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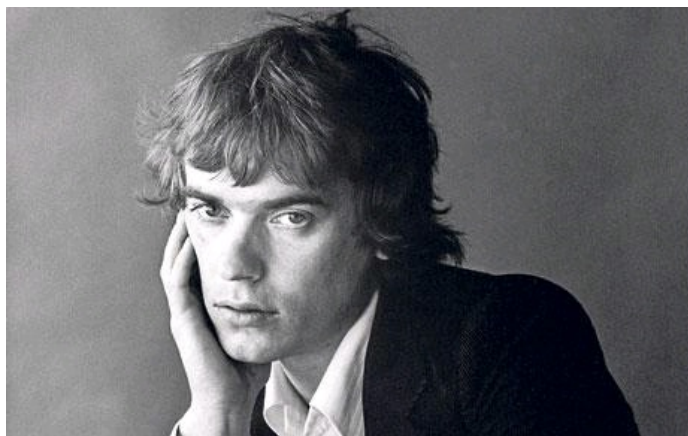
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# The sexual revolution has mellowed men like Martin Amis

Men have evolved, too: Martin Amis's generation of fathers is so much warmer than its predecessor, says Rowan Pelling.

By Rowan Pelling  
Published: 7:16AM GMT 03 Feb 2010

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A portrait of the artist as a young man: Martin Amis

When I was at university, all aspiring male scribes wanted to be Martin Amis. They talked like Mart, walked like Mart and queued up to interview him. Terence Blacker, in recognition of the syndrome, wrote a scabrously funny novel, *Kill Your Darlings*, featuring a failed male writer nursing a festering obsession with Amis. So I was taken aback when I was asked if I would like to interview the Great Author. "Why me?" I asked, "Are all the men ill?"

It turns out that Amis's new novel, *The Pregnant Widow*, dissects the sexual revolution and the consequences of "girls acting like boys". So they want a chick, as Mart might say. Whatever you think of Amis as a writer, his phraseology, humour and sense of the grotesque is seductive. The cabbie who drives me to the interview would have made a passable doppelganger for Keith Talent, *London Fields*' low-life, and I see a dwarf en route. You simply cannot leave the iconography behind.

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Everyone I know has an Amis story. One friend says, with something approaching pride, that his beautiful spouse was once seduced by Amis. That's how the author lives in our heads, as an *enfant terrible* – but when I reach the house I find that 60-year-old Amis is now a *grand-père terrible*. His eldest daughter, Delilah, has a toddler and Amis and I spend five minutes discussing babies. He says he can't pass a pram without wanting to look in, which might faze his army of lad-lit acolytes. Whatever Amis says of female evolution, it's a stark reminder men have evolved too: the author's generation of fathers so much warmer than his father's, Kingsley's.

Amis has the immense charm peculiar to a particular breed of lived-in British rake – rather like a less florid, more bijou Keith Floyd. Keith Nearing, the new book's protagonist, is said to occupy "that much disputed territory between five foot six and five foot seven", but I would say Amis is closer to Sarkozy's five five. Just before the

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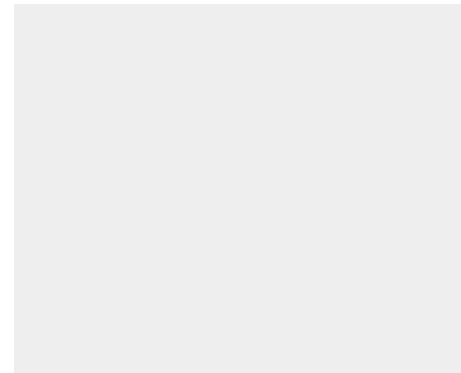
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interview begins, Amis takes a look at the chair assigned him, then strides over to a piano and grabs a tiny child's seat. For one surreal moment I think he's going to perch on it, but he sets his water down. Later I cruise his bookshelves in search of the Jordan biographies he professes to have read. Amis smiles wolfishly and says they are too precious to be on display: "I need to keep them close." At last, something for the lads.

\* No one chose Amis for the "balloon debate" at the writers' group PEN on Monday evening. The concept is that a hot-air balloon, carrying four authors, is losing height and advocates must champion a scribe to prevent them being thrown out. The last remaining is the winner. I was defending Ian Fleming, but the PEN crowd weren't swayed by the thrilling swagger of his prose nor his killer martinis. Nor even by the fact he wrote in *The Spectator* that the Isle of Wight should be turned into a pleasure island, where "frustrated citizens of every class could give rein to the basic instincts for sex and gambling". But I knew Fleming was doomed, as the poet Al Alvarez was championing John Donne. Who would hurl the greatest love poet in the English language to his doom? As Hardeep Singh Kohli (supporting Ian Rankin) said gloomily: "Next year: Irvine Welsh vs William Shakespeare."

\* *The Pregnant Widow* is set in 1970, when four per cent of women aged 16-60 earned more than their male partners. Now the figure's 19 per cent and growing. Many fear this will strike a blow to men's egos. But surely it could bolster them? I am 15 years younger than my husband and pay the mortgage. Isn't that a better definition of trophy wife than some bit of doe-eyed totty? As another happy low-earning husband says: "What's the point of keeping a wife if she doesn't keep you?"

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