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The Sexual Revolution Dissected

By [MICHIKO KAKUTANI](#)

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This remarkably tedious new novel by [Martin Amis](#) is a sort of messy improvisation on Boccaccio's 14th-century collection of tales known as "The Decameron," which concerned a group of young people spending an interlude together in an Italian villa and explored the varieties and disappointments of love. [Jane Smiley](#) tried something similar in her tiresome 2007 novel, "Ten Days in the Hills," and in "The Pregnant Widow," Mr. Amis makes many of the same mistakes she did — most notably, assuming that readers will be interested in a bunch of spoiled, self-absorbed twits, who natter on endlessly about their desires and resentments and body parts.



Martin Amis

Isabel Fonseca

THE PREGNANT WIDOW

By Martin Amis

366 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. \$26.95.

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Sunday Book Review: 'The Pregnant Widow' by [Martin Amis](#) (May 23, 2010)

Mr. Amis's 1976 novel, "Dead Babies," used a similar mise-en-scène ("Widow" moves the setting from an English country house to an Italian castle), and a comparison between the two only serves to underscore the shortcomings of this new book, which sorely lacks its predecessor's snap, crackle and fizz.

Whereas the author's early works, like "Dead Babies" and "The Rachel Papers," were animated by a satiric gift for social observation and a deliciously black wit, this novel tackles the same themes — sex and identity and coming of age — with weary determination, and lacquers them all with pompous, inane rococo meditations about the nature of art and truth. ("Recently when he was out in the street, he used to think: Beauty is gone. He soon moved forward from this position, and thought, Beauty never was — there never was any.")

At the same time, "Pregnant Widow" lacks both the emotional wisdom and historical ambition of Mr. Amis's last novel, the powerful and deeply affecting "House of Meetings," which tackled the daunting subject of Stalin's labor camps and the mental costs of survival.

The subject of "Widow" is a small one: the interactions of a dozen young people during a vacation idyll in the Italian countryside,


though Mr. Amis works hard to try to inflate its importance, suggesting that his story is actually an allegory about the baby boom generation and the psychological fallout of the 1970s sexual revolution. Mr. Amis's musings about this era tend to be overly familiar, or dubious and reductive. Is it really a revelation that many boomers are narcissistic, card-carrying members of the "Me Generation"? Can the changing sexual mores brought about by the pill and the women's movement really be summed up as "girls acting like boys"?

As for Mr. Amis's hapless hero, Keith Nearing, we're told at the start that he was ruined for 25 years by what happened during that summer of 1970, that he paid a huge price for those events. This portentous observation — like Keith's repeated asides that something terrible happened to his sister Violet — is meant to grab the reader's attention and propel the narrative forward, but it turns out to be self-dramatizing hyperbole on Mr. Amis's part. In fact, the deliberately withheld secrets littered

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throughout this book only serve to underscore the lame storytelling and its reliance on cheap tricks.

The core of Keith's story is this: He arrived at the Italian castle with his on-again, off-again girlfriend Lily, but soon developed an obsessive crush on Lily's friend Scheherazade, a tall, beautiful blonde, whose boyfriend has yet to arrive for a visit.

Among the other people staying at the castle or passing through are someone's girlfriend named Gloria, who is in some sort of "sexual disgrace"; an older man named Whittaker and his young Libyan boyfriend, Amen; a woman named Rita whom the others call "the Dog"; and Adriano, a wealthy Italian count who is only 4 feet 10 inches tall.



Like Adriano, these characters are so shoddily drawn and so off-the-rack generic that Mr. Amis is keen to emphasize their vital statistics, as this may be the only way we can remember who is who. Lily is 5-foot-5, 34-25-34; Scheherazade is 5-foot-10, 37-23-33; Gloria is 5-foot-5, 33-22-37; Rita is 5-foot-8, 32-30-31; Adriano's brother Tybalt is 6-foot-6; and Keith occupies "that much-disputed territory between 5-foot-6 and 5-foot-7."

No doubt we're supposed to see Keith's romantic and sexual misadventures as part of his sentimental education — his loss of innocence and his efforts to separate love and lust — but he's such a pretentious jerk, continually blathering on about the novels he's read and the differences between contemporary sexual mores and those in the novels of [Jane Austen](#), that it's hard to care very much about him or his relationships with women.

Though the plot of "Widow" picks up in the second half of the novel, as Keith embarks on a stratagem to drug Lily so that he can sleep with Scheherazade, this shred of a story line isn't enough to sustain interest or to support the heavy garlands of pontification that Mr. Amis insists on draping over everything. If these musings were entertaining or keenly observed, that would be one thing, but Mr. Amis, one of the great stylists of the English novel, has oddly traded his mastery of language in these pages for a mannered, self-indulgent style — much the way he did in his abysmal 2003 novel, "Yellow Dog," the only one of this accomplished author's books to stand as more of an annoying puzzlement than this one.

A version of this review appeared in print on May 11, 2010, on page C1 of the New York edition.

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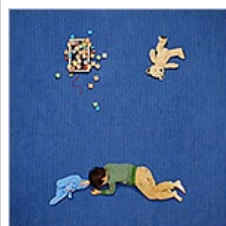


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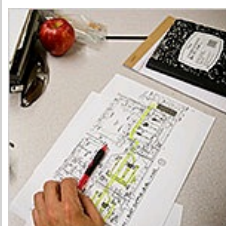
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