Martin Amis: 'I don't want to tread carefully'

As his 12th novel, The Pregnant Widow, comes out, he admits he fears his decline as a writer and is still wounded by the critics

Stephen Moss
The Guardian, Monday 1 February 2010
Article history

Books
Martin Amis · Kingsley Amis

Culture

More interviews

More features

Martin Amis on euthanasia
Video: Controversial author Martin Amis talks about his views on euthanasia at Guardian book club
28 comments

Did I say that? Martin Amis in his own words
The novelist, 60, in his own words

Review: The Pregnant Widow
Martin Amis goes back to first principles, with impressive results, says **Tim Adams**
35 comments

News: Whitbread winner condemns Martin Amis call for euthanasia booths
News: Joan Brady accuses author of 'prostitution just to flog a book'

More on Martin Amis
Martin Amis

Related

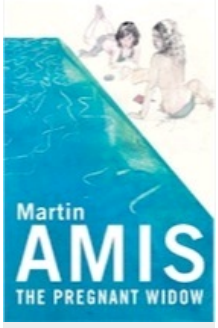
3 Apr 2010
Great dynasties of the world: The Day-Lewises

23 Nov 2008
Review: Everyday Drinking by Kingsley Amis

Martin Amis joins John Mullan at the Guardian book club to talk about his novel from 1991, Time's Arrow Link to this video

Martin Amis is the most argued over novelist in the UK, largely, I suspect, because hardly anyone reads him. I bumped into my neighbour, a cultured fellow, a few days after interviewing Amis and asked him what he thought of his work. He had read one of his books years ago – couldn't remember what, didn't like it – but he'd heard all about the row, running hotly last week, sparked by Amis's suggestion that the "silver tsunami" of decrepit and deranged old people should be killed off. Thus does Amis the controversialist obscure Amis the writer, who is now 60 and this week publishes his 12th novel, The Pregnant Widow.

The Pregnant Widow
by Martin Amis



Buy it from the

Amis lives in a large, but not ostentatious, house in a writerly part of north London, which he shares with his wife, the writer Isabel Fonseca, and young daughters Fernanda and Clio. His father, Kingsley, once had a house – shared, at the alcohol-fuelled end of his life, with his first wife (Amis's mother), the saintly Hilly, and her third husband, the late Lord Kilmarnock – in the same street.

When I arrive, Amis has a glass of lager in his hand and gets one for me, too. The photographer is just setting up, and I'm surprised by his coldness towards her: maybe he has been photographed too many times. All

On Books

Most viewed | Zeitgeist | Latest

Last 24 hours

1. AS Byatt: 'I don't believe in God. I believe in Wallace Stevens'
2. Ayn Rand fan spells out appreciation in world's largest book ad
3. Alexander the Great novel gets bum rap in Canada
4. Guantánamo Bay library's most wanted books? Anything but Barack Obama
5. Truce called in battle over ebook rights

More most viewed

Guardian Books on Twitter

Latest news, views and links from the Guardian's books team

he asks – their non-relationship is over in a flash – is that she doesn't photograph him leaning backwards as that makes him look pompous. To me he is charming, politely passing over my misunderstandings of his new book.

He drawls and tends to talk in fragments, chunks of thought; he describes the hoopla that surrounds publishing a book as "epiphenomena". What are we to make of his nightmare vision of the "silver tsunami"? "There'll be a population of demented very old people, like an invasion of terrible immigrants, stinking out the restaurants and cafes and shops," he said last week. His solution? "There should be a [euthanasia] booth on every street corner where you could get a Martini and a medal." You can now, on Google, find 137,000 items referencing Amis + euthanasia. Yet it was, he admitted as the storm gathered force, "satirical".

Amis is at heart, as he readily admits, a comic novelist, and he is something of a comic controversialist. "It's the way these things are picked up," he says when I chide him for provoking the sort of media storm which he spent the 90s – when the state of his teeth and his falling out with former friend Julian Barnes were the principal literary talking points – berating. "You never get the context. But I don't want to tread carefully and be editing myself. It wasn't an attack on the old – I'm not that far from it myself – and I was skating over the legal complexities, but I stick by my basic point: you need to have a means to end your life."

Read the description in his memoir Experience of Kingsley's final years, and you will understand Amis's dread. He recalls his intellectually annihilated father sitting at his typewriter, typing the word "seagulls", over and over. He fears his own decline as a writer. "I've talked to Ian McEwan about this. Our fallback position is going to be that you write short stuff."

Amis began The Pregnant Widow soon after publication of the critically mauled novel Yellow Dog in 2003. He saw the new book as a big one and described it as "blindingly auto- biographical". "The novel was an awful struggle," he says. "I struggled with it for four years. The first 100 pages seemed all right, they seemed to work, but it was only working because of novelistic contrivance, not because it was my story. I realised the Easter before last – in Uruguay [Fonseca is half-Uruguayan], where we were on holiday – that it wasn't working. I read on and I thought this is completely dead, it's inert. I had a terrible couple of weeks, then tiptoed back to it and realised it was two books."

He set about separating them. Here, he has written a book with a great deal of sex (or at least conspiring to have sex) and a little literature; the second book – still several years away and to be preceded by a short, satirical novel called State of England – will have a lot of literature and a little sex. Sex and literature, it is fair to say, have been Amis's key interests, though the order of importance has fluctuated over the years.

He claims to have taken most of the autobiography out of The Pregnant Widow, but will anyone believe him? Private Eye certainly doesn't. In a wickedly funny spoof in the current issue, it identifies the central character Keith with Mart, and for good measure hopes that one day he might write a novel that is vaguely plausible. Meanwhile, the Telegraph has gone in search of Gloria Beautyman, the sexually voracious woman with "pincers of bliss" who traumatises Keith in the shared bathroom of the Italian castle in which his characters spend a steamy summer in 1970. The paper offers a string of early Amis girlfriends as contenders, including Tina Brown, Emma Soames, Julie Kavanagh and Angela Gorgas. Amis rejects such literalism. "That's the crudest way to read these things, but I invited it by saying the book was going to be blindingly autobiographical. Born in 1949, five foot six and a half, but that's it: I've just given Keith my height and my birthday. And my sister."

His sister being Sally, an alcoholic who died in 2000 at the age of 46, and who was, in a brutal phrase Amis applied to her last year, "pathologically promiscuous". In The Pregnant Widow, she is reborn as Keith's younger sister Violet: damaged, habitually drinking, forever in hopeless, violent relationships. Amis has talked of Sally as a victim of the sexual liberation of the 60s, but his mother has since distanced herself from that view and he now seems to accept it is too simplistic. "My sister would have struggled in any society," he tells me. "All the sexual revolution did to her

12 Jul 2008
The digested classic: Lucky Jim by Kingsley Amis

10 Nov 2002
Observer review: Slipstream by Elizabeth Jane Howard

fate was to give it a peculiar setting and style."

Does he feel he failed her? "Yeah, up to a point. I should have put in more hours; that's what I feel. My brother [Philip, an artist, a year older than Amis] put in more than me; my mother put in infinitely more than me; and my father really depended on her in the last years. But she never responded at all to anything really. It was nice to give her money and to get her out of certain jams and patch her up every now and then, but there was no indication that anything other than devoting your entire life to it would have made any difference."

Amis suspects the book will be attacked by feminists, for suggesting that the sexual revolution made women act in ways contrary to their nature, turning them into boys, cocks (the novel's favourite word for new women), narcissists. Yet he insists he has written a feminist book. "I've been a passionate feminist since the mid-80s," he says. "It was Gloria Steinem who converted me in a single day in New York. It's the rhetorical device she uses throughout, and it's very effective: she just reverses the sexes – what if men menstruated, what if men had babies? It's unanswerable."

What he is interested in is a "decent deal" between men and women. Before the 60s women were largely second-class citizens, confined to the home; then they were liberated, economically and sexually – a revolution that produced many gains and some losses. "All the difficult choices fell to women," he says. "Boys didn't have to change. They were only furtively aware that change was taking place and wondering how it was going to go. But women did have a difficult passage. There was the equalitarian phase, which is what is happening in the book, where boys and girls are the same – that was the ridiculous orthodoxy. But I think girls had no other model than boys, so they started to behave like boys, and still are. Some coped and others didn't, because their hearts weren't in it."

Keith meets a hard-playing character called Rita four decades after the hedonistic summer of 1970, and asks her whether she had the 10 children she'd envisaged. She says, "I sort of forgot to," then starts to weep. Amis says that among women of his generation, "There were plenty of Ritas who put the emphasis so much on recreation that they didn't get married and didn't have children. They used themselves up a bit, and sensationally so with Violet. People say, 'You weren't aware of this at the time,' but you were. There was a sense of unreality that this was being allowed to happen." He is, though, at pains to say he is not attacking the 60s, the sexual revolution or the emancipation of women. Rather, he is pointing out that all revolutions proceed in stages and produce victims.

Untangling fact and fiction in The Pregnant Widow will keep literary sleuths happy for months. Amis's great friend and former flatmate Rob Henderson, who eventually ended up in prison and died in 2002, is memorialised as Kenrik, Keith's beautiful, unschooled, amoral alter ego. The poet Ian Hamilton becomes Neil Darlington. There are many echoes of the fictional Keith's life in Amis's memoir, which was published in 2000. So is it autobiography or isn't it? "The only autobiographical figures are now all dead," insists Amis. "That became the rule." Is Keith what Amis would have become if he'd stayed at ad agency J Walter Thompson, where he worked for a while after getting a first in English at Oxford, instead of embarking on a literary career? Keith, a would-be poet, does the opposite, opting for advertising and instant liquidity instead. "There's a little bit of that," says Amis reluctantly.

Why, having trawled his life so movingly in Experience – his parents' divorce, the death of his father, the discovery that his cousin Lucy Partington had been a victim of Fred West – had he wanted to return to the subject in fictional form? Amis talks about the "thickening out" of life that comes after 50 – "there is now an enormous and unsuspected presence within your being," he says in The Pregnant Widow, "like an undiscovered continent." He was eager to plot a course across it. "I thought there might be a fictional way through it too, but it was a great mistake," he says. "John Banville [the Booker prize-winning novelist] told me it was impossible, and it was." Except that, for all Amis's protestations, what has appeared draws closely on his life. Private Eye's spoof is funny because it contains a truth.

The abiding image of Amis is the thick-lipped, cigarette-dangling literary

bad boy – the Mick Jagger of fiction. But read Experience and you feel his vulnerability. He describes how he felt at Lucy Partington's memorial service in the summer of 1994. "I had never experienced misery and inspiration so purely combined. My body consisted only of my heart." In The Pregnant Widow, Keith fails as a poet because he cannot connect thought and emotion; the "joke decade" of the 70s had obliterated feeling. Amis is fascinated by the way he has changed since what he admits was a midlife crisis in the early 90s. At its simplest, he has discovered the purity of love, love without ego – the essence of that "transfiguring experience" at his cousin's memorial service. Women, trophies to the early Amis, have become redeemers.

Today Amis seems gloriously, almost uxoriously happy with Fonseca, mirroring the joy Keith eventually finds with his third wife Conchita. While I am talking to him, his daughters arrive, knock at the lounge door and proudly bring in a new kitten to show him, carrying their prize in a white sheet. The interruption lasts only a few minutes – they are polite young girls, American accented, entering teenagehood – but I like the reminder that even grand writers have consuming home lives. The litter tray in the hall.

It is his second marriage. The first, to Antonia Phillips, with whom he had two sons (now in their mid-20s), ended in 1993. He also has a daughter Delilah, who was born following a brief affair with Lamorna Seale in 1974 and with whom he had no contact until she was 19. Delilah had a son in 2008, making Amis a grandfather – "so uncool", he complains. He is also now in contact with Sally's daughter, Catherine, who was adopted when very young because Sally was incapable of looking after her. Amis's life is denser than any of his novels could hope to be.

The Bookseller describes The Pregnant Woman as "a return to form", as if Amis was left-back for Doncaster Rovers. "What's this return shit? He never went away," he says defiantly. "Return to form will become a kind of slogan, unless it goes the other way and they say 'further spiral of decline'." Rise above it, I tell him. "I'm sick of rising above it. I've had to do so much rising above it."

You would think, by now, he wouldn't care about critics, public approval, his lack of recognition from Booker prize committees, but boy does he care. He calls the panning of Yellow Dog "souring" and likens it to "having flu for a week". When I allude to novelist Tibor Fischer's notorious attack on the book – "Yellow Dog isn't bad as in not very good or slightly disappointing. It's not-knowing-where-to-look bad . . . It's like your favourite uncle being caught in a school playground, masturbating" – Amis's anger is evident. "All Tibor Fischer did, fat-arsed Tibor, was establish that you could say absolutely anything you liked about this book. It wasn't just reviewed. Anyone who could hold a pen was having a go. I'd be surprised if there was another Yellow Dog moment in my life."

Amis says that in the 90s he became "the one you can say anything about". His divorce, the switch from long-time agent Pat Kavanagh to New York-based Andrew "the Jackal" Wylie, the consequent bust-up with Kavanagh's husband Julian Barnes, and the huge advance for The Information (supposedly to pay for his troublesome teeth) combined to turn him into a literary celebrity, a target to knock down. His fascination with 9/11 and willingness to weigh into arguments over terrorism – in 2006 he foolishly told the Times, "the Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order" – further celebritised and controversialised him. Why has he returned so often to 9/11? "I never expected an event of that size to happen in my lifetime," he says. He sees Islamism as a form of tyranny, akin to the Nazism he dissected in Time's Arrow and the Stalinism he attacked in Koba the Dread. He has been accused of shifting to the right ("turning into his father" is how his critics see it), but he denies it, saying that the way he describes himself in Experience – "libertarian left of centre" – remains accurate.

Sometimes, when he wades into controversies, he generates more heat than light, but it may be a function of what he sees as the democratic role of the novelist. "I'm more and more struck by how different the novelist and the poet are," he says. "Look at Auden's sonnet, The Novelist. Poets can 'dash forward like hussars', but the work of the novelist is to be with the boring, the ugly, the filthy. In your person, as best you can, you comprehend all the wrongs of man. You have to be a sort of everyman to be a novelist, and poets are never everymen." Did Amis, like his father, ever write poetry? "I wrote and published a couple of poems. Whenever

he considered I was too big for my boots, Kingsley would say, 'I don't seem to see your first book of poems. I look but it isn't there; it's very puzzling.' "

• The Pregnant Widow is published by Jonathan Cape, price £18.99. To order a copy for £17.99 with free UK p&p, go to guardian.co.uk/bookshop or call 0330 333 6846

Related information

Books
Martin Amis · Kingsley Amis

Culture

Video (10min 23sec), **Martin Amis on euthanasia**
1 Feb 2010:
Video: Controversial author Martin Amis joins the Guardian book club to discuss his 1991 novel Time's Arrow and is asked about his views on euthanasia

More video

27 May 2001
Audio 27.05

5 May 2001
Review: Non-fiction

20 May 2000
The old devil

7 May 2000
The old devil has all the best letters

Gallery (14 pictures): **Martin Amis at 60**
25 Aug 2009:
Martin Amis, the one-time enfant terrible of the British literary establishment, turns 60 today. Take a look at a life in pictures of the author of Money, London Fields, and Time's Arrow

More galleries