

Combative political commentator Christopher Hitchens discusses Jews, friends and enemies with Jenni Frazer

# Bellow, Amis and me

## INTERVIEW

Former radical Trotskyist, Christopher Hitchens is in fine form — even after an overnight flight from Washington, countless cigarettes and a couple of double measures of Johnny Walker Black Label whisky. He is in London to take part in a double act at Jewish Book Week with his oldest and closest friend, Martin Amis, whom he has known for nearly 40 years since their first encounter at Oxford.

"It was 1970, I would have been 20 or 21," he recalls. "James Fenton [the poet] and I ran into this couple. The girl I knew — Gully Wells, the step-daughter of A J Ayer, who was said to be the prettiest girl in the university. She was with this person I didn't know and James introduced us. As we walked away, I said to James, is that any relation of Kingsley? And he said yes... I think the only thing I would have thought was that I hoped he wasn't as right-wing as his father."

They did not meet properly until three years later, just after Amis had written his first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, of which, Hitchens wryly recalls, the publishers were so unsure that Amis was forced to hold his own launch party. The two met in a Holborn wine bar in London and got on instantly. They fell into a routine of regular Friday lunches. "Well," says Hitchens, rather uncharacteristically colouring, "I had a fling with his sister after that first party..."

"We found the same things amusing. We found a lot of the same things boring, not all of them, because he's very interested in football, whereas I think it's the last word in how not to have a good time. But we had a very similar idea of what was phoney, contemptible." They were each other's best man at their second weddings — both to Jewish women — and are godfathers to each other's children. But whereas Hitchens classified everyone and everything in terms of where they stood politically, Amis was never terribly interested. These days, however, Hitchens notes much more political interest and awareness in his friend. For his part, he says he has learned a lot about literature from Amis, and he is sure his own writing has improved from knowing him.

Famously, Amis introduced Hitchens to Saul Bellow. Famously, and almost disastrously,

"Martin was very nervous and wanted it to go well", and beseeched his friend not to bait the Nobel Prizewinner politically. Hitchens assured Amis that he would behave himself.

"Saul told us how he was hired by *Time* magazine in the 1950s as a book reviewer. He turned up at the *Time* offices and was asked if he'd had his interview with the editor-in-chief, Whitaker Chambers, yet. [Chambers, a former Soviet spy who had changed sides, was ultimately responsible for the jailing of Alger Hiss after testifying against him to the notorious House Un-American Activities Committee.] Bellow was told: 'You're not really hired until you've been interviewed by Mr Chambers.'

"So Saul turned up that afternoon to be ushered into Chambers's presence. 'Good day,' said Chambers. 'What did you study at university?' 'English literature,' said Bellow. 'Excellent,' said Chambers. 'Would you give me your opinion of William Wordsworth as a poet?'

"Saul said: 'I don't dissent from the prevailing view that he was a Romantic poet.' Chambers said: 'There's no place for you here. Leave the office by the close of business.'"

Bellow was thus fired before he had even begun. What if he had got the job? Would, Hitchens reflects, the Saul Bellow he became have been lost to literature? And what was the "correct" answer that Chambers wanted? Hitchens said to Bellow: "I can tell you. You should have replied, 'William Wordsworth was a republican revolutionary poet who saw the

light and became a conservative and a monarchist after the French revolution." Bellow said: "Yes, I see that now."

So things were going rather well, Hitchens thought. Amis had no reason to be ashamed of him. "But, you know, in Chekhov plays, if there's a gun on the mantelpiece in Act One, someone will be firing it in Act Two." And as it turned out, the gun on the mantelpiece in Bellow's home was a copy of *Commentary* magazine, the bible of the neo-conservative movement. Its cover story was "Edward Said, professor of terror". Hitchens was close friends with Said and had written a book with him of critical essays relating to the Palestinians.

"At dinner, Bellow started to talk about this article and got up and fetched the magazine from the next room to read from it. I thought, Martin knows very well that I'm a friend of Edward's; what is he going to think if I sit here and don't say anything? So I said to Bellow: 'I think I ought to tell you that Edward is a friend of mine.' And Martin kicked me under the table. I could feel the atmosphere curdling — not between Bellow and me, but between Martin and me. He looked like a dog being washed, utterly miserable."

Amis was so mortified at Hitchens's defence of Said that he apologised to Bellow the next day. But Bellow, apparently, was more curious than furious: he just laughed and indicated that he had enjoyed the (four-hour) argument. He later wrote Hitchens a kind note after Hitchens had written an introduction to his novel, *The Adventures of Augie March*.



Photo: John Riffkin

**'Britain has an unbelievable level of Jew-hatred — very bilious, unchecked, uncondemned and preached to children'**

## CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS IN BRIEF

**Born:** Portsmouth, April 13 1949

**Educated:** The Leys School, Cambridge, and Balliol College, Oxford: third-class degree, PPE

**Career:** Began working for *New Statesman* in early 1970s; emigrated to USA in 1981

**Married:** to Eleni Meleagrou, two children, Alexander and Sophia; to Carol Blue, one daughter, Antonia

**Brother:** Peter; writes for *The Mail on Sunday*; two-and-a-half years younger, political opposite of Christopher (right-of-centre politics, embrace of Christianity)

**Columnist and commentator:** *The Nation*, *Slate*, *Vanity Fair*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Atlantic Monthly*

**Books:** *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*; *Why Orwell Matters*; *Love, Poverty and War*; *Thomas*

*Jefferson*; *Thomas Paine's Rights of Man*; *A Long Short War: the Postponed Liberation of Iraq*; et al. With Edward Said: *Blaming the Victims: Spurious Scholarship and the Palestinian Question*

**Main friend:** Martin Amis

**Main Enemies:** Henry Kissinger, Sydney Blumenthal and the blog *Hitchens Watch*, entirely devoted to attacking Hitchens

converted to Christianity — are devout Christians. Christopher, on the other hand, whose guiding principle throughout his life has been an antipathy to religion of any sort, appears rather to have taken to the idea of being Jewish.

Underlining his embrace of Judaism, Hitchens told his second wife-to-be, who comes from a secular, leftist, Jewish family, that he thought they should be married by a rabbi, hating the idea of a "bureaucratic" wedding. "There was a guy I knew, Rabbi Bob Goldberg; he was the emeritus rabbi of a Reform congregation — he'd married Arthur Miller to Marilyn Monroe. In fact, he had Marilyn's conversion certificate (which he refused all offers to sell)."

The rabbi was an old leftist from way back and thus Christopher Hitchens, about the most unlikely candidate under a chupah that one can imagine, was married in a Jewish ceremony.

"Carol [his wife] was OK with that. But it didn't mean anything to her. And I didn't succeed in giving our daughter [Antonia] any Jewish names. Carol is indifferent to religion: I find there's something lacking in that." This is from the man whose forthcoming book is entitled *God is Not Great — How Religion Poisons Everything*.

Hitchens's journey from full-on Trot has taken him down some strange roads. As a long-time supporter of the Palestinians, these days he is warning of "Islamic maximalism" among them. "There could be a collision between apocalyptic weaponry and messianic politics" in the region, he warns. "It is a very agonising thing for me. My attitude to Judaism is very critical, too. I would not let anyone burn down a synagogue. If Jews want to abandon a synagogue, that's fine, but the trashing of Torah scrolls has a different resonance. And I'm not going to have the state of Israel destroyed. Post-Zionism is fine by me, but I'm not going to have the place destroyed by Bin Laden or Ahmadinejad. Palestinians have to make up their mind which side they're on in this."

Coming back to Britain from the US, Hitchens notes "an unbelievable level of Jew-hatred — very bilious, unchecked, uncondemned, and preached to children... I don't think it will ever be possible for a Jew to feel completely comfortable. And, in a way, I don't think one should want it."

At the age of 38, Hitchens discovered that he was Jewish. "I used to have the vague feeling when I was growing up that there was something in the family background that I didn't know. I suppose I did notice that my grandmother — our favourite relation, Dodo — looked like a gypsy." In fact, his grandmother was from Liverpool but had lived for some time in Oxford. Hitchens has since heard from the Oxford Menorah Society, which has supplied historical material to help him find out more about her and her time there during the 1930s. "Her parents had settled in Liverpool because it was where they landed when they arrived from Wroclaw (Breslau) on the German/Polish border. They came in the 1880s. I have wedding certificates — Peter, my brother, went and found them. It says, in copperplate, 'Married according to the rites of the German and Polish Jews'. She — my grandmother — was born Dorothy Levin."

The brothers (Peter is a journalist on the *Mail on Sunday* after a long career with the *Express* group) discovered Dodo's story by chance, when Peter was getting married. He brought his fiancée to see his grandmother. "She said to him afterwards, 'Very nice girl, she's Jewish, isn't she?' And Peter said, 'Yes, what of it?' Dodo said, 'Well, I've got something to tell you...'

His mother, Yvonne, Hitchens thinks, "had decided she wanted to pass. And certainly she wanted her children to". (Yvonne had died by the time Dodo told the brothers.) The discovery had an odd, contrasting, effect on the two brothers. Peter and his wife — who