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Martin Amis: The wunderkind comes of age

Long described as the enfant terrible of the literary novel, the author of *London Fields* and *Money* has now turned 60. Yet his new book – the 12th – reveals that, far from losing his youthful outlook, he has rediscovered it



Andrew Anthony
The Observer, Sunday 10 January 2010
Article history

Next month sees the release of *The Pregnant Widow*, Martin Amis's 12th novel. Like heavy snowfall, the publication of a new Amis novel has become a kind of established media ritual.

Everyone knows the rules of the game: the writer will argue that his work holds a mirror up to the culture, while the culture responds by inviting the writer to take a look in the mirror. But over the years, this exchange has slowly evolved into something less reflexive and perhaps a little more reflective.

For Amis has increasingly taken to studying the image looking back at him and, in the process, he has become his generation's most astute documentarist of ageing and a symbol of the accelerating passage of time. Having begun his literary career at the precocious age of 23, Amis enjoyed a prolonged youth stretching deep into his thirties. Not only was he young, he also looked young – short and slim with the full lips and piercing eyes of a Caravaggio model. Rare was the profile that didn't refer to him as an enfant terrible, even in his forties.

These were the years of *Success* and *Money*, titles that worked equally as ironic social comments and accurate personal assessments. *Money* even boasted a character called Martin Amis, a novelist with an enviably cool lifestyle and a daunting intellectual hinterland.

It was meant to toy with media-shaped perceptions of Amis, but the truth was that the real Amis did lead a kind of male fantasy life. He *did* play tennis each day, snooker with Julian Barnes and poker with Al Alvarez. He *had* slept with everyone, read everything and he *did* speak pure prose in a voice seemingly made out of champagne and roll-ups.

Then came middle age, complete with the full-option crisis package – divorce, parental death, mortal dread and dental surgery. It all suddenly seemed to whizz by in a blur of censorious headlines.

Now the wild child of London letters is 60. And perhaps for the first time in his adult life, he looks his age.

"Keith was now well launched on the bullet train of the fifties," Amis writes in *The Pregnant Widow*, "where the minutes often dragged but the years tumbled over one another and disappeared. And the mirror was trying to tell him something." Not since Snow White have mirrors been so vocal. The message they have to tell is that getting old takes its toll. Amis is too much of a satirist to mourn his lost youth – he can leave that to his male critics and female fans – but discovering older age, we gather, is scant recompense for the loss.

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Still, if the joke with *Yellow Dog*, the poorly received 2003 novel, was that Amis had dropped the *enfant* and was just plain *terrible*, then *The Pregnant Widow* is a return not just to form but to more juvenile days.

It tells the story of Keith Nearing, a bookishly bright and carnally propelled young man who spends the summer of 1970 in an Italian castle with a group of tumescent friends, male and female, just at the moment that women began to explore their new sexual liberty.

The title refers to Alexander Herzen's comment that in killing the past order before giving birth to the new, revolutions leave a pregnant widow. The expectant widow in this novel is feminism, which, according to Amis, "is still in its second trimester... I think it has several more convulsions to undergo before we'll see the child".

The news that Amis has turned his attention to feminism is not something that feminists will necessarily greet with air-punching celebration. In the past, and indeed quite recently, Amis has been accused of misogyny. It was said feminist judges ensured that *London Fields*, which featured a nymphomaniac seeking to be murdered, never made it on to the Booker prize longlist.

And last year, Amis drew criticism when he noted of the public interest in Katie Price that "[all we are really worshipping is two bags of silicone](#)" – though it probably says more about the dislocation of feminism than about Amis that mocking the cult of Jordan is deemed worthy of rebuke.

In one way or another, Amis's subject has always been sex, particularly the male view of sex, and therefore of women. At the same time, his method has remained extravagantly and grotesquely comic. In novels like *Money*, he pioneered a baroque-pornographic style to depict the sexualisation of the contemporary world. It was one of the aspects of Amis writing that his father, Kingsley, found unappealing.

"Sex is a fascinating area," Amis senior once explained, "but it's harder than he thinks. Nobody says that fiction should be able to discuss everything; he thinks he can do it, but I wonder if he can."

Though extremely close, father and son were natural antagonists: Martin was an anti-nuke Labour supporter, Kingsley a Thatcher-loving Conservative; Kingsley was a reckless adulterer, Martin the devoted family man.

But the differences have faded or closed with age. Amis did what he said he'd never do and left his first wife, Antonia Phillips, following his affair with Isabel Fonseca, who became his second wife. Then it emerged that he'd fathered a daughter, Delilah, during a youthful liaison. Lately, Martin has even begun to bear a physical resemblance to Kingsley.

And now it seems that the son has his own doubts about writing on sex. Keith learns in *The Pregnant Widow* that you can't write about sex because "authorial omnipotence" is too much for the limited sexual potency of the "male creature".

The observation appears to be stamped with the author's approval because Keith is obviously based on him. Versions of other real-life characters, including Amis's close friend Christopher Hitchens, the late poet Ian Hamilton, AJ Ayer, are also awarded walk-on parts.

The one most pregnant with meaning is based on Amis's late sister, Sally. It is well known how Amis, the child of a broken home, almost became a school dropout but, with the help of his stepmother, Elizabeth Jane Howard, went on to gain a first at Oxford, dazzled at the *New Statesman* and the *Observer* and enjoyed international renown as a novelist.

[Sally's tale is altogether less inspiring](#). She waged a long struggle with alcoholism and depression and died, aged 46, in 2000. She was also, says Amis, "pathologically promiscuous". He recently called her "one of the most spectacular victims of the revolution".

Originally, Amis intended to write an explicitly autobiographical novel but gave up after several years of work. Instead, he divided the concept into two novels. Amis is apparently now working on the other section, entitled *State of England*, and promises to include a lottery-winning criminal called Lionel Asbo. If it sounds like a parody of an Amis character's name, then perhaps that's the price of originality. So distinctive is his

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style, its circular rhythms and comic beats, its verbal elegance and brutal slang, and so galvanising was its initial impact that there is a sense in which he is destined to ape himself. After all, everyone else has.

In 2006, Amis returned to England, having spent two-and-a-half years living in Uruguay. It took him a while to regain his social bearings. "Some strange things have happened, it seems to me, in my absence," he noted. "I didn't feel like I was getting more right wing when I was in Uruguay, but when I got back I felt that I had moved quite a distance to the right while staying in the same place."

Following the exposure of a plot by Islamic extremists to blow up transatlantic aeroplanes, he made some wildly ill-conceived remarks, suggesting that the Muslim community "will have to suffer" – "curtailing of freedom" and "deportation" were mentioned.

He subsequently withdrew the comments, explaining that they were said in the heat of the moment, but the damage was done and, for some observers, racism and Islamophobia could be added to the old charge of misogyny.

Such was the line taken by the Marxist academic Terry Eagleton, who accused Amis of having become his father. If the literary theorist had a point, he lost it in a self-righteous diatribe that may have owed its ire to the fact that Amis had landed a well-paid position as professor of creative writing at Manchester University, from where Eagleton was about to exit as professor of English literature.

The move into teaching confirmed a profoundly anti-reactionary quality in Amis: his interest in what comes next. A seasoned sceptic he may be but he's not really an old cynic. He tends to see social collapse around every corner, yet he remains committed to the new.

Amis is strong on describing the world and weak on plotting a story. This is not, as is commonly argued, because he is a stylist but, rather, because he is a moralist. Instead of narrative drive, he seeks universal significance. Sometimes, he strains literally for it with astronomical descriptions and sometimes he achieves it with effortless aplomb.

There's a sort of reverse bathos operating in Amis in which he slips from the empty epic to the comic sublime. At such moments, and there are plenty in *The Pregnant Widow*, no one better understands the cosmic joke that is humanity. Nor is anyone as funny telling it.

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mendonca
10 Jan 2010, 2:09AM

lionel asbo? why not crispin lager or edward xfactor?

good to hear marty's back and back on form. he is one of a few writers who have fully addressed the contemporary world and gives readers the chance to laugh along with the madness. don't know if feminist readers will be laughing

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however



ManningtreeOx

10 Jan 2010, 7:29AM

[Recommend? \(2\)](#)

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Got to say that he's a much more absorbing reviewer/critic than novelist. Money, London Fields, and, to a lesser degree (diminishing returns?), The Information were pivotal pieces of late Twentieth Century literature, but Yellow Dog was, well, any-coloured dog shit.



pastis

10 Jan 2010, 9:20AM

[Recommend? \(5\)](#)

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The author is clearly a fan of Martin Amis and shares his views on communism, totalitarianism and the like. Simply read the conclusion of his Cambodian piece where he insists Marxist-Leninist ideology should be held accountable for the genocide. As if the ideas that were adopted by the Khmer Rouge weren't skewered and distorted in the first place. Asleight of hand that discredits the author. Of course those utopian ideas are discredited but you don't need to superimpose your own views on the situation.



hojo

10 Jan 2010, 10:13AM

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Champagne Marxism personified!

He does look like his father, albeit a bit more raddled. Still, Lucky Jim must weigh heavily on his shoulders, so solace elsewhere is understandable.



jarvisgoodland

10 Jan 2010, 10:32AM

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I'm just so glad he's around to skewer the great and good on our behalf. I really would never have been able to see through the Katie Price phenomenon until this presiding genius of social satire came along. Lionel Asbo- whew, the man's cleverness just leaves me reeling, nobody else could come up with that. Or probably anybody with half a brain stared embarrassedly into their muesli when they read that a supposed leading novelist did, before bursting into hoots of laughter at the contortions the writer of this piece gets himself into to try to make it seem cutting-edge.



RooftopRejoicer

10 Jan 2010, 11:36AM

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Yes, Amis has certainly produced a few outright turkeys (*Yellow Dog*), and yes, his frequent refusal to countenance a decent plot has undermined some of his novels (*London Fields*). But even so, stylistically speaking he remains the single most influential British novelist since the '60s; his writing was and is sharper, funnier and often more subversive than his contemporaries. And it's not only the authors of today who have benefited from this, but also contributors to CiF etc. The fact that posters and bloggers delight in slagging Amis off using variants of his own outrageous hyperbolic style must give him a certain ironic satisfaction.



zoeblake

10 Jan 2010, 11:38AM

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I'm delighted he's back as he's got (keith) talent to spare. The novelty of new and/or young writers is a gift for journalists with pages to fill, and I suppose his career benefited from that more than most, but being young or glamorous or cutting edge isn't really a very good measure of the quality of your work. Being spiteful because he looks his age or isn't first or most cutting with his satire is really dumb. He's done it all; cut him some slack.

No fool could deny that some of his recent novels have been relatively poor, but there's no reason why he shouldn't grow up (or old) and produce more fabulous work. It's not like gymnastics, for God's sake.

Books that catch the zeitgeist (*Money* and *Success*) are exciting, but anyone who hasn't yet should read *Time's Arrow*. It's really moving and humane, and clever too.



TheBigMan

10 Jan 2010, 11:57AM

[Recommend? \(2\)](#)

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Thank Christ! AGrauniad article on Martin Amis that's halfway sympathetic!

When market-forced moral relativism renders judgement taboo, we jump on

any sacrifice offered up or allowed by elite consensus:

Pregnant women drinking!
Chavs!
Posh boys!
Ethnic minorities critiqued by a member of the majority!
Universally-acclaimed celebs!
Progeny of the rich and famous!
Smokers!
BOOOOOO! HISSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS!

Short of getting knocked up and hitting the town for a few tequilas with Burberry-clad girlfriends, Martin Amis could scarcely be a softer target.



blowme
10 Jan 2010, 12:47PM

[Recommend?](#) (2)

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My favourite author by a mile, the sheer number of ideas per page and the wonderful humour - I've been reading and re-reading his works since I was 14 and he's one of a few writers who have definitely made my life better. I can't wait to get my hands on his latest work, i have a decent Bordeaux lined up for the occasion and will savour every well-chosen word. So there.



ManningtreeOx
10 Jan 2010, 12:52PM

[Recommend?](#) (0)

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Has anybody got a copy of Invasion of The Space Invaders? Is it worth getting hold of?



Hareton
10 Jan 2010, 2:28PM

[Recommend?](#) (3)

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The author is usually limited to writing about cars, but when he finally gets a chance to say something more enlightening he tells us he still likes Amis, with all the dodgy politics, over-writing and half-baked ideas, and then even worse, takes time to disparage genuine genius, Noam Chomsky (in the other article published today on Cambodia). Nice days work!



RooftopRejoicer
10 Jan 2010, 2:47PM

[Recommend?](#) (0)

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@hareton
I agree that Chomsky is a genius, but in the field of linguistics, which he single-handedly revolutionised. In the field of political history he is just another interpreter of events, but I would hardly call him a genius in that respect.



RobinMcAllister
10 Jan 2010, 3:32PM

[Recommend?](#) (0)

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Ditto the comment on having more ideas per page, although admittedly you wouldn't want every novel you read to be that densely written.

Interesting comments from Andrew Anthony that Amis's focus morality and his striving for universal significance mean that he doesn't pay much attention to plot. I think this kind of true: plot for Amis, is just a framework for his voice and his ways of seeing. However, it's not like style + morality + universality? plot. You could, conceivably have 'em all. Got to admit that I've also been reading Marty's stuff since being a teenager and never noticed the lack of plot - it's quite right though.

The Invasion of the Space Invaders - dead expensive and, I would guess, not worth it, unless you're a collector.



brian68
10 Jan 2010, 5:28PM

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Lionel Asbo - sounds like a character from Richard Littlejohn's brief foray into the realms of literature. Hell in a handcart anyone?
Champagne Designer-Handbagge could be Lionel's posh 'bird'. That one's free, Marty.

Some of my favourite novels have been written by Amis, but also several where I do not have a clue what is going on at any level. What happened at the end of Yellow Dog? What happened in any of ordinary people?

Hopefully by the time the pregnant widow comes out I'll have finished Ellroy's Death's a Rover. Hopefully.



Abdias

[Recommend?](#) (2)



10 Jan 2010, 5:56PM

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The problem with Amis is that he is an unworthy epigone of Nabokov. Read his recent article on this writer, where he struggles with ADA, the pinnacle of Nabokov's art, and failing to appreciate this novel concludes that VN must have been in decline. I would like to see Amis when he is seventy write anything remotely meriting his title "epigone".



DyslexicAunt

10 Jan 2010, 9:42PM

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Amis has always seemed to me to be so 'right on' as to be right off; an addict of the killer sentence there always seems to me to be a fart smell of style over substance in his prose. The idea that MA's weakness in plotting is not because he is a stylist but a moralist is interesting if unsupported, but for me this remains a superficial and non-compelling argument, if not a cop out.



niallharden

10 Jan 2010, 10:18PM

[Recommend? \(0\)](#)

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I bought Yellow Dog in the middle of a (very enjoyable) Amis binge a few years back but never got round to it. It's the only one I've not read except Night Train. Is it really all that bad?



RobinMcAllister

10 Jan 2010, 10:45PM

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Yellow Dog -

I don't remember it being so completely terrible as everyone makes out - I think it was an unlikely story but pretty funny in places. The only one so far that I've not bothered finishing was the more recent one, set in Russia - forget what it's called.

Never really understood what it is about Amis that pisses everyone off so much, perhaps you can enlighten me? In a bullet point list please. :)

I'm of the opinion that Amis targets his writing to a certain age group - late teens - early twenties (I think he's said as much somewhere - that he writes what he thinks he would like as a twenty-one year old). Personally I loved his stuff at that age - esp. Money and London Fields.

I wonder if we don't take it all too seriously - it's only *fiction*. I mean, they are, after all, just made up stories. :-)



acme

11 Jan 2010, 12:31AM

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Amis - thick spoiled talentless misogynist perpetual adolescent who condemns his sister as "pathologically promiscuous". What does that make Martin then? Male of course.



Hareton

11 Jan 2010, 12:49AM

[Recommend? \(0\)](#)

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Rooftop rejoicer:

It is interesting how we are able to limit genius to different areas of work: Early Amis may show some signs of it (but maybe not compared to early Pynchon or Roth or even Foster Wallace); but his political offerings are clearly the opposite. Chomsky, on the other hand, who Anthony disparages in his Cambodia article (unfortunately without its own 'comment section') is an undoubted genius in extenso: not only in linguistics but also in philosophy (see his arguments with Quine) and of course in his tireless political work since the 1960s. The latter indeed may even be his greatest legacy. By the way, what Anthony writes about him on Cambodia is quite scurrilous. Ponchard thanked Chomsky for his 'responsible and precise' corrections (in the American Edition at least) and included them in his work; and Anthony forgets Ponchard's own apology for the KR, perhaps the strongest at the time in the West. To mistake Chomsky's careful analysis and comparison with East Timor is not only deceitful and false but follows an unfortunate trend among British intellectuals/journalists - Wheen, Cohen, Eustonite lot - who crudely select, cut and paste, avoid and deny context to satisfy their mistaken political agenda



zzeb

11 Jan 2010, 1:10AM

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@Manningtreeox

I went to an Amis book-signing in NYC a few years ago (I think it was for Night

Train) and asked him about that very book. He said that it wasn't worth bothering with. Which might make you and me all the more curious, but I'm inclined to take him at his word. If he wanted it out there, it would be easier to find.



bulbosaur

11 Jan 2010, 3:05PM

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Great piece about Malcolm Caldwell (no comments on their hence my representation here).

I'm sure you'll get a letter from the notoriously thin-skinned Chomsky, mithering about being quoted out of context, or whatever. Good luck with that.



mastershake

11 Jan 2010, 5:09PM

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there is a sense in which he is destined to ape himself. After all, everyone else has.

sorry - who, exactly? i cannot think of a single novelist who has in any way aped Amis's style - without obviously parodying it. that is utter bollocks. does andrew anthony read ANY fiction?

and I'd like mr anthony to elaborate on Amis's comments about muslims. contrary to what anthony says, Amis has not actually retracted them, and they were NOT made in the heat of the moment.

considering mis is on record as saying that all muslims are islamists - and that they should all be subjected to strip-searching and deportation - I'd like to know just what amis has to do for mr anthony to actually admit that Amis is a full-on, no questions asked bigot.

as for his 'not having noticed he'd got more right wing' - given that he's on record in a recent interview approving of everything Margaret Thatcher did in the 80s, I'm not sure how self-aware he actually is.

a piece of hagiographic dross. I doubt anthony has even read Amis's work. and no mention of his recent forays into non-fiction? how odd. i mean, 'the age of horrorism' was printed in the observer. why no mention? it was *really* good after all.



mastershake

11 Jan 2010, 5:10PM

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CapslockHolmes

12 Jan 2010, 12:00PM

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Aside from any opinion, expressed or otherwise, can we stop doing the *enfant terrible* thing, please? And articles that refer to it by referring to the fact that at one time (at one time!) all articles about Amis would use the phrase are, if anything, even worse. Was the draw of being able to use a massive, foreign language cliché in a massively clichéd application just too strong for you to resist? Twice?

And don't think that you got away with *Wunderkind*, either.

Humph.

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