

Book review: 'The Pregnant Widow,' by Martin Amis, reviewed by Ron Charles

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THE PREGNANT WIDOW

Inside History

By Martin Amis

Knopf.

370 pp. \$26.95

There's not a smarter, cleverer writer alive than Martin Amis. With that encyclopedic mind and father Kingsley's comic timing, he's a riveting stylist who walks across every sentence as though it were a line stretched taut between wit and erudition.

Why, then, has he become such an exasperating novelist?

After the badly beaten "[Yellow Dog](#)" (2003) and the tepid reception to "[House of Meetings](#)" (2007), he's back with "[The Pregnant Widow](#)," a coming-of-age story set amid the sexual revolution. In this nakedly autobiographical novel, a handful of topless bombshells and horny college kids spend the summer of 1970 at an Italian castle with nothing to do but plot their next orgasms. The setting is exotic, the subject is erotic, but the story is necrotic. For more than 300 pages of ironic dithering about who will have sex with whom, the climax is endlessly delayed like a painful case of literary priapism.

The Hamlet of all this prolonged sexual deliberation is Keith Nearing, a 20-year-old university student who's staying in Campania with his girlfriend, Lily (34-25-34). They've recently gotten back together, but "for reasons that were not yet clear to him," Amis writes, Lily "seemed to be losing her sexual otherness. She was like a first cousin or an old family friend, someone he had played with as a child." How much more alluring is Lily's strikingly gorgeous, frequently nude gal-pal Scheherazade (37-23-33), who complains piteously about how lonely she is at night. Yikes.

At the start of all this, Keith is a romantic — granted, a libidinous, easily shocked romantic. Watching the debauchery around him, poor Keith can't help but feel "the tingle of license" and wonder, "Where were the police? Where on earth were the police? . . . It kept astonishing him — how weak the prohibitions always turned out to be."

The sexual antics in the Italian castle play out as he's cramming through a syllabus of English novels, particularly those great comedies of manners by Jane Austen, in which a similarly privileged group of young people strategize about their potential attachments. But oh, how things have degraded since Jane set down that *universally* acknowledged truth. "The English novel, at least in its first two or three centuries, asked only one question. Will she fall? Will she fall, this woman? What'll they write about," Keith wonders, "when all women fall?"

"The Pregnant Widow" is one overlong, frequently hilarious but deeply aggravating answer to that loaded question from an author who portrays his female characters as breasts, bottoms or dead.

While Keith tries to figure out how he can dump Lily and bed Scheherazade, other characters pass through this summer sexcapade, all of them oddballs notable for their Dickensian peculiarities: The owner of the castle, for instance, is interested *only* in cheese. The cock of the roost is a hunky but very tiny Italian nicknamed Tom Thumb. Their friend Gloria has an enormous derriere that eventually overshadows the plot and strikes Keith's "famished gaze as an achievement on an epic and terrifying scale, like the Chinese Revolution or the rise of Islam or the colonization of the Americas."

That's funny, I know, but the cost of filling a long novel with bizarre tics and body parts instead of, say, actual characters eventually becomes apparent. And stacked on top of each other ad infinitum, these witty lines barely accrete into the shape of a plot. The only real movement is provided by the action of Amis ramming his themes down our throat. Half a dozen times he suspends the faint breeze of this story line with cheeky editorials or "Intervals," in which he — "the voice of conscience" — talks expansively about the Meaning of the Age, the Distress of the '60s, etc.

The point he most wants us to concede is that the sexual revolution was a tragedy, an ordeal of narcissistic trauma. (This point is conveyed far more effectively in the actual story when the novel's climactic act of sexual congress finally takes place in front of a mirror.) Amis insists that this was the period when "sex divorced itself from feeling" and became just "a play of surfaces and sensations." Readily available contraception, abortion and divorce upended everything, and the girls were "all busy acting like boys."

We've heard this lamentation before, of course, most ferociously from Allan Bloom. Here it comes across in the same key as those complaints about Emancipation spoiling so many lovely plantations. There's no acknowledgment in "The Pregnant Widow" that the sexual revolution was not just a time when "girls could act like boys" but also a time when women could finally act like adults.

Instead, Amis offers a psycho-political explanation for that crazy era: It was all just anxious acting out under the threat of imminent

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nuclear annihilation. "Mortal fear might make you want to have sexual intercourse," he explains, "but it wouldn't make you want to love. Why love anyone, when everyone could vanish?"

But in the end, he doesn't really buy that mawkish generality either. His distress over the '60s seems to stem from a more personal and intense tragedy: the decline and premature death of his alcoholic sister. She flits around the periphery of this novel in the form of Keith's sibling, and in the final 100 pages -- which zip haphazardly through 40 years -- she becomes a much-freighted symbol for all those fragile women who drowned in the dark sea of sexual promiscuity. The destruction of old social constraints creates an exciting, new world, but it also leaves, in the words of the 19th-century Russian writer Alexander Herzen, "a pregnant widow."

That melancholy image rises powerfully in the final pages, but the emotional effect is not won fairly through the long sex comedy involving Keith and his friends or the scattered coda in which we find out "what happened to them all." Amis reportedly worked on this novel for four years before realizing it was actually two different books that would require extensive reworking. What remains here resembles one of his voluptuous women: a collection of body parts -- some awesome, some grotesque -- stitched together.

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