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## The Pregnant Widow by Martin Amis

Martin Amis goes back to first principles, with impressive results, says Tim Adams



Tim Adams

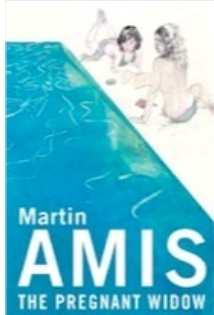
The Observer, Sunday 31 January 2010  
Article history



Martin Amis returns to form with his 12th novel. Photograph: EPA

For at least the past decade [Martin Amis](#) has seemed intent on making the most distinctive comic voice in contemporary British fiction – his own – do the most unlikely things. He's put it in the mouths of historical tyrants and 9/11 plotters, he tried it out for size – for laughs – as an impotent monarch and – in earnest – as a survivor of Soviet purges. He's had a go at Americans called Russia and women called He and one of the problems with all these characters is that they have sounded too smart, too Mart. The first thing to say about Amis's 12th novel, *The Pregnant Widow*, then, is that it is a great relief to find him back as a Keith.

### The Pregnant Widow by Martin Amis



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The moniker might be a nod to Keith Talent, the antihero of Amis's last wholly successful novel, *London Fields*, but Keith is a homecoming for Amis in more than this sense. Keith Nearing is the most proximate a fictional alter ego he's written since Charles Highway in *The Rachel Papers*. This Keith is nearing 21 (his birthday, when our tale begins, is days away), he's nearing normal male height, like the author, "in that much disputed territory between five foot six and five foot seven", and he's inching toward a statuesque 20-year-old blonde named Sheherazade, with whom he is sharing a fabled summer in an Italian castle, along with several friends (including his semi-platonic and semi-liberated girlfriend, Lily).

Amis starts with a typically arch disclaimer, the suggestion that his tale – like the murder story in *London Fields* – is another "gift from real life". "Everything that follows is true," he draws,



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blowing smoke at the reader. "The castle is true. The girls are all true, and the boys are all true. Not even the names have been changed. Why bother? To protect the innocent? There were no innocent..." He has said elsewhere that the novel is "blindingly autobiographical" and, though names obviously have been changed, you half believe him.

We're mostly in 1970, at the moment when Amis himself started to find his voice. Few writers have ever been more conscious of ageing – like all prodigies he seemed totally undone by the creeping knowledge that even his dazzle would die – and having looked back on his lost youth first as crisis (in *The Information*), then as hard-won wisdom (in the memoir *Experience*), Amis finally, at 60, gives it a go as what it no doubt mostly was: romantic farce. *The Pregnant Widow* reminds you of those medieval epics in which the hero, Troilus, or whoever, observes from a heavenly vantage, free from earthly care, his teenage self tortured and dying for love, and permits himself more than a wry smile.

The version of his youth that Amis gives us here is a fleshed-out reincarnation of the narcissist he described briefly in *Experience*, "short-arseing along the King's Road" in green velvet flares, sending letters to Kingsley that concluded "Kafka is a fucking fool" or "*Middlemarch* is fucking good". "Aren't they nice, the young?" Keith's older self observes, here: "They have stayed up for two years drinking instant coffee together, and now they are opinionated – they have opinions...."

In the castle Keith is cramming Eng Lit compulsively. He's force-feeding Richardson and Fielding, fast-forwarding Austen and George Eliot, each novel seeming to him a dramatisation of the interminable sexual frustrations he is experiencing around the castle's pool. Keith is a trier, and a dreamer (he's also, of course, a list-maker, an aphorism-coiner, and an *italiciser*); like Amis, he has swallowed Skeat's *Etymological Dictionary* whole and punctuates even his chat-up lines with lessons in linguistics. He is viewed by the author with amused and sometimes poignant affection ("*Nostalgia*, from Gk *nostos* 'return home' + *algos* 'pain' 'the return-home-pain of twenty years old'.") The portentous note that has sometimes been Amis's fatal flaw is mostly played here for comedy.

Consciously inhabiting the past, particularly this skewed slice of his own past, seems to liberate his writing from unwitting self-parody. He (and the reader) are spared the awkwardness of the last "big" novel, *Yellow Dog*, which seemed to be formed of a desperation to continue to accommodate what John Self once called (when Amis was really on the money) "the real stuff, the only stuff... the present, the panting present". Looking back he knows every contour of the territory, the sex, the politics, the pretensions, and most of all the language. By framing his recollections in the present – it's not Keith that is speaking, we eventually learn, it's his grown-up conscience, the Jiminy Cricket of 2009 looking back on the Pinocchio of 1970 – he finds he can have it all ways.

The result is a flashy Decameron of the sexual revolution; 20-year-old Keith may want to believe that his present moment – the Pill, female emancipation in the bedroom – has been plotted just for him, but a part of him can't help fearing he is on the wrong side of the barricades ("the Me Decade was the Me Decade, right enough – a new intensity of self-absorption. But the Me decade was also and unquestionably the She Decade..."). Women – in particular the women Keith observes in torturous peripheral vision plunging in and out of the castle's pool, topless (and occasionally bottomless) – are undoubtedly more available in theory, but not, strictly, in his experience, in practice. Keith is doomed and hamstrung in his pursuit of Sheherazade not only by his legion of neuroses, and a vestige of old-fashioned loyalty to Lily, but also by rival suitors – an absent (and very tall) Pentecostalist, and an ever-present (and very short) Italian count. Love, in 1970, appears to have been replaced by "hysterical sex" and of course "hysterical sex means never having to say you're sorry".

Tragically and despite all of his historical advantages, it appears Keith's own strike rate as a result won't improve on Samuel Richardson's Lovelace in *Clarissa* ("one fuck in 2,000 pages," he notes glumly), and predictably this is the source of much bathetic torment, delivered with all Amis's mastery of register and tone. Unusually for Amis, Keith's deferred gratification also injects into the novel that other, often elusive, 18th-century quality, suspense ("Amis novel" and "page-turner" have not

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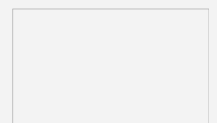
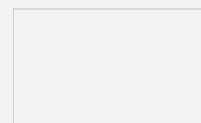
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century quality, suspense (Amis novel and page-turner have not always been synonymous). There are other surprises, in comparison with recent Amis, too: fully realised female characters – Lily, in particular, Keith's almost cynical girlfriend, is shown torn between having it all and having nothing at all; and walk-ons who are not just one-liners (Adriano, the diminutive count, is a virtuoso performance).

For the most part Amis stays within the limits of this comedy of manners; when he is finally tempted to stray beyond it in the latter third of the book, with the introduction of the girl Keith eventually does get, and regret, his substitute Sheherazade, Gloria Beautyman, the plotting creaks just slightly. Beautyman spins Keith seductive yarns about her age, and her religion, truths that are unveiled in an ending that strains for universal significance. This intervention can be forgiven, though, in some vintage Amis peacockery: riffs on the earthiness of Italian plumbing and the obviousness of Italian men, on Montaigne and *Northanger Abbey*, and fresh updates on such familiar refrains as hangovers ("The air itself was about to throw up. And he could hear the yellow birds in their tree – pissing themselves laughing...") or the evolutionary insistence of winged insects, those "armoured survivalists with gas-mask faces".

For a long while, it has been hard to imagine how a writer much concerned with reputation would begin to fashion for himself a convincing late period to match his stellar youth. This novel looks a lot like one answer to that. Amis has, of late, become a professor of creative writing at Manchester University and you could even begin to imagine that his position has prompted a satisfying return to first principles. Lesson number one: always write what you know.

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**Kepler**  
 31 January 2010 1:59AM

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Amis's lesson number one: always make yourself very important.  
 And Tim Adams fell for it.



**monopolygod**  
 31 January 2010 2:13AM

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I read Amis's first four novels in one day, and pissed.  
 I hope they took no longer to write.



**NormBlunt**  
 31 January 2010 2:17AM

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If only Martin Amis was as gifted a writer as his father. He would then be less arrogant, less bitter and we would all wait with baited breath for his next masterpiece. As it is, he sells books based on the reputation of the family name, and those who are unfortunate to have read his drivel end up questioning their sanity

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in having endured the tedium of his prose.

Norm



**klondiker**

31 January 2010 3:37AM

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For some reason, it has become really fashionable to hate Martin Amis. For my part, here is how I judge him: he is someone who constantly has interesting things to say, and constantly finds interesting ways to say them.

I'm looking forward to reading The Pregnant Widow.



**NormBlunt**

31 January 2010 5:25AM

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Clearly you have never read 'The Information'. I have read it from cover to cover and persevered in the hope that something would happen. It never did and my sanity was clearly questioned! I destroyed the book after reading to ensure no other poor soul had to endure the same torment.



**lucas**

31 January 2010 5:43AM

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Oh for goodness sake, the slagging off of Martin Amis is so tedious. I just finished reading The Pregnant Widow today and concur entirely with the reviewer? it is a return to form, and indeed a work of sheer genius. More ideas here on every page than most writers manage in an entire novel. Regularly laugh-out-loud funny, especially any reference to the diminutive count Adriano. Sentence after sentence is on fire here, and that makes the book impossible to put down. Plot? Well I enjoyed it, but if others need something more riveting, good on?em. Amis is in a league of his own? absolutely superb. And boy does he understand jealousy, of which there is never any shortage when it comes to discussing his works.

And for what it's worth, I'd say all the same about The Information.



**Speedtheplow**

31 January 2010 6:09AM

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"You don't understand, do you, my talentless friend? Even as you die and rot with envy. It doesn't matter what anyone writes any more. The time for it mattering has passed. The truth doesn't matter anymore and is not wanted."

Martin Amis, London Fields

Amis wrote that 20 years ago. Sums up the past two decades rather well.

Martin Amis is the Man. Always was. Always will be.



**NormBlunt**

31 January 2010 6:32AM

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Gawd help us all!!!

If Martin Amis is 'the man' then I am going to have a sex change.

As for liking 'The Information', words fail me - and that would be both Martin and me together.



**Pullmanite**

31 January 2010 7:06AM

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Agree with the above - The Information was a bit lame. But if this is only half as good as London Fields then I am all for it. Of course he's not Kingsley Amis. But he speaks to his/our generation better. And Dead Babies is just amazing in its ridiculousness, but very readable as well. And no mention of Time's Arrow? C'mon moaners, give the man a break!



**Jackanapes**

31 January 2010 10:19AM

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I have such a love - hate thing for Martin Amis. The first thing of his I read was "Dead Babies" and I found it to be one of the most glorious, thrillingly splenetic exercises in sustained, sneering disgust I have ever read. It's little *apart* from that but I don't care; it's a curmudgeon's delight. I wasn't impressed with "The Rachel Papers" but it was *okay*. "Success" and "Other People" left me similarly underwhelmed but in each case there were moments where the writing impressed.

After "Money" I started to understand my problem with Amis: he can write *passages* of sheer jaw-dropping brilliance. His ability to turn a phrase like a bayonet, his skill

at deploying bitterness and bile, his gleeful meanness... are all truly impressive. And yet the whole - the whole *novel* - always seems less than the sum of these wonderful jagged parts. "Dead Babies" worked so well because it wasn't even trying to be a novel, really. It was just a perfect, prolonged rant. "Money" and "London Fields" confirmed this impression for me. Great moments in both, but an overall lack of coherence. I was left with the impression of a series of good ideas; of set pieces tacked roughly together in the hope that somehow an actual novel would result. And in each case it didn't, quite.

I read "The Monic Inferno", "Einstein's Monsters" and some of his newspaper articles and found them okay, interesting, nothing special. Then I stopped reading his novels. I haven't read one since "London Fields". I keep meaning to, but somehow I don't. I may well give this one a chance after this review, and see if it sends me back to some of the stuff I've missed.

Amis has become a popular hate figure and I sort of understand why, but I don't agree with the hate. He is a good writer, just not a great one. I certainly rate him more highly than most of the over-hyped and over-praised tripe that seems to feature in the literary review pages lately. Thin, drearily-contrived shite like "The Time Traveller's Wife" and so on. I'll take Amis at his worst over that sort of drivel.



**RLatruessport**  
31 January 2010 11:19AM

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Martin Amis is a genius as a writer.  
I am not sure I would like to comment on him as a human being tho.



**DrJamesRoss**  
31 January 2010 12:41PM

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Perhaps this 60 year-old 'prodigy' should call his next masterpiece '*The Disappointed Narcissist*'.

Genius my arse.



**Chriswr**  
31 January 2010 1:55PM

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For the most part Amis stays within the limits of this comedy of manners; when he is finally tempted to stray beyond it in the latter third of the book... the plotting creaks just slightly.

Why does he do that kind of thing? Remember the Martina character towards the end of Money who seemed to have been parachuted in from a different novel to make some serious point?



**robguyton**  
31 January 2010 3:15PM

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NormBlunt writes:

"I destroyed the book after reading to ensure no other poor soul had to endure the same torment."

You have to worry about people like that!



**Polymorph**  
31 January 2010 3:52PM

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"I destroyed the book after reading to ensure no other poor soul had to endure the same torment."

Next stop - book burning in the square. Do we really need such protection from Amis? If you bother to start one of his books it probably suggests you have the ability to make up your own mind about his qualities and whether you should carry on reading to the end. It isn't obligatory.



**stodulky**  
31 January 2010 4:32PM

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haha I couldn't stand The Information either - didn't make it through to the end though. And I didn't burn it!

I find Amis's good stuff to be more about the style than anything. I thoroughly enjoyed London Fields, even though I thought the plot was weak and the storylines broadly uninteresting - it was worth reading just for the dazzling wordplay. But it hasn't really made me look out for anything since the information...



**Renoir**  
31 January 2010 4:40PM

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I'm halfway through and pacing myself so as not to gobble it in one go.

It's great. Gets funnier as it goes and it goes down very easily. Much lighter and breezier than London Fields and Money (there's so much space on the page), but driven by the same sense of moral purpose. And this is vital. People seem to either hate Amis for being a moralist or don't understand that irony and satire are the vehicles for his moralism. What's striking about TPW, however, is how straight (so far) the purpose is. It's a fictional portrayal of the impact of feminism on male-female relations (there's a great bit that sees daughter confront mother in the near-present: your lot are losers, you didn't achieve fifty-fifty on housework, the ultimate battleground) and, as such, it attempts one of the great stories of the last few generations.

The Keith and Lilly relationship is beautifully well-drawn; Sheherazade leaves us all wanting; Rita is a scream (she's just wrecked havoc); and there's lots more.

So, well done Mart, you might not quite be Swift, but you're our Swift.

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**Renoir**  
31 January 2010 4:44PM

PS Shame about the spoiler in the review...

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**smallwordsplease**  
31 January 2010 5:29PM

Amis' early books are littered with Keith's. The hideous dwarf in Dead Babies and Keith Talent and his friend Keith spring to mind, but reading most of his books in quick succession was enough to make this Keith wonder if he didn't have something against us!

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**RLatruessport**  
31 January 2010 6:51PM

Amis' early books are littered with Keith's

I will ignore the dodgy apostrophe, but would like to ask if, maybe, Amis uses the name Keith in the same way that Richard Curtis uses Bernard?

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**blackloch**  
31 January 2010 7:13PM

Amis was an incredible wordsmith, but seems fatally transfixed by a form of horror and squeamishness in his obsessive creepiness surrounding women, sex, bodies, breasts etc. I have found this ultimately tiresome, childish and corrosive of his early talent.

I stopped at The Information, which I found eyewateringly cliched on several levels - even if it was supposed to be finely-wrought postmodern irony Mart.

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**blackloch**  
31 January 2010 7:17PM

Amis was a dazzling wordsmith, but his later work has been marred by an apparent squeamishness / horror permeating his creepy and obsessive gaze on women as bodies, breasts, and fundamentally problematic beings. Ultimately childish and tiresome.

I stopped at The Information - the lamest book I have ever read by a large margin.

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**blackloch**  
31 January 2010 7:19PM

Sorry folks for similar posts, it looked like the first one hadn't worked. Still - all good rants rely on repetition...

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**RooftopRejoicer**  
31 January 2010 7:34PM

Still can't work out why Amis comes in for so much slagging - could it be the tall poppy syndrome? But there are lots of successful writers out there, and they don't excite the same opprobrium. Dunno. But I don't imagine he gives a toss. He's written some excellent books and some turkeys, but this one looks to be promising - a similar scenario to *Dead Babies* but written by a mature Amis instead of his 20-year-old flashy, show-off self.

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**Cosmonaut**  
31 January 2010 9:22PM

After decades of underwhelming novels filled with cardboard cut-out characters, I somehow doubt that Martin Amis has managed to pull something remarkable out of the bag.

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**practitioner**  
31 January 2010 9:52PM

Around thirty years ago Martin Amis wrote a newspaper piece about an international football match - I think it was Norway 2 England 1 - and it was very, very funny. He described the English goalkeeper Ray Clemence as being so lacking in confidence that "you could nutmeg him with a beachball."

His fiction has a lot of such moments, which put a smile on the reader's face. But is he a novelist? I would say that he is not and that he has never written anything that resembles a good novel.

I've met him once and he was ... just as you would expect him to be. But I know a peer of his in the literary world who tells me that he is unbelievably unpleasant and unjust.

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**M A K E** **Labour** **HISTORY**  
1997-2010  
31 January 2010 10:53PM

I just don't understand all the bile and frothing that gets spat on CiF about Amis. His name is like Clarkson's or Cameron's, like a red rag to all the left liberal bigots who come out to rant and foam at the mouth and slather and spew irrational hatred

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**Spensor**  
1 February 2010 12:56AM

he's nearing normal male height, like the author, "in that much disputed territory between five foot six and five foot seven"

This is *Dead Babies* again, only a bit taller.

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**Murphis23**  
1 February 2010 5:33AM

I'm not sure why this discussion has turned into an Information punching bag... If Martin dies before hitting the euthanasia booth, it will be from unfairness. There's been so much sloppy partial-knowledge leveled at him in the form of unsound critique; especially irksome are the remarks that he "lacks moral footing," he's a misogynist, a racist, etc. To me, he seems to espouse a politics of love with most every story he writes. And when challenged in interviews to defend the controversial, it's almost comical to watch him so fully intellectually out-muscle his interlocutors. Thank you, Renoir. I, too, will look forward to reading this one.

One another note, why doesn't anybody ever mention his short-story collection, *Heavy Water*? Amis at his best, as far as I'm concerned.

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**BuftyLopez**  
1 February 2010 2:49PM

I love Martin Amis but that didn't stop me enjoying Richard Herring's response to his comments on euthanasia:

"If only he'd put something that funny in any one of his novels of the last twenty years! The last time I tried to slog my way to the end of one, I balanced it on the edge of my bath and even the book committed suicide!"

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**Crabsoup**  
1 February 2010 9:28PM

Amis has a voice most novelists would kill for, and I love the man this side idolatry. But total fiction is beyond him. The comic demon raging in his skull trips him up in the final third. How so? This is the best I can offer: a gap opens between the voice (not comic but poetic, satiric, tragic) and the comic urge driving the plot. Result: generic confusion and character fragmentation. It is not postmodernism, just artistic failure, a blind spot.

But if they gave prizes for pitch-perfect scenes, for paragraphs that crackle with inventiveness, for sentences that make the mind fizz, Martin Amis would have a cabinet full of Bookers. As it is, he doesn't give the judges a leg to stand on. Why? Because novels live or die on their characters.

That said, I'd read him before any number of shortlisted authors. His voice trumps

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their breathing bores; his muscular intelligence outshines their generic harmony. I buy Amis books but wait for others to land in my lap. Amis's is the voice of a generation, theirs the striving for a place in posterity.

Forget the appalling Fry, Amis is the real institution.



**JoeThePlumber**  
2 February 2010 7:22AM

No-one seems to remember -and it was only a few years ago- The House Of Meetings.

If there are to be judgements on The Information and Yellow Dog, which weren't too good, there should be some examination of THoM, which was excellent. Interesting that in a case like that, when Amis is concise and less conceited, and writes a no-fuss novel, no one's fussed to read it.

Don't know about the UK pressing but the cover of the Australian *The Pregnant Widow* looks like some sort of ugly computer manual.

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**dwynwyn**  
10 February 2010 10:22PM

Love Amis, not perfect, no, but speaks to me in volumes. And I enjoyed The Information. No-one has mentioned Experience which is one of the best, most moving books I've read. I've no idea if he's such a bastard as everyone makes out but I simply don't care - Larkin's poetry is still brilliant despite the unsavoury revelations about him. The earlier posts here are written by fools and bigots.

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**patcompo**  
11 February 2010 8:30AM

Agree with dwynwyn. Experience is a truly wonderful book about fathers and sons and families and is easily his best work. In general, I much prefer Amis's non-fiction to his fiction. Aside from The Rachel Papers and Dead Babies, I find his novels considerably less than the sum of their frequently dazzling parts.

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**Hurrb**  
19 February 2010 2:47PM

"If only Martin Amis was as gifted a writer as his father. He would then be less arrogant, less bitter and we would all wait with baited breath for his next masterpiece."  
- NormBlunt

Hey Norm, were you half as literate as Martin Amis, you would then know that "baited" breath is what you get from burping up a lot of bilge.

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