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That Summer in Italy

By GRAYDON CARTER
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For someone who grew up in a not particularly exciting city in Canada — yes, yes, that was a joke — the sexual revolution was something that happened to someone else, somewhere else, most probably in that enchanted, faraway Gomorrah called the United States. I had certainly read about the sexual revolution in magazines like Time, and I was nothing if not eager to take it beyond the theoretical. But the knock on the door never came, and when I left for the rough-and-tumble of New York in the 1970s, I was still waiting for the sexual rebellion to conscript me into its welcoming bosom.



Illustration by Ulla Puggaard

We could chat on and on about the dating habits of my beloved homeland — where even *post*-marital sex was gently frowned on — but there is a book to review here. And it is written by [Martin Amis](#), a British foot soldier on the pulsing, sweaty front lines of that era's social sexual upheaval. To Amis, London was a petri dish of sexual experimentation. In his new novel, "The Pregnant Widow" he says that sex was everywhere, and that the turning point in the whole affair arrived when girls became sexual aggressors who could pursue their desires and enjoy "the tingle of license" just like their male counterparts. Yes, just like guys, minus the pleading.

To discuss a Martin Amis book, you must first discuss the orchestrated release of a Martin Amis book. In London, which rightly prides itself on the vibrancy of its literary cottage industry, Amis is the [Steve Jobs](#) of book promoters, and his product rollouts are as carefully managed as anything Apple dreams up. The Amis campaigns tend to follow a rough pattern. In the first wave are interviews in the broadsheets: The Sunday Times, The Guardian, The Independent, The Telegraph, The Observer and so forth. Amis is photographed or described doing laddish things like playing darts, shooting billiards and drinking in the middle of the day. Names are dropped: [Christopher Hitchens](#), James Fenton, [Ian McEwan](#), Clive James, [Philip Larkin](#) and [Julian Barnes](#), with whom Amis had a very public falling-out some years ago.

There will be the inevitable artistic contrast with his father, Kingsley Amis, an interviewer's dream inasmuch as he was known to proclaim his son's books unreadable. Feature writers will declare the Amises the most significant literary dynasty in living memory. Father and son both burst onto the scene early, shaking up the publishing firmament with bracingly comic, original novels that each heralded a new voice: Kingsley with "Lucky Jim," Martin with "The Rachel Papers." These journalists will then put Amis junior on the spot by reminding him that unlike his father, he has not won the [Booker Prize](#) or landed a knighthood. Kingsley was protean in his output well into his 70s. He was also an accomplished womanizer,

THE PREGNANT WIDOW

Inside History

By Martin Amis
370 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. \$26.95

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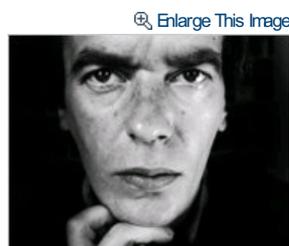
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Steve Pyke/Getty Images
Martin Amis in 1995.

drinker and conversationalist, and as he aged, he became increasingly and vigorously conservative. (I sat beside him years and years ago at a Private Eye lunch at the magazine's regular spot, the Coach and Horses in Soho, not far from its Greek Street offices. He was funny and raffishly rude, and had the thinnest, whitest skin I've ever seen on a man — like a condom filled with skim milk.) Finally, there will be descriptions of Martin's lovely home in Primrose Hill, on the same street where his father once lived; his lovely wife, Isabel Fonseca; his lovely kiddies running around the house; and his past conquests as well as his looks, his fame and his fortune.

As a rule, Amis will make some outlandish statement, generally in jest, that will provide second-day headlines in all the papers. The noted biographer D. J. Taylor is not alone in noticing that Amis does this pretty much anytime he has a book coming out. In the Sunday Times interview for "The Pregnant Widow," for example, Amis envisioned a looming "silver tsunami" rolling into Britain. "There'll be a population of demented very old people, like an invasion of terrible immigrants, stinking out the restaurants and cafes and shops," he said, before proposing public euthanasia stands: "There should be a booth on every corner where you could get a martini and a medal." You can imagine how that went over.

Next come the reviews, which also follow a general pattern. First they rehash the ghastly notices of the previous book, then they express the great hope that this will be a return to the old Martin — the funny Martin, who gave us "The Rachel Papers," "Dead Babies," "Success" and "Money." Then comes the aggrieved disappointment that this book, regardless of its merits, is not the one we were waiting for. Even the compliments are backhanded. When the British publishing journal The Bookseller declared "The Pregnant Widow" a "return to form," Amis blanched. "What's this *return*?" he asked. "He never went away." Writing, remember, is the only art in which the creator is publicly judged by people who do precisely the same thing, but as a rule less well. And bubbling beneath the surface of a lot of these interviews and book reviews is resentment.

"The Pregnant Widow" is set largely in 1970, at a castle above an Italian countryside village in Campania, where it just so happens D. H. Lawrence and his wife, Frieda, once stayed. (In this novel, even real estate has a literary provenance.) Like Charles Ryder recalling his time at Brideshead years later, Amis's narrator looks back on the events in that castle from the perspective of the 21st century and reflects on all that happened in their wake. Three students from the University of London have come to stay: the protagonist, Keith; his girlfriend, Lily; and a stunning 20-year-old blonde with all sorts of luxury options and the unlikely name Scheherazade. Keith is both a leg man and a breast man — a fellow who wants to have his Kate and Edith too, as the saying goes.

Although Amis announced early on that "The Pregnant Widow" (subtitled "Inside History") would be "blindingly autobiographical," he tut-tuts when critics try to align the characters with their real-life inspirations. He says that he *had* been working on a fiercely autobiographical novel, but that two years ago in Uruguay (where he has a second home) he scrapped most of it. Still, as the book opens, his narrator states: "Everything that follows is true. Italy is true. 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." The coy hints really got the fizz up in London's literary cocktail. It has been speculated that Lily was based on Gully Wells, an editor now living in New York, and Scheherazade on Mary Furness, a comely contemporary of Amis's who later took up philosophy.

Graydon Carter is the editor of Vanity Fair. He is also the editor of "The Great Hangover: 21 Tales of the New Recession From the Pages of Vanity Fair."

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