

**TLS** The new TLS website is under construction and will be online in the near future. [Click here for the TLS homepage](#) ▶

From [The Times Literary Supplement](#)

[MY PROFILE](#)

February 3, 2010

# Martin Amis's chronicle of loss

His new novel is an elegy to wasted opportunity

[Bharat Tandon](#)

"What can I tell you?" wrote Martin Amis in *Experience* (2000). "It was the Seventies: the joke decade . . . It amazes me, now, that any of us managed to write a word of sense during the whole decade, considering that we were all evidently stupid enough to wear flares." It feels chronologically felicitous that a decade later, Amis should be casting his fictional eye back to 1970, to the personal and cultural rites of passage (or accidents of slippage) that went on to define the seventies and beyond. And if Amis was capable of sounding curmudgeonly about the past then, his new, not wholly un-Amis-like protagonist, Keith Nearing, finds more than enough to complain about in the world that surrounds him:

"When he was young, people who were stupid, or crazy, were called stupid, or crazy. But now (now he was old) the stupid and crazy were given special names for what ailed them. And Keith wanted one. He was stupid and crazy too, and he wanted one – a special name for what ailed him."

A similar siege of contraries faces the writer of any historical novel: nostalgia can tidy the pain and inconveniences of the past into an unblemished object of longing, while fictional "Whig histories" shrink it into an unsuccessful but necessary rehearsal for the glorious present. Amis steers clear of both temptations: as befits a novel structured around a series of allusions to canonical nineteenth-century English fiction, *The Pregnant Widow* shares with George Eliot and Thomas Hardy a sense for how historical novels can also be historiographical ones. Past and present, 1970 and 2009, are repeatedly measured against one another, in order to answer the unspoken question that runs throughout Amis's narrative: just how did we get here from there? Unfortunately, there are points in *The Pregnant Widow* where the sound of the question threatens to drown out the conversations around it.

Amis has been candid in interviews about the novel's autobiographical genesis; but he has also stressed how the work grew beyond his original plans, and the reader is given such a mixture of details that correspond to Amis's life with details that patently don't, that anyone trying to reduce the novel to a biographical cryptogram is going to look foolish. A more profitable way of reading the novel would be as a long critical dialogue with the works that Amis produced just after the period he represents – most notably *The Rachel Papers* (1973) and *Dead Babies* (1975), especially given the fact that both *Dead Babies* and *The Pregnant Widow* feature characters called "Little Keith". It is as if the early novels' scatological comedy of sexual misdemeanour were being interrogated by the voice of experience (and the voice of *Experience*).

At the beginning of the novel, in the summer of 1970, Keith finds himself spending his university vacation in an Italian castle, mugging up on the history of the English novel while finding his affections, and his definitively male gaze, wandering between his on-off girlfriend Lily and the aristocratic Scheherazade ("Lily: 5'5", 34-25-34. Scheherazade: 5'10", 37-23-33"); the former is ostensibly more street-smart about the impending sexual revolution, the latter a reformed do-gooder only beginning to become sexually aware in the new style. In a plot pitched somewhere between a Shakespeare comedy and an Iris Murdoch novel, Amis depicts his characters not only occasionally groping one another, but also groping awkwardly for a stable understanding of what is expected of them, at a time when values are in flux, but where the new rules are not yet set down ("New rules – and new and sinister ways of getting everything wrong. He acted like a boy, and so did Lily. But she was a girl, and could do more of it than he could").

Each character feels this mess of pressures and expectations differently, but since the story is focalized through Keith's eyes and mind (if narrated slightly off to one side, by a mysterious character whose identity is only revealed much later), we are closer to his own anxieties as the story unfolds. In particular, he

**EXPLORE THE TLS**

- ▶ [TLS SELECTIONS](#)
- ▶ [TLS ARCHIVES](#)
- ▶ [TLS ARGUMENTS](#)
- ▶ [TLS WRITERS](#)
- ▶ [TLS LETTERS](#)
- ▶ [POEM OF THE WEEK](#)
- ▶ [THEN & NOW](#)

**TLS SELECTIONS**

Select ▼



**The TLS e-paper**  
An instant facsimile version of the TLS; enhance your subscription today



**Subscribe today**  
The leading paper in the world for literary culture; get the TLS for less

**SIR PETER S'TO THARD**



The latest posts on books, people and politics from the Editor of the TLS


- ▶ [George Woodpecker Bush](#)
- ▶ [Ivory-billed woodpecker - the movie](#)
- ▶ [Arise again, Sir Walter](#)
- ▶ [To my own chickweed](#)
- ▶ [Mandelson, the triumph](#)

**This week**  
Anote from the Editor

**In the next TLS**

**Get the TLS for less**  
Subscribe for only £92 per year  
Subscribe today and save 34%

The leading paper in the world for literary culture



TLS

THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

carries around the burden of what he would like to think of as chivalry, laden as he is with guilt over his treatment of Dilkash, an unworlly past girlfriend, and especially at his inability to save his younger sister Violet from a life of pathological promiscuity. Keith's confusion – as to whether he is a sexual revolutionary, or simply “poncing off the spirit of the times” – is exacerbated by everyone's seemingly being unsure how to use the freedom that is now up for grabs, and unsure whether it really amounts to freedom anyway. In the extended absence of her boyfriend, who is on an evangelical hunting trip, Scheherazade experiments with her nascent self-confidence by encouraging the attentions of Adriano, a loaded Italian playboy who happens to be more “vertically challenged” than Keith:

“Ah,” he resumed. “I know how Tereus felt when he first spied Philomela. As a forest when a drought wind turns it into a firestorm.” It was not the voice of a small man, which was remarkable in its way. Because guess what. Adriano was four foot ten inches tall.’

At the same time, Keith sees an opportunity to bend the inchoate rules of sexual engagement to his advantage in pursuit of Scheherazade, even (in an ill-judged impression of an eighteenth-century fictional rake) attempting to drug Lily in order to make a secret tryst with the new object of his affections. Into this thicket arrives Gloria Beautyman, slightly older and perhaps much wiser than the students. Gloria may be an object of amusement to the other women on account of her reported drunken sexual exploits, and her “farcical arse”. (“It’s too big,” said Lily. “Much too big.” “I feel as if I’m seeing it for the first time,” said Scheherazade. “And it’s absolutely enormous, isn’t it?” “Absolutely enormous.”) Keith, however, rightly divines in Gloria something he can’t quite read, can’t quite put his finger on, until it suddenly puts its finger on him in the novel’s central episode.

It is in this light that the larger significance of the work’s major allusions becomes clearer. Amis’s title comes from Alexander Herzen’s worrying thought, repeated more fully in the novel’s epigraph (“what is frightening is that the departing world leaves behind it not an heir, but a pregnant widow. Between the death of the one and the birth of the other, much water will flow by, a long night of chaos and desolation will pass”). And as with the characters in *Dead Babies*, it is implied that Keith and his friends are as much victims as they are participants, the collateral damage of a socio-political shift that is still working itself out. Similarly, the parallels and contrasts Keith draws between his present and the fictional past return insistently to questions of sexual roles and power relations: “So Keith understood why the girls cried. But now the rules had been rewritten, and the generic proprieties no longer obtained. The question had to be asked again. What were heroines allowed to do?”. It is apt that of all the nineteenth-century novelists Keith co-opts, the most prominent is Jane Austen. At a simple level, she provides a field of debate, a means for Keith to map out the new territory of sexual mores with both Gloria and Lily:

“Mm. Mm. I suppose you’re in love with her now.”

“Who?”

“Emma.”

“Oh, definitely. She’s a bit flash, Emma, but I fancy her, I admit. Clever, handsome, and rich. It’s a start.”

An Austenian vein runs deeply throughout the novel, even surfacing at moments in the form of stylistic inflections (“his minimal handsomeness, his plausible tongue, his sincere enthusiasm, and a certain willed but invigorating coldness”). It may initially seem “wacky” to parallel the 1810s with the turn of the 1970s, but Austen was in her own way the documenter of the “pregnant widow”, not so much a comedian of manners as the comedian of a culture actively debating the very nature and existence of manners themselves; and as hinted at by Keith’s misremembering the opening sentence of *Emma*, the limitations of his own critical reading also suggest the shapes around him that he can’t fully discern (“Keith was good on the big picture. But the immediate situation . . . this he often saw with unreliable eyes”).

To depict protagonists who aren’t wholly aware of the genre of story they are in has long been a staple of Amis’s ironic art, and one of his notable inheritances from the Nabokov of *Despair* and *Pale Fire*. For example, John Self in *Money* (1984) and Samson Young in *London Fields* (1989) are, despite their radically different attitudes towards books, united in their inability to “read” their own circumstances. The *Pregnant Widow*, much the same length as those two large predecessors, makes its own use of the device, but to less significant effect. It is odd that a novel with so much to admire in it should fail to cohere adequately, but *The Pregnant Widow* feels more impressive in its moments than as a whole. This may have something to do with its long gestation, and its

Paul A. J. Davis:  
The arousing of Charles II

Ruth Coates:  
Pavel Florensky, lost genius

N. J. Enfield:  
How paper becomes money

Raymond Tallis:  
Immortality for Henrietta  
Lacks

#### IT'S A DON'S LIFE



Mary Beard of Cambridge and the TLS on culture ancient and modern

- ▶ From Cuba with love?
- ▶ Classics in Cuba
- ▶ How (not) to sell a van

#### CONTENTS PAGE

- ▶ This week's contents in full

#### TLS INFORMATION

- ▶ About us
- ▶ Contact us
- ▶ Syndication details
- ▶ FAQs

- ▶ How to advertise
- ▶ This week's classified ads
- ▶ More classified ads
- ▶ Rate card 2010

attendant change of focus, leaving it reading like a palimpsest of autobiographical novel, comedy of sexual misunderstanding, and the kind of pubby-clubby sociology familiar from Amis's 1980s satires (compare some of the narratorial musings on the politics of dress and undress with the infamous "tight bright white underwear" sequence from *London Fields*). It is as though Amis has lived with the ideas so long that he can't let anything go – including some wincing thigh-slappers about which even Thomas Pynchon might hesitate ("Sexual intercourse had come a long way"; "Spin this out, Scheherazade").

However, if the friction between the novel's layers doesn't always generate excitement, the conceit of layers does contribute to its greatest strengths. At the very beginning of the story, Keith in 2006 is described as entering "the great dig of London", and *The Pregnant Widow* works best as an archaeology of the ageing body, an analysis of what Helen Small has pointedly described as "the failure of a preferential version of the future in which one's own freedom was the overriding object". In this regard, the novel's multiple time frames give Amis the chance to measure Keith's increasing physical frailty and stretchedness unsparingly against his younger self ("As you pass the half-century, the flesh, the coating on the person, begin to attenuate. And the world is full of blades and spikes"), raising the uncomfortable possibility that it may be worse for a man's ageing body to be parodically recognizable than changed utterly.

Nor is this the only kind of wasting that sets Amis's imagination going: *The Pregnant Widow* stands alongside novels such as Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* and Philip Roth's *Indignation* as part of a contemporary subgenre, the elegy to wasted opportunity. As in McEwan's novella, the last section of the story fast-forwards through the future lives and losses of some of the characters, a trajectory of unfulfilment and mis-fulfilment that is deliberately braced against the unsuspecting world of 1970, as if the sheer weight of narrative itself could somehow preserve the ghostly energy of what didn't go on to happen.

"The revolution was a velvet revolution, but it wasn't bloodless; some came through, some more or less came through, and some went under"; although much of *The Pregnant Widow* feels – like the period it describes – pitched uncomfortably between two stools and styles, it also shows Amis growing into a new mode, as a chronicler of loss and uncomfortable metamorphosis. If his next novels continue in this vein, then this book's own awkward transition will have been worthwhile.

Martin Amis  
**THE PREGNANT WIDOW**  
470pp. Cape. £18.99.  
978 0 224 07612 8

**Bharat Tandon** teaches at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. His book *Jane Austen and the Morality of Conversation* was published in 2003. He has written the chapter on Henry Green for the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to English Novelists*.

#### YOUR COMMENTS

(Displaying 1-10)

Order By: [Newest first](#) | [Oldest first](#) | [Most recommended](#)

#### HAVE YOUR SAY

Would you like to post a comment? Please register or log in

[Login](#) | [REGISTER](#)

[Terms and conditions](#)