

Oh, I bet he drove them round the bend! He admits he could be “uncomforting”. He recalls driving one girlfriend to violence in the late 1970s; he ended up striking her as well, but only, he says, in self-defence. “Some girls, some of the very best, need to fight, to have rows. She was one of those. My wife needs to fight every now and then. She feels better afterwards. I hate that, but I realise that I’m doing a kind of service by submitting to it.” Really? “Oh, you don’t want to bottle it up. Sometimes I even initiate it.”

Well, at least I’ll now know when it’s a good moment to ask her if he’s a misogynist.

Sometimes I think he understands women. He certainly adores them. He says he has been in love “seven or eight times” and gets “desperate” for their company. At others, I don’t think they register on the Martinometer at all. Most of his muses are men: Christopher Hitchens was “moved” to be the inspiration for Nicholas in this book, and when asked if women make better writers, “No,” Amis says confidently. “They’ve produced the greatest writer in the English language ever, George Eliot, and arguably the third greatest, Jane Austen, and certainly the greatest novel, Middlemarch, but their showing in poetry...”

Anyway, he’s been thinking about past relationships and the past in general a lot recently, but, ultimately, he finds it rather difficult. He used to like going back over his old stuff (“bottle of wine, a joint and five hours of me — my idea of a great night”) but now, “it’s like a visit to a former self”, he says. Of reading an early script of the BBC’s impending new adaptation of *Money*, which features Nick Frost as John Self, Amis’s hideous and perhaps most famous creation, he says: “I didn’t like it.” He also re-read *The Rachel Papers* for *The Pregnant Widow* (the time frame is similar), but even that “seemed crude”, he says. “Not the writing. That was terribly alive. The craft. The sex. The setups... all incredibly cack-handed.”

The past — “a great undiscovered continent that’s suddenly there” — bothers him. He writes that the only thing that matters to a man on his deathbed is “how it has gone with women”; his own thoughts about them are now “mostly self-reproaching”. He certainly regrets his louche behaviour, “the casual cruelty, not answering the phone, being a bit of a shit. I do think about my first marriage, bits where I was unkind”.

He married the writer Antonia Phillips in 1984. They have two sons, Louis, 24, and Jacob, 23 (hilariously, both boys are over 6ft). In 1993, he left her for Fonseca; although they are on good terms now, the break-up was traumatic and dramatic and he still rarely talks of it. When I ask what he will think about on his own deathbed, he replies quietly: “It was awful leaving home... I still feel I didn’t really have a choice, in that you stay until you can’t stay. It was a good marriage for so long, but I owe a great moral debt to my sons and to my first wife.”

He has “good relationships with all five children”, although recently he had a fright about Jacob, who “got quite far with auditioning to become an officer in the army. I said, ‘What happens if you get in to Sandhurst?’ And he said, ‘Six months in intensive training and then AfPak.’ When he didn’t get in, my first wife and I were tremendously relieved.”

He respects his son’s youthful idealism, but thinks the war in Afghanistan is “unwinnable”. “It was a just war in the beginning but it was ruined by the Iraq war. I was against that war from the start, and said so.” He has written widely on Islam and terrorism, and in 2006 found himself at the centre of a race storm when he suggested in an interview that the “Muslim community should suffer until it gets its house in order”.

The literary theorist Terry Eagleton marvelled that such comments were “not the ramblings of a BNP thug, but the views of Martin Amis, leading luminary of the British metropolitan literary world”. Amis felt “totally misrepresented”. “The racist hand grenade is even more irresponsibly used than the misogynist one. I was accused of hating nine-tenths of humanity.”

Why doesn’t he just run away to Uruguay and escape all the abuse? In fact, he already tried, in 2004, but it precipitated (another) creative crisis. He was writing *House of Meetings*, a

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novel about two brothers in a Soviet gulag. "You see those Posy Simmonds cartoons of people by the pool having cocktails and saying into the Dictaphone, 'On the second day, the last child died,'" he says. "And I was in Uruguay, with my beautiful wife and beautiful daughters, living a completely stressless life. So I had to do my suffering on the page and, Christ, did I do it. I was very nervous about that book."

He describes his talent as "evolving". In fact, he's nearly finished his next novel, *State of England*, about chavs, which contains one character, Threnody, inspired by Katie Price — "She has no waist, no arse... an interesting face ... but all we are really worshipping is two bags of silicone," he said recently — and another, "my worst yet", he says, based on Mikey Carroll, a crack-smoking lottery winner. "Lionel Asbo wins £90m on the lottery and does something so vicious..." He trails off. "I can't tell you what."

He is painfully aware that his time as a writer is running out. "Writers die twice: once when the body dies, and once when the talent dies," he wrote recently in a review of Nabokov's *The Original of Laura*. "Medical science has again over-vaulted itself," he says now, "so most of us have to live through the death of our talent. Novelists tend to go off at about 70. And I'm in a funk about it. I've got myself into a real paranoid funk about it, how talent dies before the body."

I can't help feeling he's being a leedle dramatic here, but his hatred at not feeling "100%" is genuine. He is disgusted at the problem of the ageing population: "How is society going to support this silver tsunami? There'll be a population of demented very old people, like an invasion of terrible immigrants, stinking out the restaurants and cafes and shops. I can imagine a sort of civil war between the old and the young in 10 or 15 years' time."

Amis's solution is typically extreme: mass euthanasia. "There should be a booth on every corner where you could get a Martini and a medal," he says. In fact, he was thinking about it only last year, when his stepfather died "very horribly", he says. "He thought he was going to get better. But he didn't. I think the denial of death is a great curse. We all wanted to assist him... It was clearly a lost battle."

Is Amis becoming obsessed with death? Three of the characters in the novel are inspired by dead friends and family: Sally, Rob, and a smaller character, Neil Dartington, inspired by the critic Ian Hamilton. Kingsley, says Amis (it's always "Kingsley") was "obsessed with death, from very early on. I got it in my mid-forties, the usual time".

How exhausting. Is he getting more like his father? At first he fondly replies, "probably", but then he catches himself: "It's bullshit when people say 'getting like Kingsley'. He had perverse attitudes, and something I really watch in myself: failures of tolerance. He was very impatient with babies in public places, going 'Shhuddup' under his breath in restaurants, and I don't think he liked young people kissing in streets. But I like that, and I am very keen on babies."

Still, he's unlikely to descend into total respectability any time soon. He wouldn't accept an honour, for starters, "although I would be happy with an OM or Companion of Honour", he says grandly. "Nothing else, certainly not a knighthood. But I've never been offered anything." Why? "Too dangerous," he says.

Too cool? I ask. "Too cool," he nods. "Now, would you like another whisky?"

• *The Pregnant Widow* (Jonathan Cape, £18.99) is out on February 4. It is available from BooksFirst at £17.09, inc. p&p. Tel: 0845 2712135

[◀ PREVIOUS PAGE](#)

Page 4 of 4

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