Charles Highway. I'd forgotten that he's terrified of his parents divorcing, and that he spends a lot of his time either afraid or in tears. I was surprised by how little wanking there is and how rarely Charles enjoys sex. When he and Rachel finally sleep together, she has to help him with the condom, because he's never used one before.

In short, I too had remembered him as much worse than he really is. It turned out that the apology I owed was to Charles.

To return to that paper-bagful of kedgeree: in my memory, it was Rachel's own genitals that provoke the cruel comparison. Quite the opposite. 'Rachel's was the most pleasing I had ever come across,' Charles tells us. 'Not, for her, the wet Brillo-pad, nor the paper-bagful of kedgeree, nor the greasy waistcoat pocket, the gashed vole's stomach, the clump of veins, glands, tubes. No. It was infinitely moist but not wet, exquisitely shaped and yet quite amorphous, all black ink and velvet recessed into pubic hair that resembled my own as a Persian carpet resembles a mat rug.'

And Charles's own genitals do not escape inspection. There is a comically awful scene in which, paranoid about STDs (Charles is paranoid about pretty much everything), he considers lopping his penis off with a razor blade, then settles for 'working it over':

> Normal procedure: I flicked it; slapped it; I garrotted it with both hands; a final searing Chinese-burn – a last attempt to tempt out a drop of that most dreaded commodity, discharge. None was forthcoming. It looked at me as if bullied, picked-on. Cautiously at first, I applied a nailbrush to the helmet. I combed, with the rigour of an orphan matron, my pubic hairs. I swabbed my balls with aftershave. Perhaps a pipe-cleaner, steeped in Dettol?

Much later, when he's finally about to sleep with Rachel, once she's helped him with that pesky condom, he makes the mistake of glancing down. 'My rig, in its pink muff, looked unnatural, absurd, like an overdressed Scottie dog.'

There's a lot going on here. First, and most obviously, Amis is being virtuosic with the language and, whatever you think of the subject matter, it bears repeating that this endlessly inventive novel was written by a very young man. On that count alone it is deeply impressive. It's also undeniably funny, in an outrageous, adolescent way. ('Surely,' Charles muses, 'nice things are dull, and nasty things

are funny. The nastier a thing is, the funnier it gets.') Second, he's hit upon some interesting truths: that there is variation in our genitals (and why shouldn't they be a fit subject for literary description?); and that while genitals have potential for ugliness, even repulsion, the condition of being in love can transform them into objects of aesthetic adoration.

Are the Brillo-pad and the kedgeree misogynistic? I don't think so. Amis (speaking through Charles) is conscious of his hero's weakness for baroque bravado. 'Told Geof how much I wanted to fuck an Older Woman,' Charles writes in his notes. 'He said it beat him why, since I was always going on about how horrible they looked. He asked how the fuck I knew, anyway, having never poked one or seen one naked. I had no reply.' Then Charles attempts to answer Geof's question for the reader:

> I wonder. Transferred disgust of my own body? No; too boring. Dislike of women? Hardly, because I think male oldsters look just as dreadful, if less divertingly so . . . Sheer rhetoric? Yes.

Also worth noting: Rachel's own thoughts on women. 'Well, let's face it, women usually look pretty terrible by the time they're thirty-five,' she tells Charles as they're cuddling in bed. '*Scaly* faces. Figures go, hair gets matty and dry. Men often get better. At least their faces don't get all . . . scaly, like women's. So it's good that they can have families. Like your mother.'

More truths, this time rather hard. The way that youth sees age as a separate species, which is one of the novel's key themes, brilliantly done. Then there's the poignancy of Rachel's unwittingly self-hating critique of older women. It's a well-known irony that misogyny infects its victims, too. Yes, society is unfair to women, and yes, we all hope that's changing. All Amis is doing here is observing the reality in which he/Charles finds himself back in 1973. We might wish for a different reality, but is it the novelist's job to create one?

Let's stick with Rachel for a bit. The charge often levelled against Amis is that Charles takes up so much space that Rachel never becomes real. But this book is explicitly about being an insufferable, solipsistic teenager: a key part of its effect is that we're locked inside Charles's mind, just as Charles is. And is there anyone in all of literature less 'in the moment' than Charles Highway, with his hyper-articulacy and his internal running commentary on his sexual tactics? Even when things go well, and a girl called Gloria performs some longed-for fellatio, we read: 'Visually, it was most appealing, but all I could feel was a remote, irrelevant numbness – plus, in my legs, cramp and pins-and-needles respectively. Have I come already, perhaps? I asked myself.'

So it seems perverse to arraign Amis for not spending enough time on the other characters. (A bit like complaining that Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is overly concerned with Stephen Dedalus.) What surprised me, third time through, is how much we actually *do* find out about Rachel. Far from being the meek victim of Charles's manipulative seduction technique, she turns out to be almost as bad. When Charles and Rachel meet, she's already seeing DeForest Hoeniger, a visiting American student. She strings both men along together for a while, sleeping with DeForest but not Charles, until her affections list in favour of Charles. Then she goes to spend a weekend at Charles's house without telling DeForest, who is heartbroken when he finds out. She assures him she hasn't slept with Charles. '[DeForest] appeared to believe her, but, five minutes later, burst into tears. Cracked. That was ten days ago. Since then? Smashed up his car twice; crying all the time.' On the phone to Rachel, unsure which man she's going to choose, Charles finds he only just has time 'to slap my hand over the telephone, so she didn't hear me cry'.

When they finally do get together, one of the first things Rachel does is to tell Charles all about DeForest's sexual shortcomings, imitating the face he used to make immediately before premature ejaculation. She lies elaborately to her mother in order to secure her fortnight with Charles and his sister. She also invents an absent,

glamorous father, presumably to make herself more interesting, a ploy comparable to Charles's own posturing and self-mythologising. 'It's so silly, I always do it,' she says when she finally comes clean.

And I love Martin Amis for this. I love that in this book, women behave badly too. It's a book about *being a teenager*, a state that is not unique to boys. I think this was what most appealed to me when I read *The Rachel Papers* for the first time: it is more than possible for an adolescent girl to recognise herself in Charles. Besides, back then, he was all I had; I encountered no equivalently funny, filthy tract by a female author. Historically, it's fallen to male authors with their male privilege to pioneer frank discussion of sexual desire in mainstream literary fiction (Thomas Hardy, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, John Updike, Philip Roth . . .). However unfair that might be, thank goodness some of them did!

Amis himself was fresh from the final frontier of adolescence when he wrote *The Rachel Papers*. His generosity with his own experience helps make Charles feel real to us – but the fact that they share some biographical details does not mean that Martin Amis and Charles Highway are the same person. To anyone who's actually read the book, it will seem crazy that this should need spelling out. The ironic distance between author and character is one of the novel's chief pleasures. Charles might be telling the story, but Amis has sprung the narrative with booby traps, sending his unwitting protagonist off on a series of pratfalls. He has Charles quote his own poetry, which makes E. J. Thribb look like a serious contender for the Forward Prize:

> Face full of goo,
> Annotating
> Fuck-lists, mating
> Smells honey-dew;
> Stoked-up heat-haze,
> That guiltless laugh-
> ter in the bath-
> room: the dog days.

Charles is applying to Oxford, and already fancies himself an expert on art and literature. Amis slyly plants two women who appear to know more about his special subjects than he does. When Charles invites Rachel to see William Blake's paintings at the Tate, he's alarmed to find that 'she spoke of that engraver with enthusiasm and surprising familiarity. Obviously, if we did go, I would have to mug up on him'. Still more delicious is an early scene when Charles and his friend Geoffrey bring two girls, Susan and Anastasia, back to Charles's room – which Charles has carefully stage-dressed in case of female company. Susan opens one of the books so casually littered about. 'She was reading an essay on Herbert, rather a good one,' Charles notes as he looks over her shoulder. '"Herbert Who?" she must have wanted to ask.' But at the end of the scene, on his way out of the room, he hears Susan giving a fluent critique of the essay in an 'indignant monotone'.

At the end of the novel, Charles attends his Oxford interview. His preparatory notes for this are almost as obnoxious as the Rachel Papers themselves. '*Accents, Avoiding Detailed Discussion, Dress, The Female Don* – and sub-heads – "Blinking", "Entrances", "Leg-crossing", "Flattery, indirect", etc.' His interviewer sees his potential but he also sees straight through him, and administers a thorough dressing-down before agreeing to admit him. 'I want you to do a great deal of hard thinking in the next nine or ten months – I'm going to take you anyway; if I don't, somebody else will and you'll only get worse.'

The Rachel Papers is also a book about first love, and we shouldn't forget that Charles has it bad, in all the usual ways. 'Instead of being merely bland, food had begun to seem irrelevant, superfluous, wholly alien. Must be Rachel . . . It stayed in my body like a dull allergy.' I thought of Janet Malcolm's lovely observation in her last book, *Still Pictures*, about 'the habit of love we form in childhood, the virus of lovesickness that lodges itself within us, for which there is no vaccine'.

Charles and Rachel are in love with being in love, as we all are, first time round. After the angst of the chase, there is one perfect,

'unfallen week', where they spend every afternoon in bed. Then Rachel moves in with Charles, and reality gradually makes its unwelcome presence felt. Three notorious 'incidents' combine to produce in Charles what we currently call 'the ick' – the terrible volte-face of sexual attraction, when someone we'd previously desired begins ineluctably to repel us. First, Charles finds, when sniffing a discarded pair of Rachel's knickers, a 'stripe of suede-brown shit, as big as my finger'. Charles resists his 'perverse desire' to confront Rachel with evidence that she defecates. Up until this point, their relationship has been 'frantic avowals and wordy mutual praise . . . Neither of us defecated, spat, had bogeys or arses'. But his discomfort manifests itself in 'a teenage sulk' when she gets in that afternoon. 'It was most illuminating. Our relationship until that moment had been so straightforward and idealized, so utterly without *candour*, that when the first case of honest, rotten moodiness turned up, I (and Rachel, also) discovered that we had no machinery for breaking through it.'

After his sulk, they make up and have a lot of sex, then fall asleep together. In the morning, it turns out that Rachel has wet the bed: this is the 'Second Incident'. Charles gets a bad rap for feeling ashamed to be with a bed-wetter. But I think it probably is quite off-putting, to a teenager who has idealised his first love, to wake up in a cooling pool of her urine. (Remember Rachel on DeForest's sexual inadequacies.) And it should be noted that Charles is outwardly very kind to Rachel about it, and inwardly attempts empathy. 'I tried to imagine her anxiety, after the emotional and sexual drubbing. I tried to imagine what insidious, coaxing little dream she must have had . . . No, too sad, I couldn't bear it.'

The Third Incident is the spot and, once again, Charles's real issue is with the lack of candour. He chafes against the constrictions of a relationship in which he can't point out, even humorously, that his girlfriend has a big pimple on the end of her nose. To object to the pious window-dressings of first love – well, that seems to me like an intelligent response. A real coming-of-age novel. But I can also understand why it so bothered my friends, reading this

book for the first time in their early twenties, one or two heartbreaks in. Too close for comfort. It's an unpalatable truth that when we are falling out of obsessive love, we become hyper-critical of the love-object before we achieve escape velocity. Worse still to consider that this is also true when someone is falling out of love with *us*. 'Why does it take so long coming and so little time going?' Charles asks his father at the end of the novel. 'My dear boy,' his father replies, 'if I knew the answer to that question I should be a happy man.'

Above all, there is a deep nostalgic pleasure to be had from *The Rachel Papers*. The essence of adolescence is here: luckily for us, Amis was clever enough to write it all down before he forgot. I particularly enjoyed the weird, transient mood-highs that Charles experiences. Remember those? 'Elation was gathering on me like a drug.' 'I was still vibrant from an intense Conscious-of-Being attack, having had a highly soulful walk from the Gate.' After Charles has finished sitting his papers for Oxford, Rachel meets him outside the exam room. They make their way to the park 'in a handicapped shuffle, arms everywhere', adolescently unable to keep their hands off one another, and lie down on the grass. 'In our noses the smell of trees, soil, and our bodies. O my youth.'

O my youth. Ironic or straight? It works both ways, a quietly powerful moment in a novel full of noisy jokes. It's very easy to be reductive about *The Rachel Papers*. But this comic, compact book is deceptively complex. Think of how Amis tripped Charles up by revealing Rachel's superior knowledge of Blake's paintings. A merely good writer would be content to leave things there, egg dripping down Charles's face. A great writer – a writer like Martin Amis – hands his ridiculous hero a towel, and reminds us, just for a second, of his humanity. On the next page, Charles goes along to the Tate to mug up on the exhibition ahead of his date with Rachel. (I know, what a creep.) But then we read: 'I was a bit ashamed, actually, having not been along before then. Because I really quite liked Blake – and not just for the fucks he had got me, either.'

Re-reading *The Rachel Papers* is a bit like re-reading Salinger's

Catcher in the Rye: as a teenager you think Holden's a badass, then you meet him again as an adult and find this sad, lonely soul going prematurely grey, grieving the death of his younger brother. Now, I'm not suggesting that Charles Highway deserves our pity, as Holden unquestionably does. Charles is an arrogant, bumptious, wise-cracking smartarse. But he's also uncertain and fragile, filled with doubt and self-loathing, alive to beauty. It's this multiplicity that makes the novel so obviously the work of someone who would go on to become a major literary talent. And it doesn't matter that no one would write it now, because Martin Amis already has.

—Claire Lowdon, 2023

The Rachel Papers

Seven o'clock: Oxford

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, waistless figure, corrugated ribcage and bandy legs gang 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. They're quite different. I remember I used to have to fold the bands of my trousers almost double, and bulk out the seats with shirts intended for grown men. I dress more thoughtfully now, though, not so much with taste as with insight.) But I *have* got one of those fashionable reedy 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 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, however, is that I am nineteen years of age, and twenty tomorrow.

Twenty, of course, is the real turning-point. Sixteen, eighteen, twenty-one: these are arbitrary milestones, enabling you only to get arrested for H.P.-payment evasion, get married, buggered, executed, and so on: external things. – Naturally, one avoids like the plague such mischievous doctrines as 'you're as young as you feel', which have doubtless resulted in so many trim fifty-year-olds flopping down dead in their tracksuits, haggard hippies checking out on overdoses, precarious queers getting their caps and crowns stomped in by bestial hitch-hikers. Twenty may

not be the start of maturity but, in all conscience, it's the end of youth.

To achieve, at once, dramatic edge and thematic symmetry I elect to place my time of birth on the stroke of midnight. In fact, mother's was a prolix and generally rather inelegant parturition; she went into labour about now (i.e. about seven p.m., December 5th, twenty years ago), not to come out of it again until past twelve, the result being a moist four-pound waif that had to be taken to hospital for a fortnight's priming. My father had intended – Christ knows why – to watch the whole thing, but got browned off after a couple of hours. I have long been sure that there is great significance in this anecdote, although I have never been able to track it down. Perhaps I'll find the answer at the moment at which, two decades earlier, I first sniffed the air.

I confess that I've been looking forward to tonight for months. I thought when Rachel turned up about half an hour ago that she was going to ruin it all, but she left in time. I need to make the transition decorously, officially, and to re-experience the tail-end of my youth. Because something has definitely happened to me, and I'm very keen to know what it is. So: if I run through, 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-disgust 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 shall make. Or not, as the case may be. Anyway, it ought to be good fun.

Now it's – let me see – just gone seven. Five hours of teenage to go. Five hours; then I wander into that noisome Brobdingnagian world the child sees as adulthood.

I snap open my dinky black suitcase and up-end it on the bed; folders, note-pads, files, bulging manilla envelopes, wads of paper trussed in string, letters, carbons, diaries, the marginalia of my youth, cover the patchwork quilt. I jostle the papers into makeshift

stacks. Ought they to be arranged chronologically, by subject, or by theme? Patently, some rigorous clerking will have to be done tonight. At random I pick up a diary, cross the room, and lean against the bookcase, which creaks. I sip my wine and turn the page.

The second weekend of September. At that point I had only a couple more days of home to endure before going down to London. It was on the Thursday that my father, drinking spirits for the first time in years, had wondered why I didn't 'have a crack' at getting into Oxford and I had nodded back at him, wondering why not, too. I was going to have a year off before university anyway. My English master had always impressed upon me how fucking clever I was. I didn't particularly want to go anywhere else. It seemed logical.

Mother got all bustly the next morning (fixing everything up) but came on vague and spiritual over lunch and resolved to take an afternoon nap. When I asked her what there was left to do she free-associated, until it became clear, as a jigsaw becomes clear, that she had succeeded only in telling my sister that I would be coming to stay and also (one assumes) giving her the usual half-hour rundown on the perils of the late menopause, and other such female smut.

'So,' I said, 'I ring the Oxford Admissions and UCCA *and* the Tutors.'

Mother left the kitchen with one hand flat on her forehead and the other suspended in the air behind her. 'Yes, dear,' she called.

It took about an hour because I am surprisingly ineffective on the telephone. I spoke to key tarts in the University Administration complex and finally got on to the Tutors, where a shifty dotard told me that it wasn't for him personally to say but he was fairly sure they would be able to fit me in. I realized then that I was half hoping for some insurmountable snag, like entrance dates. Yet it all seemed to be going forward.

I didn't know why I hoped this. Oxford meant more work, of