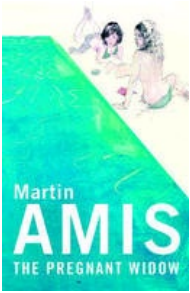


It happened one summer

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For those unfamiliar with Martin Amis's short story, 'What Happened to Me on My Holiday', written for The New Yorker in 1997, it was a purist exercise in autobiographical fiction; not even the names were changed.

The Pregnant Widow is a far more complex, troubling piece of work. Amis did indeed spend much of the summer after his second year at Oxford in a castle near the Mediterranean, though not in Tuscany; that would come later. In the novel, the grand residence belongs to an acquaintance of an acquaintance of Lily, Keith Nearing's girlfriend, and in the real world the château on the Côte d'Azur to which Amis and Gully Wells repaired was owned by a distant member of the Wells family.

Gully and Lily. How do I know? I'll be honest; Martin told me. But for anyone even remotely apprised of his life, the parallels between fact and fiction are glaring and abundant.

Rob Henderson, Amis's anarchic, self-destructive best friend from the late Sixties and early Seventies appears as Kenrik. Nicholas, Keith's brother, is without doubt Philip, Martin's elder sibling, and Violet, their sister, is a tragically undisguised portrait of the late Sally Amis. The poet and editor Neil Darlington, frequently referred to but never actually encountered, stands in for the famously elusive Ian Hamilton, while Tina Brown enters as Gloria Beautyman. According to the author, Brown rescued him from a period of sexual self-abasement, which he terms his 'Larkinland', and Gloria performs a similar service for Keith, involving one episode where she disports herself as an erotically charged version of Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet.

Keith, like his author, is reading for a degree in English and muses:

Would he one day open his copy of Critical Quarterly and see the article entitled 'A Reassessment of Pride and Prejudice: Elizabeth Bennet Considered as a Cock' by Gloria Beautyman and (or perhaps with, or possibly as told to) Keith Nearing?

Perhaps as a droll incitement to gimcrack Freudianism the 'Tina' of the novel is Keith's mum. And who, we wonder, is the beguiling Scheherazade, whose presence distracts Keith from everything, and whose memory haunts him throughout the book? If a consensus on indescribable allure is shared between the male personae of the novel and their actual counterparts of a generation ago then she is undoubtedly Mary Fumess. There are many more, and I could go on, but this is a review, not a prurient footnote.

A question arises. Does Amis's decision to write what he has admitted in pre-publication interviews is a 'flagrantly autobiographical' novel diminish its quality as a literary work?

Amis's readers are divided between fans and begrudgers by the simple fact that he is the most expansively gifted prose stylist of his generation. His father once paid him the backhanded compliment of finding a 'terrible compulsive vividness in his style', the subtext being that performance had replaced substance or plot. The extent to which he has overindulged his abundant talent will remain a matter for debate, and in my view his detractors are in truth motivated by a blend of prudishness and envy.

In The Pregnant Widow he retains his stylistic signature, which many have attempted to replicate, none with any success, yet by turns modulates and remodels it. Its closest counterpart is his most significant non-fictional work, Experience, a beautiful book which had frightful consequences: it spawned a decade of misery memoirs by the intelligentsia. But it did something else too. It prompted a hypothesis. What would a novel by Amis be like if written in the manner of his memoirs? Now we have it.

Amis and Gully Wells had the château to themselves, but their counterparts in the novel are joined by figures picked from Amis's post-Oxford life for a scenario that invites comparison with his second novel, Dead Babies (1975). This offered a somewhat grotesque picture of near contemporary England via a group of young bon vivants, gathered for a long weekend at the country house of the patrician Quentin Villiers.

This in turn could have been mistaken for a late-20th-century version of Waugh's Vile Bodies, incorporating an appropriately updated excess of sex, drug-taking and alcohol abuse, except that Amis's host, Villiers, murders each of his guests, wife and closest friends included. He derives no particular pleasure from this, but suggests with characteristic hauteur that it is inevitable. He is, he implies, his narrator's and his author's avatar; the characters have served their purpose as material for fine stylistic conceits, so they are now dispensable. In a way this could be taken as Amis's confession before the act: he would thereafter misuse and exploit his characters magnificently.

Whether or not Amis deliberately prompts the comparison in The Pregnant Widow, the contrast is compelling. For the first time in his career as a writer he treats all of his creations with a combination of respect, altruism and kindness. We forget that they are inventions, and wonder about the causes of their variously endearing, troubled, despondent states. Perhaps, then, we can detect a rationale for his otherwise gratuitous display of autobiographical links. It is his mantra. The linking of each of his creations to individuals for whom he personally feels a degree of attachment, even affection, guarantees in the novel a concomitant demand for care and responsibility. Perhaps he has even invented a new sub-genre: beneficent autofiction.

Despite the absence of anything resembling a plot, it is an addictive read. We live with the characters, follow them in and out of focus, and wonder continually about Keith, our companion in this experience. There are some shrewd digressions, on the much debated sexual revolution, and more intriguingly on the contrast between those parts of Europe that have 'just come staggering out of the Middle Ages' and their young, hedonistic invaders. All these reflections are amusing and insightful enough, but we return continually to the enigma of Keith.

The name itself evinces the wound-scratching, sometimes contrite, temper of the book: Keith, or more frequently Little Keith, was Martin's pseudonym for contributions to the New Statesman's literary competitions of the Seventies, the nickname used by friends and family during the same period and the forewarning of many his most pitiable inventions. The narrative, such as it is, never releases us from his presence, and he is a curious figure — shy, self-conscious, perplexed — and via him we apprehend a summer which will stalk the future lives of all with whom he shared it.

Later, in a 'Coda' in which we follow him through his subsequent life, and leave him aged 60, we also encounter an accumulation of great sadness and regret. In 2003 we join him in a pub near his home. He hates the place, but has neither the energy to leave it nor any inclination to explain why he is wasting his day there, alone. It is, however, an appropriate location for the mood of despair and weary resignation that accompanies his reflections on friends and family.

By 2009, he has still not detached himself from the night, ten years previously, when he witnessed his sister's death. Amis can reduce even his most sombre, mirthless

readers to guilty laughter, but he has not hitherto shown a capacity to provoke tears:

Yes, Violet looked forceful. For the first time in her life, she seemed to be someone it would be foolish to treat lightly or underestimate, ridge-faced, totemic, like a squaw queen with orange hair.

'She's gone', said the doctor and pointed with her hand. The wavering line had levelled out. 'She's still breathing,' said Keith. But of course it was the machine that was still breathing. He stood over a breathless corpse, the chest filling, heaving, and he thought of her running and running, flying over the fields.

In these closing sequences Keith is the most grievous, heartbreaking individual so far created by his author. If, as is implied, he speaks for him, then one can only feel something akin to heedful pity. But it is only a novel, is it not? Near the end the narrator raises a similar question: 'Yes, we're close again, he and I ... I? Well, I'm the voice of conscience...'

This book is a unique, sometimes exquisite experience that begs to be returned to after a first encounter.

Richard Bradford's biography of Martin Amis will be published this autumn by Peter Owen.

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