

These were women who fell victim to the new sexual freedom, became obsessed with looks — “the mirror, narcissism, the Me decade” — and forgot to have babies. “I know women now full of regret at just not worrying about it until it really was too late,” he says. “Three or four friends, who would have been very good mothers, but...” He pauses. “The sex revolution wasn’t a bad thing. In fact it was a cornucopia of opportunity. But it is a massive project to rethink an entire gender, and behaving like men was the only model women had. It was never in their interests to be like that. The sex wasn’t in their nature.”

The book will undoubtedly goose a few feminists, with its focus on tits and arse — “It was a tits-and-arse time,” he insists — and the fact that Amis apparently defines female emancipation as a matter of underwear, going from “wearing functional pants, like female Y-fronts, to cool pants, pants with adornment. The cool thing about cool pants is that you know they’re coming off”, he says. “They bespeak a kind of ease and self-admiration. The pants the Christmas Day bomber was wearing, for example, were not cool pants. They were very uncool — pants that actually explode.”

Personally, I’m not sure I’m thrilled that one female character is called “The Dog”, ostensibly for her willingness to have sex, and some of the book’s girl talk is plain weird. Frolicking around in front of the mirror fondling her breasts, one of Keith’s lust objects says, “Oh, I love me. I love me so,” which I don’t think has happened in the history of women and mirrors, ever. But when I tell him this, he gives another evasive explanation: “Oh, like, it’s because you’re of your time. People used to speak like that. It was experimental. Like, what can we say?”

There are flashes of Amis brilliance, laugh-out-loud moments such as when Keith Nearing suggests that *Pride and Prejudice* “had but a single flaw: the absence, towards the close, of a 40-page sex scene”. The themes — women, sex, death, body image — are sharp.

But a lot of it... well, let’s just say there’s a 200-page sexathon right in the middle that reads like an exhausting wet dream. He looks completely puzzled when I say this — “Do you think? But it’s soft-core, only a bit hardcore,” as if that makes it perfectly fine.

Indeed, his seemingly blinkered attitude has got him into trouble before: as a novelist, he has often been accused of misogyny. But when I bring it up, he snaps: “I’m not a misogynist; ask my wife. Do you think she would have put up with me for 13 years if I was a misogynist? Thoughtful people are not misogynists. [The cultural historian] Marina Warner wrote it recently; my wife was furious. ‘She’s saying I’m married to a misogynist? What does that say about me...?’” He waves his hand. “Besides, what kind of novelist would you make? It’s a completely disabling thing. What a job of animosity, to hate half the universe.”

He admits that “there are women-hating novelists, but not many. Often, it’s when things haven’t gone well with women. Larkin [the poet Philip Larkin, Kingsley’s best friend] wasn’t a misogynist, but he exuded resentment”.

Amis Sr was also accused of misogyny: “My father wrote two novels when he was very bitter about the break-up of his first marriage,” he says. “If the second marriage breaks up and you left the first one, whom you still love, it’s your whole life gone... He was very bitter about that. But he wrote very affectionately about them later.”

Has Amis got any women to read the book? “My wife read it and loved it. It’s very pro-women,” he says, and to be fair, Amis himself has been hurt by the revolution. His own sister, Sally, a “pathologically promiscuous” alcoholic who died in 2000 aged 46, was “also a casualty” and provided inspiration for the character of Keith’s vulnerable, wayward younger sister, Violet. The middle son of Sir Kingsley and his first wife, Hilary (“Hilly”) Bardwell, Amis was five years older than Sally.

He describes his sister’s life as “tragic”. “As an adult, she had a mental age of 12 or 13,” he says. “She was kind of an animal.” Her problems began in earnest in America. “She just went wild there, going to rock concerts with truckloads of boys and Hell’s Angels and taking heavy drugs. When she came back, she was

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unrecognisable, a child terrifyingly adrift in an adult world.”

In 1965, Kingsley walked out on Hilly and set up home with the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard. Hilly remarried the writer Lord Kilmarnock and eventually moved to Spain. Sally stayed in London.

“The life she led was awful,” says Amis. “Uncertain from moment to moment. She didn’t really like sex, so would get drunk, got drunk all the time, and got beaten up.”

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