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Has Martin Amis used his former lovers as inspiration for his racy new novel?

In the rarified setting of an Italian castle, half a dozen libidinous twentysomethings gather for a long, hot summer holiday dominated by sexual intrigue.

By Gordon Rayner, Chief Reporter
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Martin Amis with his current wife Isabel Fonseca Photo: GETTY

By the end of their stay, one tender youth will suffer carnal "trauma" at the hands of a particularly predatory female, whose "twisted" lust will "ruin him for 25 years".

The risqué plot of Martin Amis's new novel has made it his most eagerly anticipated book for years, but for his legion of former lovers it will be greeted with more than a tinge of apprehension when it is published next month.

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Far from being a work of pure fiction, Amis has described The Pregnant Widow as "blindingly autobiographical", making it something of a literary guessing game over which of the female characters and bedroom scenes might have been inspired by Amis's real-life sexual encounters.

The journalist Emma Soames, granddaughter of Sir Winston Churchill, has speculated on whether she has anything "to fear" from the novel - a thought that is likely to be shared by Amis's other high-profile conquests, who include the former Vanity Fair editor Tina Brown, the writer Claire Tomalin and Victoria Rothschild, daughter of Baron Rothschild.

"I'm sure Martin will draw inspiration from some of his former girlfriends," said the biographer Julie Kavanagh, who lived with Amis for a year before discovering he was cheating on her with her best

friend, Miss Soames. "Though I suspect he will also use aspects of other women who are not part of his life."

Amis, 60, has confirmed that the central character of the book, Keith Nearing, who is the "victim" of the pivotal bedroom scene, is based on Amis himself, while friends including the journalist Christopher Hitchens and the late poet Ian Hamilton appear fleetingly as minor characters. "Everything that follows is true...the girls are all true, and the boys are all true," he writes at the beginning of the novel. "Not even the names have been changed. Why bother? To protect the innocent? There were no innocent."

Despite his teasing introduction, he has not, so far, provided any clues to

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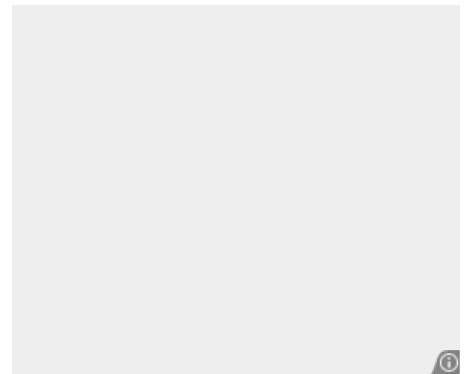
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whether any former girlfriends are reincarnated as female characters, such as the lascivious friend who "loomed up on (Keith) unclothed and unarmed, with her pincers of bliss" to subject him to his "sexual trauma".

In a recent article about her time with Amis, Miss Soames said: "I remember a line from one of his books which read: 'They all want to be the bitch in the book.' Well this one didn't."

Yesterday Miss Soames told The Daily Telegraph: "I think anybody who goes out with a writer knows that they draw on their life for their work, but I'll wait until I've read it before I say anything else."

During readings from the book, Amis has revealed that "Keith" begins the holiday touring the streets of Montale, near Florence, "flanked by two 20-year-old blondes", Lily and Scheherazade, the latter named after the Persian queen and narrator of One Thousand and One Nights. Together with other female characters, they are "afloat on the sea of change" of the sexual revolution where "the girls are acting like boys" in their promiscuity.

Literature student Keith, meanwhile, "is struggling to twist feminism and the rise of women towards his own ends".

The novel is set in 1970, when Amis was a 20-year-old English student at Oxford University, three years before his first novel, The Rachel Papers, catapulted him to fame.

Miss Kavanagh has described in the past how Amis, who is just 5ft 4in tall, worried during his student days about being a "shortarse" and having crooked teeth, and suffered from "feelings of profound unattractiveness".

He has credited the 19-year-old Tina Brown, who went out with Amis when he was 23, with "saving" him after a lengthy period when he could not get a girlfriend.

But fame won him the attention of a steady stream of women. They included the photographer Angela Gargas, to whom he was engaged; the late Lamorna Seale, by whom he later discovered he had fathered a daughter; the socialite Antonia Phillips, with whom he had two sons during a 10-year marriage, and his current wife, the author Isabel Fonseca, the mother of his two youngest daughters.

It was only when Miss Kavanagh wrote about her relationship with Amis last year that Miss Soames, now the editor-at-large of Saga magazine, discovered the author had begun seeing her before breaking off his relationship with her friend.

She wrote: "There was probably always an overlap in all his relationships with women - to my knowledge he never left someone simply to be alone. That meant the edges of all his relationships were likely to be tinged with duplicity and infidelity."

Miss Kavanagh, who called Amis by the pet name "Lazy S****" during their relationship, because of his refusal to help around the house, doubts he will be in any way vindictive about former girlfriends.

"He is not vengeful in any way," she said, adding modestly: "I doubt whether I'll be in the book. I probably wasn't very good copy as a girlfriend."

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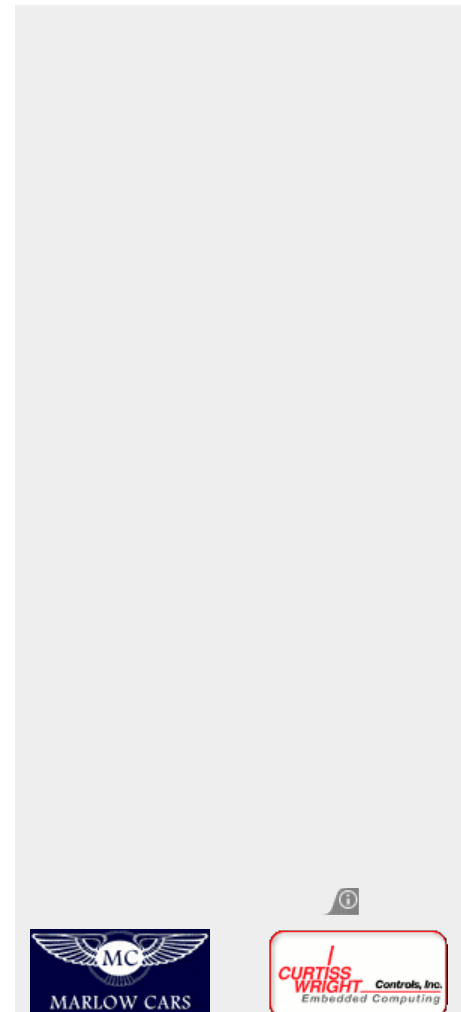
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