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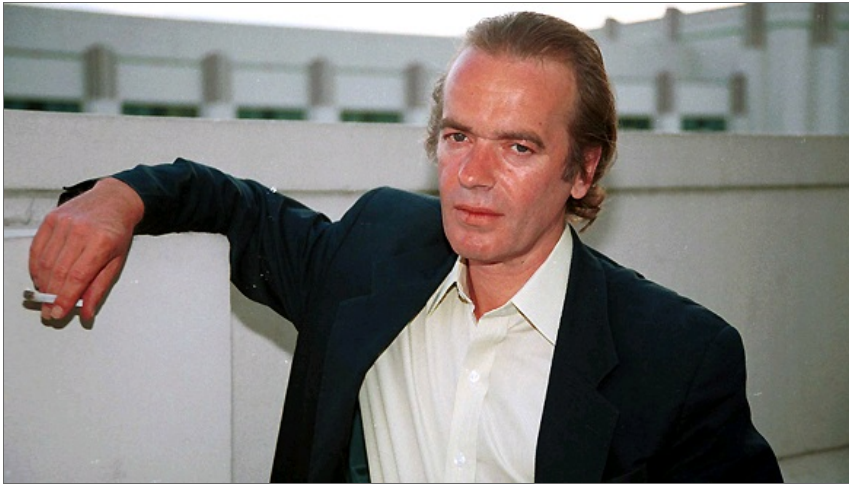
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Let's talk about sex

Novelist Martin Amis explores the sexual revolution in *The Pregnant Widow*

Last Updated: Friday, May 14, 2010 | 5:03 PM ET Comments 5 Recommend 21
By Flannery Dean, CBC News



British author Martin Amis revisits the 1970s sexual revolution in his new novel, *The Pregnant Widow*. (Frederick M. Brown/Online USA/Getty Images)

"Revolutions are fascinating things — frightening things and challenging things," says author Martin Amis, on the phone from his home in London.

They make compelling subjects for fiction, too. His last novel, *House of Meetings*, carved a compelling personal narrative out of the brutal realities of Stalin-era Russia. His latest work of fiction, *The Pregnant Widow*, again makes a meal out of social transformation, though this time it's the sexual revolution that receives Amis's full attention.

'For my father's generation, perhaps the greatest event was the migration from the countryside to the city. In mine, it was the sexual revolution.'

— Martin Amis

The Pregnant Widow attempts to sort out the effects of one "erotically decisive" summer in Italy for Keith Nearing, an Oxford undergrad who aims to join in on all the fun—conscience be damned. A kind of *Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* with a subtle moral thrust, *The Pregnant Widow* doesn't just sink its teeth into the luxury of sexual liberty — it tries to make it comprehensible as a historical moment.

Amis is labelled a "fire-starter" in his native Britain — when the 60-year-old icon offers an opinion on any subject, from Islam to aging, a hundred howling editorials follow. But he's unfailingly polite over the phone.

"For my father's generation, perhaps the greatest event was the migration from the countryside to the city," says Amis. "In mine, it was the sexual revolution, which changed everything."

FEATURE: Amis talks about his 2007 novel, *House of Meetings*

In *The Pregnant Widow*, Amis presents those changes as "clauses" in a revolutionary manifesto. Item number one: "There will be sex before marriage. Sex before marriage, for almost everyone. And not only with the person you were going to get married to." Clause number two is even more explosive: "Women also have carnal appetites."

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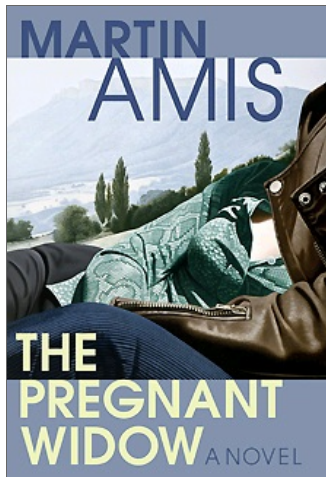


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In the 1960s, the notion of sex before marriage was part of the increasing demand for social and economic parity among young women. "A liberated woman is one who has sex before marriage and a job after," said feminist author Gloria Steinem in 1960. (Fifty years later, many women can take or leave both.)



(Random House)

The Pregnant Widow was originally conceived as "a vast autobiographical work" about Amis's own experiences living through the sexual revolution. It was an exercise in confession that failed to come alive, however. "I had to abandon that after two or three years of work, because it was just a sort of huge corpse. I realized that autobiography is a horrible limitation on your freedom as a novelist."

That hasn't stopped critics from mining the novel for real-life connections — Amis's longtime friend and fellow provocateur, celebrated journalist Christopher Hitchens, has been "outed" as Keith's adopted brother Nicholas. Amis openly discusses the parallel between his sister Sally and the character of Violet, but isn't impressed with the effort to extract gossip from his work.

"I used to say, 'I'm writing a blindingly autobiographical book.' And some people just sort of trudged on with that. But if you think about that, [Keith Nearing] is an

illegitimate orphan and a failed poet who spends most of his life working in advertising. Now, where is the correspondence to my life? It's plain — it's patently not autobiographical. But once the bee is in the bonnet, it's hard to get it out. But trying to track down characters and all that, that's just yellow journalism."

Yet there are parallels between the author and his lead character — and Amis freely discusses those. Like Keith Nearing, Amis was 20 in 1970, and for both the author and his invention, the end of abstinence as an official policy among the majority of young women was "thrilling."

"The multiplication of possibilities was enormous. I can remember what it was like before, in the '60s — the tremendous battle to try and get anywhere with girls and their tremendous stubbornness, particularly working-class girls."

Hearing yes instead of no is an unforgettable experience in any young man's life, but for an entire generation of boys inured to getting their faces slapped, the universal affirmation must have taken some getting used to. That mix of shock and awe is conveyed comically in the novel. The sight of a topless young woman in his holiday party prompts 20-year-old Keith to wonder, "Where were the police? Where on earth were the police? It was a question he was often asking himself, in these uncertain times."

The temptation to provide an autobiographical gloss to *The Pregnant Widow* is just that — tempting. But to do so dulls Amis's achievement. While the novel is irreverent, comic and wicked — essential qualities of any Amis novel, even a few not-so-great ones — it's also one of the author's most coherent and sensitive tales. Great care has been taken to explore how Keith and the secondary characters digest the novelty of their sudden and complete sexual freedom. Not everyone makes it out OK in the end. There are casualties.

According to Amis, the sexual revolution resulted in a "wound" for an entire generation. In the novel, romantic love takes a blow, and that injury results in a disassociation of feeling for both men and women. There is sex before marriage, but there's little love. After Keith's sexual awakening in Italy — it's not his first time, but it's his most complex sexual encounter — he senses the adjustment. He realizes that something has "been separated out" from sex.

"The revolution was a trauma for everyone. [Keith's] was more extreme because of the tremendous peculiarity of the girl [he hooks up with] and that she is ahead of that time, by god," says Amis.

To name the "girl" Amis is talking about would spoil a major twist in the novel and the moral life of the hero. Needless to say, this femme fatale is definitely of a new type within the canon of English anti-heroines — she's a sexual adventuress straight out of a casting call for *Rock of Love Bus*. For the author, the character is a kind of cultural cosmonaut, the slutty ghost of sexuality future.

"What he runs into [with her] is pornography, really, which is well over the horizon. There wasn't any in 1970, unless you went to some filthy shop in Soho. Now it's just absolutely central to the culture."

The novel looks ahead to the "industrialization" of pornography, a subject that Amis appears to find both fascinating and terrifying. (He rhymes off pornography-related internet viewing stats that will make you wish you were born a dog or a goat — anything but a human with wireless access.) But that's not the only vision of the future that's on offer. By novel's end, it's clear that Keith Nearing is something of a cultural cosmonaut, too. Thirty years after the

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Q & A: Amis on his non-fiction collection *The Second Plane: September 11: Terror and Boredom*

sexual revolution, he's brokered peace between love and desire. It's the kind of happy ending that contemporary culture can only hope for.

The Pregnant Widow is in stores now.

Flannery Dean is a writer based in Hamilton.

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BrentPulford wrote:

Posted 2010/05/18
at 9:24 AM ET

I grew up during the so-called sexual revolution. Given that I was smack in the middle of it it didn't seem like anything out of the ordinary. The only people who really would have seen it as a revolution would have been my parents and grandparents. Frankly I think Mr. Amis is using a socio/cultural shift to justify being chronically horny



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sklars wrote:

Posted 2010/05/17
at 5:16 PM ET

I'm one of you, P.J. Try not to presume.



Agree | Disagree

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pj meagher wrote:

Posted 2010/05/17
at 4:55 PM ET

Sklars wrote. BS
There was it [and it was the 60s.] With the "Pill"
You were probably born after that ?
The scarred generation...WW2 ..yes we got lucky, we didn't and still don't whine
Try and be happy.



Agree | Disagree

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pj meagher wrote:

Posted 2010/05/17
at 3:58 PM ET

Gerra grip kid. it was an amazing era. The "pill" released women from bondage.
Love and a quick jump and a giggle has nothing to do with commitment for life.
I think you're saying you missed out ?



Agree | Disagree

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sklars wrote:

Posted 2010/05/17
at 2:09 PM ET

There was no sexual revolution.

Only an indulgent and spoiled generation that marks the apex of this civilization's material development, coming to grips with its own hormones. They talked about it and everything else about themselves openly, to a degree unmatched prior or since. But in truth their prudishness was greater than of those who came before them and after.

Real promiscuity without hangups or regrets is seldom to be talked about. In sex, as in death.



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