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## Martin Amis: the return of the master

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Will the next ten months see Britain's most controversial novelist finally return to his best?

Tom Chatfield

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These days, Martin Amis is bigger news than his own novels. Martin Amis the political commentator, that is, whose off-the-cuff remarks in a **2006 interview** ("There's a definite urge—don't you have it?—to say, 'The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.' ") have been tinnily echoing around the fourth estate ever since. Then again, these days Martin Amis the political commentator looms a rather larger figure than Amis the novelist. The last twelve years have seen just one novel ( *Yellow Dog*, in 2003), one novella ( *House of Meetings*, 2006) and a handful of short stories—compared to four books of non fiction ( *Experience*, 2000; *The War Against Cliché*, 2001; *Koba the Dread*, 2002; *The Second Plane*, 2008) plus various uncollected prose pieces. Has, as some critics bluntly assume, one of the most important British novelists of the 1980s and 1990s ceased to be a creative force in fiction?

The next ten months promise a partial answer to this question with—hopefully, at least—the publication of his much-delayed latest novel, *The Pregnant Widow* (its release has **just been pushed back** to the start of 2010; it has been in the works since 2003, by far the longest writing-time of all Amis's books). The title refers not to *The Pregnant Widow's* own prolonged gestation, but to an altogether vaster theme: as Amis explains in the second part of his interviews for *Prospect*, the phrase is taken from the Russian intellectual Alexander Herzen, who argued that "the result of a revolution is like a pregnant widow: the father is dead but the child has not yet been born." This is the case, explains Amis, with feminism and the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s: they are epochal events whose consequences have even today only entered their "second trimester."


Epochal events certainly have a habit of featuring in Amis's work. Admirably revolted by the parochial, polite tradition of the English novel, his past fiction has lurched from nuclear war to environmental apocalypse via the goriest excesses of drugs, booze and unfettered capitalism, accompanied by intermittent lashings of sex




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and violence. Since 9/11, however, Amis's determination to prove equal to even the deepest crisis also seen a constriction of the verve that made all this so engaging—a hankering for definitive moral utterance that has left him looking, often, nervously out of kilter with his times. As Michael Tomasky put it in **his review** of 2008's *The Second Plane*, Amis in his most recent incarnation as a public intellectual "sounds increasingly like the embarrassing uncle screaming at the television."




Those hoping for a return to the gloriously, bleakly comic form of *Money* (1984)—one of the finest British novels never to have won a literary prize—will be relieved to hear that *The Pregnant Widow*, unlike Amis's recent short stories, features neither constipated terrorists nor psychopathic dictators. Instead, it's set in a castle in Italy during the long, hot summer of 1970 and features a cast of young people who, it must be hoped, will indulge in the kind of excesses only possible in a novel by Martin Amis. The set-up closely echoes the country house debaucheries of *Dead Babies* (1975), Amis's second book, and its return to his own lived experience—Amis has promised "blindingly autobiographical" elements, including cameos from Philip Larkin, Saul Bellow, Christopher Hitchens, Salman Rushdie and his own father, the novelist Kingsley Amis—may mean a welcome stylistic and imaginative unstiffening.

Terrorism and global disorder haven't been the only influences on "late" Amis, of course. Age and a sense of life's fragility, along with a sprinkling of sentiment, have been increasingly insistent presences in his recent work (*House of Meetings* featured an 86-year-old narrator and a country "dying" through a lack of births). And it's notable that, in fiction, nothing he has produced since *The Information* in 1995—the year his father died—has had quite the swagger or the polemical dazzle of the novels that came before that watershed. Amis's 2000 memoir, *Experience*, was a triumph precisely because it largely abandoned linguistic pyrotechnics for the shouldering of real-world responsibilities. Since then, the writerly shoulders seem to have been increasingly bowed by both political and existential circumstances—something that makes the prospect of a semi-autobiographical fiction set in the 1970s especially tantalizing.

For all the accusations of posturing that come his way (many of which are undoubtedly a form of literary sour grapes—few authors, and fewer critics, can claim anything like the public profile or impact Amis enjoys), it has always been to Martin Amis's huge credit that he believes in writing as a public force: as a moral act, and as one that cannot exist in a political vacuum. But it's also good to see him in these recent interviews looking tanned, relaxed and ready to talk about himself as much as about the woes of the world. If we're lucky, *The Pregnant Widow* may be the book in which the master rediscovers his voice.

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