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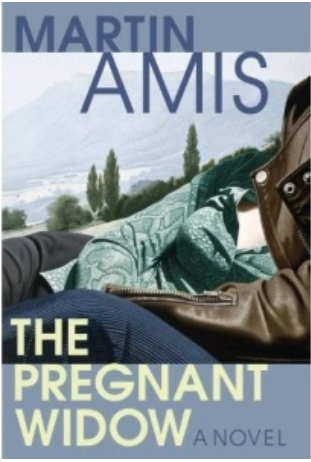
## Postings from the literary world THEAFTERWORD

# Open Book, by Philip Marchand: The Pregnant Widow, by Martin Amis

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Philip Marchand May 15, 2010 – 6:45 am

At his best, Martin Amis has been one of our finest satirical novelists. Let no reader complain, then, that Amis's characters lack a rich inner life. As an earlier satirical novelist, Wyndham Lewis — the title of his 1930 novel, *The Apes of God*, about fashionable English society, could stand in for any number of Amis novels — once commented, "To let the reader 'into the minds of the characters,' to 'see the play of their thoughts' — that is precisely the method least suited to satire." According to Lewis, true satirists focus on the outside of characters.



Amis knows this well. In *The Pregnant Widow*, nothing the character Gloria Beautyman says or thinks is as important as the fact of her "absolutely enormous arse." Another character, the Italian aristocrat Adriano, cannot make anyone forget that he is only 4-foot-10. When he stands by his much taller brother at a bar, a woman observes, "They looked like a bottle of Scotch and a miniature. The same brand and the same label. The bottle and the miniature."

Readers don't have to peer inside the soul of Adriano — they merely have to see the countless scars and bruises on his body acquired in dangerous physical pursuits, such as fierce games of rugby, to understand him.


A hint of these skewed external realities is conveyed by the novel's title, which Amis has taken from the 19th-century Russian writer Alexander Herzen, who describes the period succeeding an era of revolutionary change as "not an heir, but a pregnant widow." In this case, it's the sexual revolution that has left the widow pregnant, and the young characters who spend the summer of 1970 in an Italian castle are trying to sort out the consequences of their own involvement in her pregnancy.

Chief among them are Keith Nearing, a 20-year-old student of English literature and his girlfriend Lily, a law student, the beautiful Scheherazade, a math student, the aforementioned Gloria Beautyman, and a comparatively ancient Englishman named Whittaker — he's 31 — who is passionately involved with his 18-year-old Libyan boyfriend. His boyfriend's major characteristic is his hysterical repulsion over Scheherazade's magnificent pair of breasts.

The events of that summer are told from the perspective of Keith — or to be more precise, the voice of Keith's "conscience." The major event is a sexual encounter that we are led to believe permanently

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warps Keith. Keith three times calls the incident “the climax of my youth.”

A large helping of literary bric-a-brac surrounds this event. Keith is constantly quoting from the 19th-century novels he is reading, comparing his stay at the castle to various movie genres, supplying the etymology of important words cropping up in his conversation.

None of this is totally superfluous. Etymologies are always interesting, particularly when they apply to names — Keith defends his own name from Lily’s view of it as plebeian, and at one point refers to himself as “Little Keith,” the name of a particularly repulsive character in Amis’s novel *Dead Babies*. But it does tend to distract from the novel’s main theme, which is the divorce between feeling and sex promoted by the sexual revolution. The theme occasions some of the most biting passages in the novel.

“The free love business certainly worked best with girls who were acting like boys,” the narrator muses regarding Keith and his sex life. “He acted like a boy, and so did Lily. But she was a girl, and could do more of it than he could.” Gloria is blunt on the subject. “I’m secretly a cock,” she says to Keith, meaning that she has wholly adapted the male sexual imperative of going to bed with people for the hell of it. “In the future every girl will be like me. I’m just ahead of my time.”

This is sex with no echoes of reproduction and abundant links to narcissism. “Girls need looks even more now,” Lily says, and at one point cries out in anguish, “Why aren’t I beautiful?”

Narcissism brings with it a fear of aging. Keith observes that the class system has been replaced by the age system, in which people between 60 and 70 are the proletariat, and those older are serfs. “To cope with old age,” he remarks, “you really needed to be young — young, strong and in peak condition.” And there are further ironies. Marriage is “what women want,” Gloria admits, but Keith in his own mind responds, “You can’t marry a cock.”

Amis’s gleeful exaggeration of current trends and ideas has always been compelling, as well as his over-the-top metaphors — an “outlandish pepper grinder” in a restaurant is “the size of a supergalactic telescope.”

The structure of this novel, however, is unequal to Amis’s usual hyperenergized prose. It’s not just the bric-a-brac, the scattershot reflections on religion and the effects of the nuclear Cold War on the young, the postmodernist touches — the uncertainty about just who the “I” is in patches of first-person narrative, the yanking of the reader’s chain with statements such as “Everything that follows is true,” and “All this really happened.”

The novel’s main weakness is the failure of the central episode to bear the weight of meaning attached to it as a life-changing “climax.” The sex involved in that climax is odd, to be sure, but the novel makes clear that sexual oddities are par for the course when it comes to the pregnant widow.

Matters are not helped by a prolonged “Coda” tracing the career of Keith and some of his fellow castle dwellers throughout the ’70s. The portion of that coda dealing with Keith’s psychopathically promiscuous sister, Violet, is indeed disturbing, and in keeping with the darker undertones of the novel, but much of the coda deals with the return of Gloria Beautyman in a way that confuses rather than clarifies her significance.

There’s always been a grim, self-satisfied feeling of apocalypse in Amis’s fiction, as his puppets jerk frantically to their doom, but in *The Pregnant Widow* these puppets carry too much philosophical freight. It’s as if, in this novel, Amis has taken his eyes away from the outside of his characters for a moment too long.

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