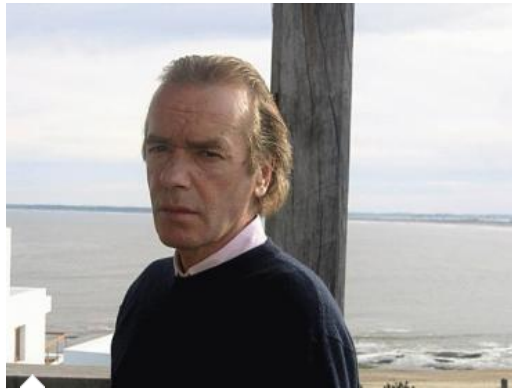


## 'The Pregnant Widow,' by Martin Amis

Jacob Molyneux, Special to The Chronicle  
Sunday, May 16, 2010

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Isabel Fonseca

Martin Amis' latest novel centers on a man's recollections of a destiny-shaping summer at an Italian castle in 1970.

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### The Pregnant Widow

By Martin Amis

(Alfred A. Knopf;  
370 pages;  
\$26.95)

Martin Amis' new novel, "The Pregnant Widow," is about the lifelong consequences of a 20-year-old English lit major's summer at an Italian castle full of tempting young women in 1970. It has been billed as a return to peak form by the

author of such satisfyingly caustic comedies of class, criminality and middle-aged male disappointment as "London Fields" (1989) and "The Information" (1995), and at the heart of this novel is a narrative that's tight, funny, sexy and poignant.

Unfortunately, Amis can't resist embellishing his traditional morality tale with a number of distracting pet obsessions and unconvincing metafictional smoke screens. The end result is an often frustrating hybrid of fiction and tipsy, maudlin pontification.

Keith Nearing is the adopted son of working-class parents. His girlfriend, Lily, is a practical middle-class law student, and they are staying for the summer at a castle belonging to the rich family of Lily's friend Scheherezade, who has just blossomed from a nerdy do-gooder into a stunningly sexy blonde who sunbathes topless by the pool. Keith sets himself the project of falling out of love with Lily so that he can indulge his lust for Scheherezade before her upper-class boyfriend arrives to claim her.

This effort at Nietzschean self-creation is amusingly depicted, with comic reversals, false starts and humiliations that make Keith increasingly likable as he struggles to shed his nagging conscience once and for all and become a "character" - rather than a clever, hapless, 5-foot-6 boy-man consistently overmatched by the moral subtlety and newly unleashed sexual power of young women at the height of the sexual revolution. The really nice irony here is that, just as Keith begins to sense the folly of overreaching, he finds himself face to face with a far more advanced sinner than himself, who senses easy pickings and quickly sweeps him away to an exquisite sort of hell he won't soon escape. (To give away more would be to ruin the fun.)

The novel's omniscient narrative voice - we're told near the end that it's supposed to be the voice of Keith's conscience - is that of a witty, self-mocking, sometimes tedious uncle. At its best, it's vintage Amis, but too often the account of the summer at the castle is interrupted by orations about the nature of men, women, aging and the implications of the sexual revolution. We get utterances such as "It was a revolution. And we all know what happens in a revolution. You see what goes, you see what stays, you see what comes."

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Religion, whether Christianity or Islam, is too often gratuitously caricatured - who would have guessed there were so many Pentecostal trust-funders and hard-core Catholics among educated British in 1970, or that a sophisticated, sexually confident woman born in Cairo might have always been an Islamic fundamentalist beneath her nihilistic mask? Still more distracting are the sudden, decontextualized glimpses of Keith's future, not to mention the episodes from the myth of Narcissus and Echo that punctuate the story in case we don't know how to interpret the action for ourselves.

We tolerate such maneuvers for the first 300 pages because we want to know what happens next. But Amis goes badly astray when the Italian summer ends and the narrative begins to skip in telegraphic fragments over the ensuing decades of the characters' lives. Sacrificing continued character development (which would, it's true, have required a massive expansion of the book's length), Amis seems resolved to enforce the big idea that for Keith everything that follows that zeitgeist-shifting summer is merely aftermath and elaboration.

He even attempts to elevate to a virtue the offhand quality of the extended post-Italy denouement by shrewdly giving Keith the thought that the Italian summer "was the only passage in his whole existence that ever felt like a novel. It had chronology and truth. ... But it also boasted the unities of time, place, and action." In contrast, we're told, there's another "genre" called "Life." This, alas, "can never be rewritten. It can never be revised."

Maybe it was to allow such metafictional self-indulgence and narrative slackening that Amis chose his curiously old-fashioned moral premise: that a young man who ignores the dictates of his conscience by choosing lust over love will pay for this willful "dissociation of sensibility" for the rest of his life. Not only that, but he'll be disqualified from becoming a poet - instead he'll be a critic! Worse, poor Keith will spend the next 30 years comparing his destiny, shaped during that Italian summer for all time, to that of his narcissistic, surface-obsessed generation - a generation itself shaped by the sexual revolution and the decision of some women to wield their sexual power, as Amis would have it, like men.

It all seems a little overdetermined. But then, it's fiction, not life.

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