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## Ways With Words 2010: Martin Amis: a chronicle of damage

Philip Hensher on why the treasured British author Martin Amis divides opinion.

Published: 4:15PM BST 20 May 2010

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Anna Ford has accused Martin Amis (above) of being a negligent godparent to her daughter  
Photo: REX

Martin Amis has been at the centre of English writing since his first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, was published in 1973, and he has remained there, with 12 novels and around a dozen books of non-fiction and short fiction. He was a presence in English literature even earlier than that, with a thinly disguised appearance as a character in his father Kingsley's *I Like It Here*, a quizzical, intelligent and hilariously morbid small child.

His new novel, *The Pregnant Widow*, one of his best, takes on the history of the past 40 years, and, indirectly, his own career, revisiting and rethinking long-considered themes.

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Sometimes it has been difficult for his readers to see what a terrific novelist he is. A substantial anthology could be put together of news coverage of his doings, much of it not only non-literary but actively anti-literary. There was the long-running story about his teeth; the one about his divorce; his comments on Islamism; and, most recently, a very public spat with Anna Ford.

All these things leave out what is most interesting: the quality and value of his writing. It's notable that when it became known that he was proposing to include a figure based on Katie Price in his next novel, many commentators felt able to start discussing that. In the old days, one waited for a novelist to write a book before reviewing it. Nowadays, in the interests of scandal, it seems easier to write about unwritten books.

But the body of work is unignorable. *Money* is obviously a classic, a tumultuous and virtuosic statement about self-gratification and the Eighties, published almost before the decade had got under way. His four early novels, from *The Rachel Papers* to *Other People*, are scabrous comedies of low life and disgrace; it is astonishing how quickly Amis evolved an unmistakable style in these books; no page of his could be mistaken for anyone else's.

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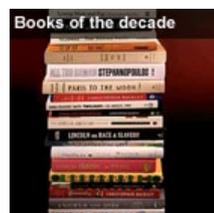
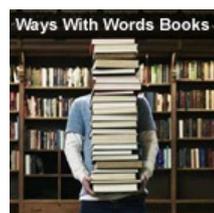
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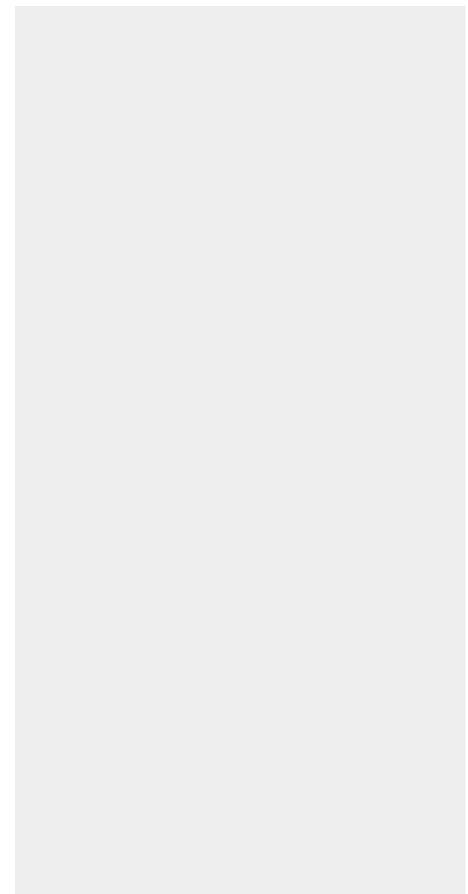
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Since then, he has approached grand themes in the same evolving way, including a subversive millennial novel, *London Fields*, and an unforgettably plangent memoir, *Experience*.

I was in conversation with him last week and he said nothing was beyond the reach of comedy, including the Holocaust, which he has approached in a reverse-chronology novel, *Time's Arrow*. *Experience* deals, among other things, with the murder of his cousin, Lucy Partington, by the serial killer Fred West. Comedy, for Amis, is a mark of humanity.

The *Pregnant Widow* returns to previous territory. Like *Dead Babies*, it is the story of an early Seventies house party of indulgence and lechery; like *Success*, it is about the gap between social classes; like *The Rachel Papers*, it is about a literary education. Unlike them, it deals in humane portraits.

It begins with the summer of 1970 around a swimming pool in Tuscany and its focus is both on the first wave of the sexual revolution and the damage, as well as the freedoms, wreaked on lives over the next 40 years by that immense change. It is written with Amis's customary elegance but has a new warmth and sympathy in its comedy.

Not everybody has agreed over the excellence of *The Pregnant Widow* – like all of Amis, this is a novel to debate over. Its views are very definitely Amis's own; its sentences could be nobody else's. Amis's novels are watched and read by his fellow novelists like nobody else's.

Surprisingly for a writer of his distinction, he has been passed over many times by prize juries. He divides opinion, as powerful writers often do. This book, I think, ought to give him the recognition he deserves. Everyone should be reading it: everyone, I think, already is.

**Martin Amis speaks with Philip Hensher at the *Ways With Words Festival in the Great Hall on Friday July 9 at 8pm***

**Buy *The Pregnant Widow* from Telegraph books**

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**Ted Knight**

05/21/2010 08:09 AM

I shall seek out *The Pregnant Widow*, but, with the metropolis in my veins, I still feel that the voices of his cockney characters in *London Fields* were as flawed as Audrey Hepburn's Covent Garden flower girl.

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Different genre, sure, but if a voice grates the words lose that which brings a special tingle to the discerning reader.



**Steve in the six**

05/21/2010 07:18 AM

He is an immense talent and immense fun. I was a late-ish convert, not discovering him until an impulse purchase of London Fields in the 90s. I've been lending that book to friends old and new since. I'll read everything he writes.

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