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By Martin Amis

Reviewed by [Leo Robson](#) - 28 January 2010

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There's a lot of sex in Martin Amis's social comedy about free love at the end of the Sixties - but is it any good?



The superego speaks

At last: the return of Amis the novelist. For a while it seemed that James Wolcott, pointing to the "narrow focus" of Amis's "personal vision", was right to predict that he would "slowly drop the pretence to fiction and devote himself to lofty journalism". That was in 1998. Over the next decade, Amis produced only two novels, *Yellow Dog* (2003) and *House of Meetings* (2006), neither of them especially distinguished, and made to look all the pokier by a bracing output of essays (*The Second Plane* in 2008) and autobiography (*Experience* in 2000 and *Koba the Dread* in 2002) in which this brave, determined and radiantly gifted writer could be found writing, as he once put it, "flat out".

Now there is *The Pregnant Widow*, a social comedy covering 40 years and running to 465 (sparsely printed) pages. The book represents a return to the social and psychological territory of *The Rachel Papers* (1973), *Dead Babies* (1975) and *Success* (1978) - pitiless comic novels about youthful hedonism and self-loathing, suffused with what the latter two books called "street sadness". *Dead Babies* contained a vile character named Keith ("a preposterously unattractive young man - practically, for instance, a dwarf"), who reappeared in *Success*, terrorising the deviously or dementedly unreliable narrator, a landed layabout fearful of social change. Amis obviously found the name evocative in the right grim way, because he used it again in *London Fields*, but *The Pregnant Widow* is the first time he has put a Keith at the centre of a novel: the closest we get to progress in the collapsing empire of Amis's fiction.

Keith Nearing, a 20-year-old Oxford undergraduate, is the book's guiding consciousness, but he is not the narrator. Curiously, Amis has chosen to resuscitate a device he used in *Time's Arrow* (1991), whereby the tale is told by a non-corporeal part or counterpart of the protagonist - in this case, "I'm the voice of conscience . . . and I perform other duties compatible with the superego." Amis saves those words until late in the novel, sprinkling teasers ("Is this time to clear up the question of who I am? Not just yet, I don't think"), but it is the kind of revelation that makes you want to kick him rather than yourself, so consider this indiscretion a "spoiler" that will improve, rather than diminish, the reading experience.



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The narrator describes Keith as occupying "that much-disputed territory between five foot six and five foot seven", which establishes the book's concern, sometimes statistical, always tedious, with bodily extremes, notably the pendulous breasts of Scheherazade and the mind-boggling bottom of Gloria Beautyman. Scheherazade and Gloria are two members of the gang with which Keith spends a "hot, endless, and erotically decisive summer, in a castle on a mountainside above a village in Campania, in Italy". The year is 1970. Also present are Keith's on-off girlfriend Lily, his pal Kenrik and a dwarfish Italian count. The narrator of *Dead Babies* claimed to be evoking a world of "cancelled sex". With the exception of one mishandled flirtation, *The Pregnant Widow* is a novel of uncanceled sex that takes place during a period of cultural shift, when girls started to sunbathe topless and treat boys as sex objects, or so Amis says.

But the novel isn't all shagging. There is a lot of reading here, too, from both the protagonist and his creator. Keith works his way through the English canon, discussing it with the other characters in the novel's grating dialogue, and spends a great deal of time worrying what genre he is in; he thinks it might be social realism, but the narrator says that in fact it is *Life*, where there is no plot and weather doesn't answer to mood. Meanwhile, Amis nudges the reader with covert references to - among others - Noël Coward, Joseph Heller, Yeats, Kafka, Tom Wolfe, Henry James, Kingsley Amis (a paraphrase of a line from *That Uncertain Feeling*), the King James Bible, Ford Madox Ford, Shakespeare, Nabokov and Martin Amis.

There is a lot of Amis in this novel, too - a lot of his life and a lot of his voice. Keith shares the novelist's height and some of his history (including his date of birth, degree and early employment); Kenrik is modelled on Amis's late friend Rob Henderson; the names of his London cohort, Arn and Ewan, bear some resemblance to Barnes and McEwan. Alterations to fact are often small - for instance, Ian Hamilton married an Egyptian novelist (Ahdaf Soueif), whereas Neil Darlington marries a Palestinian poet. If fiction is reduced to its lowest criterion - shaping - then this just about cuts it (Palestine is not an arbitrary choice). Nevertheless, the book is both an example of what Amis called "the higher autobiography" and a *roman à clef* in which the life-to-art dots are all too easily joined.

The novel is narrated in a 2009 voice that prefers telling to showing. There are hints of those personalities we associate with Amis as an interviewee - the strident universaliser who refuses to accept the peculiarity of his own experience and perspective, the patronising generaliser who talks as if he is the only person who has ever given any thought to religion and literature and sex and death. Some of the book's more ear-catching perceptions are recycled from *Experience*, such as "It's the death of others that kills you in the end": a stirring sentiment, if not quite medically sound.

In happier times, Amis could throw all his effort into voice, knowing this to be a risk-free enterprise. Here, he relies partly on voice, which lacks the power it had in earlier works, and partly on revelation, creating an unlikely phenomenon - the end-oriented 470-page novel. The first paragraph announces that this is the story of Keith's "sexual trauma", which "ruined him for 25 years". We wait long enough for the description of the trauma - a source of exasperation, as we know it is coming - and even longer for other pieces of news: the narrator's identity, which squib I have already detonated; and two unexpected biographical details about one of the characters. Even if these succeeded in ejecting us from the reading chair, it would scarcely justify *The Pregnant Widow's* strategy of grand postponement.

On the way there, however, Amis hits numerous bullseyes. He shows again that, almost alone among novelists, he can practise literature as a stream of highlights, with a tick after every sentence - or after a decent number, anyway. His less enthralling mannerisms are all here - the italics, the near-synonymous repetitions, the stand-up-ish riffs, the ellipses - but so is his ability to hit upon just the right word or couple of words to catch an ironic or idiosyncratic perception. A burlap sack looks "felon-woven", consecutive life sentences are "unambiguously unsurvivable", Lily is said to "sub-edit" her packing, Gloria wears "a starkly abbreviated version of her Sunday best"; Italian toilets have an atmosphere of "negative sensual adventure". In places, the book recalls the Martianism of Amis's brooding thriller *Other People* (1981), flies appearing as "armoured survivalists with gas-mask faces" and rays of sun finding their way through "the colander clouds". (In *Other People*, clouds are "fat, sleepy things . . . the trolleys of the sky".)

During a period when English writing has been too often pale or listless and American writing too often crazed, Amis has hit on an ideal, mid-Atlantic compromise. He unites the best blessings of the two traditions - the fluent euphony and illusionless sanity of the English comic novel, and the street-smart idiom of the American redskins, of whom Saul Bellow is the most eminent, and the most important to Amis. The American influence has served to relax and

modernise Amis's English classicism, while his mode of English complaint has diluted the American propensity for leap and lift.

The modern city has usually functioned as Amis's muse. When he isolates his perceptions in the Italian countryside, the effect resembles one of those occasional sitcom episodes in which our gang takes a trip, and the winning formula doesn't quite survive the transposition. So we are grateful to be in London for the book's epilogue, a canter through the 40 years after the holiday. The author's senses, previously confined to breasts and wildlife, sharpen when he surveys the urban landscape. In a restaurant scene with Keith and his brother: "Nicholas drank his beer, called for the bill, queried it, paid it, and left." The joke in this sentence - Nicholas's habitual querying of the bill - is consummated by the sentence's curt final "left". Like Bellow describing Herzog's feelings ("confident, cheerful, clairvoyant and strong"), Amis knows the power of a clinching monosyllable, how it can work to clarify or ratify a sentence. Readers may not want to wait 400 pages to discover that something is worth reading, or why, but they'll wait ten words.

In this book so full of stinging tails and pin-point pay-offs, Amis has come up with his most sensible ending yet. I am not alone in finding the final paragraphs of some of the earlier novels baffling or obscure, but he gets it right here, and he needs to. The novel's plangent closing reflections bear a great deal of weight because of the book's preoccupation with what Amis, welcoming late Bellow, called "last things, leave-taking and final lucidities". Amis has become increasingly pessimistic about the novelist in his period of winding down, arguing, in an essay on Updike, that as writers age, "they lose energy (inspiration, musicality, imagistic serendipity) but gain in craft (the knack of knowing what goes where)" - a characterisation that doesn't apply to *The Pregnant Widow*, which is frequently inspired and musical, but ill-shapen, lopsided, rough-hewn.

One of the reasons for the depleted energy of much late prose is the neurotic, overfamiliar and dutiful-seeming obsession with all those years that cannot be reclaimed, all that eternity ahead. The feeble scattering of memories deposited by whole decades of experience, and the vividness of events from our youth or earlier, conspire to give the impression that life has whizzed by. Naturally, this is an illusion. Years foreshorten in retrospect, but only in retrospect; we do not complain about time's fleeing ways when we are doing the washing-up or waiting for the night bus or undergoing dental surgery.

Amis, for all his obsession with the abruptness and injustice of ageing, understands this, riffing on the fact that our experience seems to move at different speeds, and acknowledging it in the novel's form - an idle summer can occupy nearly 400 pages and decades of marriage and divorce and decay fewer than 100.

Amis's divisiveness works within readers as well as between them. It doesn't give me much pleasure to find fault with a writer whose body of work has meant more to me than almost any other - as if Amis-bashing or -ribbing or -needling were not already too popular a sport. And we should remember that, despite bringing new spirit to the English novel, Martin Amis has aroused more resentment than anything else. We shouldn't indulge him - not much danger of that - but surely there exists a range of possibilities between resentment and indulgence. *The Pregnant Widow* is finally a cause for gratitude, more so than any of Amis's novels since *The Information*, another diverting train-crash in which the writer's remarkable talent was hobbled by bad instincts while retaining its power to elate.

Leo Robson is the New Statesman's lead fiction reviewer

The Pregnant Widow

Martin Amis

Jonathan Cape, 470pp, £18.99

Amis: Defining Moments

1949 Born in Swansea

1973 Jonathan Cape publishes his first novel, *The Rachel Papers*

1977 Joins the staff of the *New Statesman* as literary editor, a post he holds until 1979

1991 *Time's Arrow* is shortlisted for the Booker Prize

2000 Publishes his memoir *Experience*

2007 Becomes professor of creative writing at Manchester University

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3 comments from readers

Niall

01 February 2010 at 20:21

Thank you for such an entertaining, interesting review. It makes a change to read an article that doesn't bemoan that Amis hasn't, yet again, written a novel that can live up to Money.

The pedant in me would make the point that there's no Keith in Success, rather a Terry, but you're probably referring to the pervading Keith-ness that nevertheless applies, names notwithstanding.

I'm excited for this novel; whatever his failings, the man can write. Even his most throwaway lines will frequently bring a head-shake of appreciation.

To wit; 'I suppose, in theory, I've had worse times, but not many, and not much worse.' is used to describe an emotionally draining encounter in a restaurant. The sentence is just perfect, it couldn't have been written any better, any other way.

robsonln

02 February 2010 at 13:01

Dear Niall - Thanks for your comment. You are right that the Keith figure in Success is Terence Service, but Keith Whitehead, from Dead Babies, makes a small appearance as a sometime guest at Torka's. His prominence there is one of the things that makes Gregory Riding realise that his own days on top are over - if in fact they ever existed. Leo

Niall

02 February 2010 at 20:17

Cheers Leo, I hadn't made the connection before. Time to read Success again so.

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*This article was originally published on 28 January 2010 in the issue **Unforgiven***

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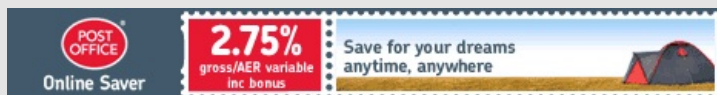
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