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## Martin Amis: Talking about a revolution

Martin Amis has woven his dead sister Sally, the casualty of an unequal struggle with the mores of her generation, into the erotic dystopia of his new book. Boyd Tonkin visits the novelist at his home to hear how she asked her brother to write about her life

Friday, 5 February 2010

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News of JD Salinger's death comes through shortly before I arrive chez Martin Amis, in the house that everyone routinely locates in Primrose Hill (swanky, serene, A-list heaven) but which in fact lies just as close to Camden Town (scruffy, hysterical, boho purgatory). It depends from which direction you travel. Editors ring to commission 500 words of instant tribute: one mocking, ribald voice of the bright lost boys (and quite a few girls) of his era on another. He turns them down.

Amis does admire "a purity" in Salinger. But the passing of the Great Recluse also prompts thoughts of the man who tried to climb over his wall: Amis's late, close friend Ian Hamilton. The poet and critic has a walk-on – or saunter-on – part in Amis's eleventh novel, and 14th work of fiction, *The Pregnant Widow*. He appears (as Amis acknowledges) as the skint but sexy "Neil Dartington". In the mid-1980s, Hamilton set to work on his utterly unauthorised biographical quest, *In Search of JD Salinger*. Over lunch, he once showed Amis a warning-shot letter from Salinger's lawyers. Still he pressed ahead. Later on, Amis reports, the book "concerned" its author.

As much of a talisman and icon, for readers and other writers, as the creator of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Martin Amis has on every other level become the anti-Salinger. No writer appears more open; less elusive. As he says, "I don't protect myself".

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Indeed not. So we think we own him, through feuding and families, divorce and dentistry, and have done for a quarter-century. Since, perhaps, the bull's-eye bravura of his 1984 satire *Money* (soon to grace BBC TV screens) upgraded an already closely-observed whipper-snapper prodigy into a leader of the pack. *Money* took aim at a newly brazen Britain of junk-TV stunts and gobby in-your-face celebrity that, in its later, much more toxic strain, has fuelled the novel that will follow *The Pregnant Widow*. Amis is now within a few pages of finishing the first draft of a satire about a crook who wins big-time on the lottery. Everyone already seems to know that it involves a character who aspires to rival Katie Price – and, as well, a version of the diva of reality TV herself. She will be called not "Jordan" but "Danube". Amis decided that "Volga", another possibility, sounded just a shade too obvious.

"It is absolutely terrifying, our culture at the moment," says the author, who has seen and felt the media pack-attack up close for two decades or so. "It's not just the triviality; it's the bear-pit violence too. I will not be saying a word against Jordan from now on, now that certain parts of the public have turned against her. I can't bear that. I met Jade Goody – charming, a sweet little girl. And remember 'Kill the pig'? It's so horrible."

Martin Amis and Jade Goody: strange bedfellows, flung together by the new brutality of fame. Such public ownership means abuse at least as much as affection. As for Amis the scapegoat, his remarks about the burdens of an ageing populace, with a Swift-like modest proposal for street-corner euthanasia, have dunked him in the mire of opprobrium again.

Regrets? Not many. The veteran of a thousand tennis courts strolls out in that slightly stiff-limbed, sports-injured manner of ageing athletes to get me a cup of tea (later followed by wine). Back with the mug, he gently points out that, "I'm not a teenager jeering at old people". No: he is a father of five, aged from 33 to 10, and recent grandfather of one. For the past decade, save for spells in Uruguay, he has lived in this ample but far from flashy home with his second wife, the writer Isabel Fonseca. Their daughters came in 1997 and 1999; he has two early-twenties sons from his first marriage.

Then there's Delilah: the late-discovered child of his affair in the mid-Seventies with a married friend. So much life; so much love: it's far too late for puerile provocations. But not for argument. His sleepy drawl, more West End than Old Posh, is diving even deeper today thanks to the remnants of a cold. "I'm an old person.



TERI PENGILLEY

House of meetings: Martin Amis at home

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I'm of that generation, less and less affectionately known as the baby boomers, that is going to break the system.

"I didn't coin the phrase, 'a silver tsunami'. That's what demographers call it... There's going to be a huge transfer of wealth from the young to the old and not every young person appreciates that. In the US, they call this issue 'the third rail': the subway analogy. If you tread on it you're electrocuted. So the conversation is subterranean."

Amis, as ever, rouses the slumbering dragons from their lairs. His assault on joyless, "no talent" JM Coetzee certainly had this critic breathing fire. Here, though, he backtracks a bit. Amis does brand Coetzee's *Disgrace* (which, as a Booker judge, I eagerly helped steer towards the prize in 1999) as a novel "much admired, particularly by academics". Ouch. All the same, he says, "I shouldn't have a go at other writers. I'm sure, if he ever looked at my stuff, it wouldn't do a thing for him either. We're just diametrically different."

Which brings us to *The Pregnant Widow*. Subtitled "inside history" and wearing its art on its sleeve (two semi-naked lovelies by a Hockney-esque pool, to be precise), Amis's novel tells of the sexual revolution, its Bastilles, its guillotines and its Terrors. By and large it takes place in a castle in Italy over the summer of 1970. Flash-forwards and a hefty coda frame the action, and the cast, in hindsight. This long view of what Amis calls "the biggest social shift of my lifetime" scans the later progress of the principals. It shows us how "some came through, some more or less came through, and some went under, but they all had their sexual trauma".

Trauma-carrier in chief is Keith Nearing, adopted child of an academic clan and sly, clever Eng Lit student on the brink of 21. Keith yearns to be a randy Red Guard of the bedroom insurrection. Life – and his author – have other plans for him. "He's below average," Amis insists. "There was a time when men had great opportunities, and he's rather slow to take them up... He's typically English in his diffidence. He's far more unusual in being very literary, and talking quite well."

In height, Keith may occupy "that much-disputed territory between five foot six and five foot seven". He may have a 1949 birthday in common with his maker. Keith may also fret about his defenceless, out-of-control sister Violet, just as Amis allows that he did about Sally: the sister whose death at 46 in 1999 helped to darken the entire palette of his work.

Yet *The Pregnant Widow* only exists because Amis cut loose from his experience. It began as "part of a huge abandoned novel". A couple of years ago, this nakedly autobiographical project resembled "a corpse". Then "I realised after two weeks of stunned horror, having abandoned it, that it was actually two novels." After bisection, the creative juices flowed again.

"It was getting away from autobiography that was the huge relief and release," Amis says. He felt "a marvellous influx of freedom as I completely de-autobiographised it." Keith, who was "jerry-built for the novel", becomes a brash but edgy orphan who must labour to gain a new family's love. "Whereas I, for my sins, am the son of Kingsley Amis".

Keith, after his X-rated idyll in Italy, spends bleak stretches of time in what Amis calls "Larkin-land". This desert of loneliness and frustration is named after the emotional moonscape of his father's best friend, the poet Philip Larkin. But, according to Amis myth, the son of one of postwar Britain's most-admired novelists himself enjoyed that tutto e subito ("everything and now") plenitude that his young guns seek in the castle. As the legend runs, Amis the pocket Casanova had (after an intellectual growth-spurt at Oxford, plum jobs on magazines, and envy-inducing first novels) no reason even to sight the borders of Larkin-land. Former girlfriends from the media nobility still queue up to make a buck, or a headline, from their long-past liaisons. The old flames merrily crackle and snap.

Yet Amis knows the scenery of Larkin-land pretty well. In the novel, Keith gets to grasp the melancholy truth that, in love as elsewhere, success breeds success; failure, failure. "It's like conkers," Amis comments. "You can go from a one-er to a 45-er" in one bout. "And it did happen to me... This is no secret, but I had a very bad year or two, and then I went out with Tina Brown, who was very ebullient, pretty, but also publicly affectionate. And that changed everything." Ever the semanticist, he adds that "invidious" might have been coined to define it. That which is unfair, and likely to provoke resentment among others. The whole sexual attractiveness business is invidious.

"It's interesting how novelists have theories about the big differences between people on this planet. Nabokov said it was to do with whether you slept well or not. Zadie Smith says it's between the organised and the disorganised. And Kingsley says it's between the attractive and the unattractive." The son corroborates the father, as he often does. "I meet people all the time, and there's a certain unease they exude, and I think, 'Ooh... It didn't go well with you, did it, with girls'. They don't even have to be talking to me. I just see it."

*The Pregnant Widow* depicts a time when widening freedoms had deepened, not diminished, the despotic power of good looks. Scheming through his summer of lust in the Campania, Keith the unleashed child of 1949 drifts away from sensible bed-chum Lily down a torrent of desire. He slips towards and past the sleek, don't-touch beauty of upper-crust Scheherazade, then into the darker, cavernous charms of Gloria, an enigmatic, rootless Scot. In what Amis calls this "green world", set apart for leisure and pleasure, a Decameron, *Midsummer Night's Dream* or *As You Like It* place of revelation and transformation, the author can revisit "the climax of youth". His style pairs the post-adolescent sparkle and swagger of his earliest novels, *The Rachel Papers* and *Dead Babies*, with the mordant reflectiveness of his maturer work.

As Keith reads his way through a catch-up crash-course in the English novel, from Fielding through Austen to Lawrence, these classics join snatches of poetry, from Chaucer to Larkin. Together they set this cusp of erotic change against a wide-screen picture of evolving courtship, passion and romance. Above all, Ted Hughes's *Tales from Ovid* ("a book that bowled me over") looms over all these metamorphoses – with the myth of Echo and Narcissus ominously to the fore.

Ideas and allusions aside, the Amis jazz – the jive, the shuffle, the syncopation – sounds in as good nick as at any time over the past two decades. Gem-bright, knife-sharp, sentences and scenes burst from the page. Dialogue and narrative unfold with that flair for loose-limbed comic timing and zesty verbal riffs that recent books (grappling with Stalinism in *Koba the Dread* and *House of Meetings*, then Islamism in *The Second Plane*) had almost stifled under Serious Thinker gloom.

"I kept thinking of the typical danger of the novel of ideas, where everyone starts sounding like everyone else," he says. "And I don't think they do. I think they have their idiolects." They do. From the diminutive rigger-playing count Adriano to rampant wild-child Rita and Scheherazade's Bible-bashing huntsman of a fiancé, Timmy (who, in one among hundreds of throwaway Amis trills, reads magazines called *One God* and *Gun Dog*), a cluster of vivid, smaller, figures play out their own games of love and longing on the edge of the action.

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For all the fizz and fun, you might argue that *The Pregnant Widow* adds up to the most historically engaged work that Amis has ever done. It tries to draw up a balance-sheet of the benefits and deficits of sexual liberation, for women above all. Soon enough we learn that "every hard and demanding adaptation would be falling to the girls... The boys could just go on being boys. It was the girls who had to choose."

Writing from within this revolution, Amis only nods to the "shame and honour" crimes of the patriarchal ancien régime. His stress falls on the damage wrought by licence rather than restraint: such as "the complete banishment of emotion – or indeed of significance – from the bedroom". Gloria comes across (in every sense) as a surface-loving, soul-denying porno queen before her time. She is known as "the Future".

In spite of such abuses (and self-abuses), Amis has no wish to turn the erotic clocks back. "I still think it was a heroic achievement, that revolution. As revolutions nearly always are, no matter how they end up. To break the continuities with the past is very brave. And it wasn't brave of men; it was brave of women. I think the bondage beforehand was infinitely worse."

Amis reports that, although he was well on the way already, Gloria Steinem "completely converted" him to feminism "in the course of a day" in the early 1980s. His feminism, like that of the reluctant older Keith, has a practical bedrock: a "50-50" split of responsibilities at home.

"Having it all!" Amis snorts. "The reality of that is *Doing it All*. They do most of the kids' stuff, most of the housework, most of the administration." Without "50-50", he fears that feminism amounts to "this reckless accumulation of powers that don't give pleasure". Yet the revolutionaries of 1970 failed to secure this base, from which "everything else would have followed".

Instead they fell, he thinks, for an "equalitarian" delusion of head-to-head sexual competition. Whether lyrical, loutish or ludicrous (sometimes all at once), the book's sex-chatter captures the moment when emancipation meant, for some women, "acting like a man". In such a contest, Amis warns, biological men would always win.

Most women "realised quite soon that the model of the boy's behaviour does not work" for them. In the novel, indeed in Amis's eyes, the ultimate wrong in the realm of sexuality rests not in any particular kind or frequency of behaviour. It lies in the denial of one's true self. "The great sin is to go out of your nature – the great mistake." Here, men cajole if not compel women to "go along with the spirit of the times". And in 1970 that spirit tends, so Amis presents it, to burn them dry. As a sexual dystopia, *The Pregnant Widow* comes close at several points to the novels of Michel Houellebecq, such as *Atomised* and *Platform*. And what a platform pairing they would make.

Always, back in England but forever in ham's way, hovers Keith's sister Violet: the broken child of the revolution. Naive, dependent, abused in body and spirit, she is the howling ghost at this feast of love.

Amis makes no bones about the kinship of the fictional Violet and the actual Sally: addicted, depressed, and dead at 46. "Violence against women is the thing that I care most about," her brother says. "And if you said it was because of what happened to my sister, you wouldn't be far wrong. You don't need a sister like I had to be against ill-treatment of women, but it lends it immediacy and urgency.

"This was the time to write about my sister, who was going to struggle in any society – but the sexual revolution formed the setting for it, and the style. Perhaps the only society she could have flourished in would have been a very strict one: Islam, for instance."

Readers may recall earlier Amis controversies over faith and politics, when accusations of Islamophobia flew around the writer's head. "The austerity, and the demands made on you by that religion. And she had many religious impulses."

What about the ethics of this transfer into fiction? "I once rescued her from some terrible situation," he remembers, "and paid up what was necessary to release her from it, and took her home and patched her up. And she looked at me and I know she wanted to thank me, and she was wondering how to do that. Normally she thanked people by having sex with them. But she just said: 'Write about me, Martin. You can say anything you like. I won't mind.' Maybe without that remark – she looked as clear-headed as she ever looked in her life, it reminded me very much of how she looked in the moments after Kingsley died, really seeing something, her future or something – without that, maybe I couldn't have done it."

After her death, he says, "I did have a kind of breakdown... It took a long time to see that it was that." The result of guilt? "It was the pity of it. A certain amount of guilt, certainly. I didn't do as much for her as my brother did, and nothing like as much for her as my mother did. And nothing like as much as Kingsley did. He was always off to admissions wards and sometimes I'd go with him. But I couldn't bear it."

In the novel, Keith on his spree is "trying not to think" about Violet. "Which is what I did," Amis goes on. "I couldn't bear to watch. I was very close to her as a child. I was there at the beginning and I was there at the ending. And not there enough probably in between." But might she have flourished in another, more protective time and place?

"She would have had a better chance. There was a lot of talk for a while about going in the army. We sensed that it had to be a really rigorous environment... I thought that there was perhaps a bit of hope there, but it wouldn't have lasted. Only something as monolithic as a great world religion – a religion that really asks a lot of you – could have absorbed her energy."


Amis's own energy seems to have enjoyed a boost of late. After his state-of-England burlesque will come the separated second half of *The Pregnant Widow*. Some version of Philip Larkin himself (in whose erotic misery and death Amis detects "a failure of courage, a failure of energy – the desire to love just wasn't strong enough") may play a leading part in that novel.

Its author worries rather less these days about the age-related death of talent that has vexed him over recent years. Larkin aside, watching the slow sad end of friends such as Saul Bellow, the great master of Amis's youth, had given him a horror of the fading writer's final acts.


"It just seemed to me: thank you very much, medical science. The body outlives the talent. So we have that to look forward to.

"I'm a bit calmer about that now." Still, "it's something you can't help thinking about. I talk about it with Ian McEwan a lot. He says the thing is, you've got to adjust scale. Attempt shorter things. I don't feel that at the moment. I feel full of words, having had a very good time with this book."

Can a novelist retire? "But then life would be so miserable. And Kingsley, when he was really sort of nuts towards the end, my mother said: 'I like the sound of a typewriter.' It was a manual typewriter, the 'S' key almost split in half by his fingernails over the years. She said: 'He still makes that noise that I like to hear. But I looked in the other day and all he'd written was, "Seagulls Seagulls Seagulls Seagulls".'"

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