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The Pregnant Widow by Martin Amis

Martin Amis's new novel shows a regathering of his artistic energies

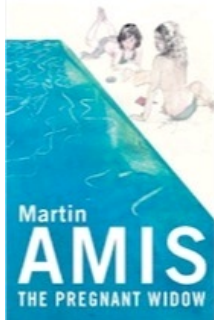
Christopher Taylor

The Guardian, Saturday 6 February 2010
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The Pregnant Widow
by Martin Amis



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"First it was all moral patterning. And felt life. Then it was all drugs and fucks. Now it's all tits and arses." This pithily reductive progress report on **Martin Amis's** new novel is spoken by a character in it, summing up not only her student boyfriend's increasingly boisterous approach to Eng lit, but also, *The Pregnant Widow* suggests, the unintended consequences of a cultural revolution. She's speaking in 1970 – the year, as the narrator notes elsewhere, of Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*. Later in the decade, though not noted by the narrator, there will be *The Rachel Papers*, *Dead Babies* and *Success*: dispatches, as their author might now see it, from a battle of the sexes that was fought on unpredictably shifting terrain. Historical consciousness isn't something you'd automatically associate with Amis, but here he is with a long novel set in the times he started out in, a novel that's partly an advance post-mortem on his generation's

historically constituted sexual selves.

The first time round, in the 70s, these were matters of some interest to Amis's literary generation, to which Keith Nearing, the new novel's central figure, also belongs. Ian McEwan, for example, read Greer's manifesto in 1971 and found it "a revelation"; his first two novels are, among other things, dreams about a collapse of male power. Amis, meanwhile, seemed to fit the sexual revolution into a wider sense of a world turning

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upside down, a sense that coarse, yobbish ways – ways that he was, as a good satirist, half in love with – were displacing high-minded talk about "felt life" and other literary-moral nostrums. Satirical inversions were his stock in trade, as in "It's Disgusting at Your Age", a slice of screenplay he published in 1976 and then cannibalised in *Success*. In it, 70s girls act like boys – swill pints, shag around, neglect their flats and appearances – while 70s boys swap grooming tips. "Posh girls," one such specimen disconsolately squeaks, "they're after one thing and one thing only."

Vivid yet analytically shallow reversals of this sort find a place in *The Pregnant Widow*. Early on, there's a riff on miniskirts, see-through blouses, knee-high patent leather boots "and all the other things you needed before you could act like a boy". There's also a good deal of chat about handjobs, boxes and so on: the dialogue of bookish, defensively cocky young men cracking wise among themselves, which was another of Amis's 70s specialities. This time, though, there's an enormous effort to put this behaviour in context, and the context isn't limited to feminism. Nuclear anxieties, the postwar "economic miracle", the fact of their not being called on – in contrast to parents and grandparents – to risk early death or widowhood: the narrator carefully threads all these into the book's depiction of "the generation less and less affectionately known as the Baby Boomers". There's also an effort to see things more squarely from the women's point of view – not an altogether successful one, maybe, but an effort nonetheless.

What all this boils down to, for the first half or so of the book, is a weird, slow-moving sexual comedy set in a posh girl's holiday castle in Italy. Keith – a short, chain-smoking would-be poet and orphaned adoptee brought up by academics – has been invited there for the summer with Lily, his down-to-earth, faintly mutinous and only reasonably attractive girlfriend. They're guests of Scheherazade, Lily's second-best friend, an upper-class English do-gooder. Having previously resembled "the girl who distinguished herself on the harpsichord, or clocked up five thousand miles for Meals on Wheels", she has suddenly blossomed into an incendiary beauty with, we understand, beyond-incredible breasts. Also on the scene are Whittaker, an older, gay American; his boyfriend Amen ("pronounced Ahmun"), who's Libyan and therefore – uh-oh – a Muslim; Gloria, Scheherazade's brother's uptight girlfriend; and Adriano, a tiny Italian toff. Most of them are 20 or thereabouts, and Scheherazade's drippy boyfriend is away.

Cutting at intervals to an older, sadder, three-times-married Keith in 2003, and announcing at the start that he'll have a life-alteringly traumatic sexual experience in 1970, the novel sets about asking the question: will Keith get to see Scheherazade's breasts? Then, once he's seen them, and the other characters have finished quizzing him about his response to this development, the question changes: will he manage to get his hands on them? A nice boy, not a natural schemer, Keith has brought a small library with him, and his studious reading for his degree course is used as a springboard for elaborate discussions of the parallels, or lack of them, between classic English novels and 70s mating rituals. Occasionally other characters drop by – notably a woman named Rita, who turns out to be such a fiercely liberated shagger that she has no time for love or even affection. (Amen's veiled sister, Ruaa, is brought on to serve as a dialectical counterweight to this terrifying figure, bringing an end to one Islam-related thread.)

As all this slowly happens, there's a growing sense that the reader is being asked to do too many things at once: to chuckle at the consciously puerile gags and over-literary running jokes, to nod along with the bulletins on ageing and baby-boomer sexual attitudes, and to attend solemnly to the busy surface of Amis's later style. Unless you're Christopher Hitchens, it's not easy to sustain the correct mood for doing all three simultaneously, and it doesn't help that Amis has expanded his repertoire of eccentric mannerisms. His *Concise Oxford Dictionary* has seen a lot of action (there are four etymologies in the first 50 pages, with at least 12 more to come), as has, I'd guess, his *Oxford Book of English Verse*. Above all, the need for each sentence to bear a heavy stylistic stamp often leads to such lines as "he insomniated by Lily's side", or "The clock, once in a blue moon, ticked. Or tocked. Or clocked. Or clicked, or clucked, or clacked." This section – the main trunk of the novel – is stilted, fiddling and rarely funny.

Around 250 pages in, however, as Keith's inept scheming builds to a

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catastrophe, the writing seems to relax a bit, collapsing the absurdly high diction into low comedy in more effective ways. It also starts to generate images reminiscent of the earlier, funnier Amis: "an extended dynasty of monogrammed leather suitcases", for example. Then, after several narrative twists, the Italian holiday abruptly ends and the writer seems to embark on a different book. Narrating in fast-forward Keith's sentimental education at the hands of a Nicola Six-like femme fatale in the 70s, 80s, 90s and beyond, Amis jettisons the lumberingly intricate, glassily poised manner of the earlier sections, working up instead a kind of narrative fugue state not seen in his work for some time. Although not everything succeeds here, you get the feeling of a writer working at high pressure with combustibly personal material, scarcely bothering to disguise various real-life figures – his sister, Hitchens, the poet Ian Hamilton. It's as though, having previously played only grace notes, he's launched into a tune.

A hostile reading of *The Pregnant Widow* might be that it blames Keith's moral quasi-degradation and failure as a poet on too close or too early an association with naughty ladies. A more sympathetic one would be that the novel portrays the 70s as the ground zero of a narcissistic baby-boomer culture that coarsened both sexes, a culture in which Amis's writerly enterprise is implicated too. (The narrator resurrects TS Eliot's notion of a "dissociation of sensibility" that cut thoughts off from feelings – a separation that's often been diagnosed in Amis's novels, not least by the narrator of *The Rachel Papers*.) There are fewer sage-like speeches on "universal" themes than in most of his recent fiction, and the minor character who functions as the book's feminist superego also seems to indicate that the novelist has seen through at least some of the Eurabia-type stuff he espoused not long ago. Is it a "return to form"? Not exactly, but there's plainly a regathering of artistic energies. It's a "strange ride with the pregnant widow", as the narrator says, and for stretches of it, the reader is happy to tag along.

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benefactress
 6 February 2010 3:42PM

I have not as yet read Martin Amis's book, but from the review I am immediately struck by its similarity to a book by Elizabeth von Arnim, "The Enchanted April", published in 1922. The setting, a castle in Italy, the group of friends, some with literary connections, the 'do-gooder', the writer with an association with 'naughty ladies', the barely-disguised real-life contemporary figures. Elizabeth's book is very funny too, with her customary dose of ironic comment. All her characters end transformed by their Italian holiday, and there is also a reference to Parsifal. So - has Martin Amis read Elizabeth's novel? And what would 'Elizabeth' have made of Amis?

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On another page, Amis has claimed "I am the only hereditary novelist in the anglophone literary corpus." One reader has already put forward an example which precedes Martin & Kingsley Amis: Anthony & Frances Trollope. There is also another: Mary Wollstonecraft, who published the novels 'Mary: A Fiction' (1788) and 'Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman' (1798), and her daughter Mary Shelley, who of course wrote 'Frankenstein' (1818).

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