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## Books

### THE PREGNANT WIDOW: MARTIN AMIS



**THE PREGNANT WIDOW:** Martin Amis has traded in his brooding Seventies persona

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Friday February 5, 2010

By **Roger Lewis**

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**UNFOLDING** beside "the Olympian swimming pool in its grotto setting", Martin Amis' *The Pregnant Widow* has all the ingredients of a scenario for a soft-core porn movie.

The hero is Keith Nearing, a 5ft 6in young fogey whose long vacation in the sunshine is the book's subject. It is quite an education he receives, too, at the hands and loins of Lily, Scheherazade, Gloria, Vi, Rita, Cona and Dodo. Fun and games in the water "making love to a

fragrant 20-year-old girl, in summer, in a castle, in Italy". Or perhaps it is wishful thinking.

For unfortunately Martin Amis, being Martin Amis, the actual titillation is kept to a minimum. Instead there's a lot of high intellectual verbiage, self-conscious swearing, would-be sophisticated chatter that is immature and adolescent as well as abstruse literary references by the lorry-load.

The fact that the book is set in 1970 is a clue. It was round about then that Amis graduated with a first in English literature from Oxford. He proceeded to fill editorial posts at the Times Literary Supplement, the New Statesman and The Observer, mixed usefully with his father Sir Kingsley Amis' famous friends and this was (and remains) his finest hour.

Amis has never improved upon the precocious success of *The Rachel Papers* (1973). Frequently photographed frowning and moodily smoking, he got a reputation for being trendy and hip. He was in reality a swot and a square.

At 61 Amis is still the clever-clever undergraduate, who thinks it is witty to discuss the relative globular nature of boobs and bottoms, who will put in a paragraph about how expensive face cream contains the same ingredients as sperm.

*The Pregnant Widow* is like doing A-level English again. Amis (or his stand-in Keith, "the most plebeian name there is") gives the reader mini-tutorials on Kafka, DH Lawrence, the fallen women Tess and Bathsheba in Thomas Hardy, Dracula and Middlemarch, among much else.

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The suppressed sexuality in Jane Austen takes up a lot of discussion time. *Pride And Prejudice*, we are told, would be improved by "a forty page sex scene". So would *The Pregnant Widow*.

Amis Jr even quotes Amis Sr: "Men understood why they liked women's breasts – but they didn't understand why they liked them so much." Despite such pop-eyed moments, however, you don't get the impression that Keith or his chum Kenrick like women very much. Indeed women have to be despised precisely for the lust and the loss of control that they arouse.

There is a discussion about honour killings. This isn't roundly enough condemned by any of the characters. They switch to talking almost with approval about how heroines were drugged and seduced in classic 18th-century novels. Cue more seminars on the emotional struggles in Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson

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Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson.

It is 1970 and the men in this book don't really welcome women being independent and taking the initiative. It impugns their manhood, now that "girls acting like boys was in the air". Self-willed and self-validating, women no longer want to be regarded as objects and the men feel a bit at sea, their machismo redundant.

Germaine Greer had this sort of stuff sewn up decades ago. The arguments are as dated as white thigh-length PVC boots. What I much preferred were the flash-forwards with Keith in his late-50s. Now a grumpy old fella he rants about the way the average girl today disfigures herself "with jewellery in her navel, in her lower lip and in both nostrils". Keith looks in the mirror and his reflection shows "something worse than reality... Your life is thinning out".

He has heard the chimes at midnight: "The minutes often dragged but the years tumbled over one another and disappeared." That's brilliant but much of *The Pregnant Widow* is as flaccid and embarrassing as a provincial revival of *Oh Calcutta!*

**Jonathan Cape, £18.99**

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