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The Pregnant Widow by Martin Amis

The Sunday Times review by Peter Kemp

As is customary in the case of Martin Amis, advance reports about his new novel have resembled Met Office predictions of the approach of a tropical storm. Readers have been alerted that something full of seething turbulence was heading their way. Feminists would be thrown into a tizzy. Former girlfriends should expect the worst. The book, Amis has declared, would be “blindingly autobiographical”. It is, its awestruck blurb gasps, “Martin Amis at his fearless best”.

After this, it comes as something of a surprise to find that the subject he is fearlessly taking on is a group of loungers-around having a holiday in Italy. The set-up, a house party in well-heeled surroundings, recalls the one in his second novel, *Dead Babies* (1975); but anyone expecting a return to the scabrous zest of his earlier fiction will be disappointed. As in all Amis’s novels since his best book *Money* (1984), raunchy goings-on are subordinate to lofty soundings-off.

At the forefront of *The Pregnant Widow* are three students: 20-year-old Keith Nearing, his girlfriend Lily and her friend Scheherazade. As guests in a castle near Naples owned by an unsavoury cheese tycoon, they spend most of the “hot, endless, and erotically decisive summer” of 1970 stretched out around the pool and interacting with cartoonishly depicted visitors ranging from a tiny Italian count to a flat-chested nymphomaniac and a temptress with an oversized rump.

This crew is silhouetted against what Amis sees as a time of momentous change, when women are starting to enjoy promiscuous sex without emotional commitment, formerly regarded as a male perk. The first glimpse of this emancipation in the novel is when Scheherazade shucks off her bikini top at the pool, daringly exposing what Amis calls her “twinning circumferences, interproximate, interchangeable” to public view. Eager to entice her into further liberties, Keith excitedly concocts a seduction plan.

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An English-literature student repeatedly seen reading classic novels, Keith takes his inspiration from Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*, in which a young woman is drugged and raped (a scenario

previously updated by Amis’s father, Kingsley, in his 1960 novel *Take a Girl Like You*). Working a variant on this, Keith tips a tranquilliser into Lily’s prosecco so that, while she sleeps, he can slip away for a sex tryst with Scheherazade.

But in the new world of assertive women his plot goes awry. And soon he himself falls prey to one of Amis’s synthetic sex harpies, along the lines of Selina Street in *Money* or Nicola Six in *London Fields* (1989). Her unnerving erotic expertise, it is unconvincingly maintained, leaves him with “chronic sexual problems”. Problems of other kinds (messed-up emotional lives, unfulfilled maternal urges) subsequently bedevil the novel’s females, who are hit by what Amis sees as the first wave of a sea change in sexual mores.

The Pregnant Widow takes its title from a phrase by the Russian thinker Alexander Herzen, who observed that revolution is followed by fraught expectation, not the immediate birth of something new. Seven years in the writing, the book is itself the product of a difficult gestation, indeed of a kind of literary caesarean. According to Amis, out of what had swollen into “an uncontrollably long and pointless novel” he plucked this near-500-page account of an Italian holiday and its aftermath.

During the process most of the promised autobiographical material (apart from a portrayal of Amis’s sister Sally and a few in-jokes about his friend Christopher Hitchens) seems to have been left behind. Keith’s CV vaguely parallels that of Amis in the 1970s (an art-gallery job, a stint with an advertising agency, early ascent through the literary world). But — unexpectedly, given the puerility

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of Keith's commentaries on the novels he reads (largely assessment of whether or not their heroines have "big tits") — he becomes a "respected critic", not a novelist. The women around him, plasticised figments from the usual Amis mould, aren't filled out much beyond their vital statistics: Lily ("34-25-34"), Scheherazade ("37-23-33"), Rita ("32-30-31"), big-bottomed Gloria Beautyman ("33-22-37").

For decades, Amis has been striving to attach his repertoire of fictional effects to a large subject: nuclear threat, the Holocaust, awareness of mortality, Stalinism, and notions such as the link he has intuited between constipation and toxic fundamentalism. In *The Pregnant Widow*, characters are allowed to do little beyond illustrating his thesis that they live in an era when "it's in the air that girls should act like boys". Conversations harp on this; behaviour is rigged to exhibit it.

Once, sexual ins and outs stimulated Amis into his most vitalised writing, as did sleaze and squalor. Immersion in his early fiction was like being plunged into a septic tank doubling as a Jacuzzi. Now, that energy has dropped. The cruel eye and flair for inventive metaphor have dulled. It is only occasionally here that you find deft descriptions: a round shower mat that looks like "a steamrollered octopus, with gaping suckers", "old people, slowly growing into their masks of bark and walnut".

Elsewhere, the prose strains for loftiness (sunbathers are "under the burning axle of the parent star") and images go into strained contortions: "Keith imagined her buttocks as a pair of giant testicles (from L. testiculus, lit. "a witness" — a witness to virility), not oval, but perfectly round." Peculiar pronouncements abound ("The night is more intelligent than we are — many Einsteins more intelligent"). Talk is often swaggeringly in-your-face about sex. But physical encounters are so swathed in verbiage and eccentric theorising that it is hard to make out what, if anything much, is happening. Structurally, the book is ramshackle.

Amis encrusts the meandering storyline of his novel about changing sexual attitudes with portentous allusions to tales of metamorphosis, especially the myth of Narcissus. The latter, which has featured in his fiction before, isn't the only instance of recycling. A leading character is nudgingly called Keith ("probably the most plebeian name there is") for the third time in Amis's fiction — the fourth, if you include Keithette, the brawny matriarch in *Einstein's Monsters* (1987). As in seven previous novels, impotence is a central complaint.

The main element that doesn't seem like a reprise in the book is its much-publicised fictionalising of the wretched sexual misadventures and death of Amis's alcoholic sister Sally, rather awkwardly manoeuvred into the narrative as another specimen female casualty of the 1970s sexual revolution. But, lurching uncomfortably towards caricature, even this fails to put any real life into *The Pregnant Widow*.

The Pregnant Widow by Martin Amis

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Martin Amis will talk about *The Pregnant Widow* at the Sunday Times Oxford Literary Festival, on Saturday, March 27, at 4pm. To book, visit the [Oxford Literary Festival site](#)

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