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The Pregnant Widow by Martin Amis: review

The Pregnant Woman is a deeply autobiographical novel in which Martin Amis returns to the 1970s and the sexual revolution of his youth. But does his writing regain its earlier vigour too, asks Harry Mount

By Harry Mount

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Comments

Forgive the vulgarity, but I hope that Isabel Fonseca, Martin Amis's second wife, has good breasts. Or 'noble' ones, 'violent' ones, 'feminine' ones or ones with any of the dozens of different adjectives that Amis uses for the mammary gland in *The Pregnant Widow*. Amis turned 60 last year and his thoughts, while turning to many other things, are dominated by breasts.

The ones in question belong to three girls, all around 20, on a long summer holiday in an Italian castle in 1970. Also with them is Keith Nearing, a nervous, bright, breast-obsessed 21-year-old literature graduate about to submit his first review to the Times Literary Supplement. As if these

weren't clues enough to Keith's real identity – Amis also turned 21 in 1970 and, after Oxford, got his first job at the TLS – he is obsessed with his height. Like Amis, Keith occupies that 'much-disputed territory between five-foot-six and five-foot-seven'. He is constantly aware of where he's standing: if Keith's on a staircase, a step above a pretty, tall girl, he's essentially six-feet-two; let her climb to the step above him, and suddenly she's six-feet-six. His breast and height obsession gets so bad that he ends up checking out the vital statistics of the castle fountain: about 7ft 6in and 44-18-48.

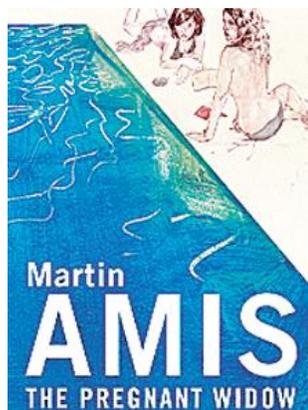
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It's not just Amis who appears under a pseudonym. Other real-life pals crop up: the writer Christopher Hitchens, and the poet Ian Hamilton, have walk-on parts, but this one is really about Martin and the girls.

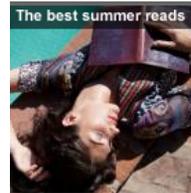
Alongside the breasts, there are flashes of Amis's old gift for new phrases – the alleyways of the nearby Italian town are 'scooter-tom'. He's good, too, on the longeurs of the villa holiday: the boiling heat, the kitchen smelling of cabbage and drains, the milk going off, and the endless games of the leisured rich – I Spy, What Would You Rather, Go Fish, anything to get through the next few empty minutes. The boredom gets so intense that they start counting the freckles on one girl's arms (there are nine altogether).

There are also moments of rude, honest observation – reminiscent of Amis in his first book, *The Rachel Papers*, and of his father Kingsley. Gone are the experimental games of novels like *Time's Arrow*, gone the political thoughts on Communism and Islam of his recent fiction and non-fiction. Back come the caustic insights into the shortcomings of human beings: 'Why is Miss Universe always from Earth?' Keith wonders at one point. The only trouble is, Martin Amis seems a lot nicer these days, and not quite as caustic as he was. He's not bad at trying to imitate the thoughts of a sex-obsessed young man; he's not so good at recapturing the wickedly funny thoughts of Martin Amis when he was a young man, writing *Dead Babies*, ...



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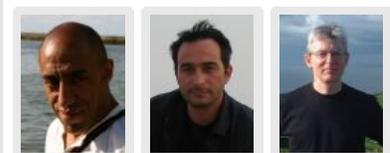
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The endless sexual shenanigans in Italy eventually begin to pall; Amis is better on the four decades that follow, and the fallout from the sexual revolution. He caught the full force of the golden age – post-Pill, pre-Aids; with no wars to fight in, not even National Service – for an Englishman born in 1949. It was a time when girls behaved sexually more like boys than boys; much more forward, in their see-through blouses and cut-off culottes, than the boys, dressed like clowns in their Seventies threads. Despite Keith's neurosis about girls, he ends up having some sort of action with all three of the women on holiday, thanks to the sexual revolution – and, in two out of three cases, it's the women who make the move.

But there's a price to pay. The book's title comes from Alexander Herzen, the 19th-century Russian writer, who said that a revolution created 'not an heir but a pregnant widow'. A revolution isn't just a flip of the old order; it takes a while for the baby to arrive. Before it does, someone's going to get hurt and, in the sexual revolution, it's the women who suffered.

The biggest victim is Keith's sister, Violet, based on Amis's sister, Sally, who died aged 46 in 2000 after a lifetime of drink and promiscuity. Violet can down seven Martinis in half an hour; soon after the seventh, she's off to bed with a new burglar, beggar or – the last resort – the cab driver who carries her home. Violet ends up dead.

Other casualties of the revolution are those who divorced sex from reproduction. Late in life, Keith bumps into former sex goddesses his age, now heartbroken at not having children. 'I sort of forgot to? ... I just seemed to miss it,' says one, bursting into tears.

The other price to pay for the passing years is the eternal one – old age. Amis has been in the papers recently, advocating euthanasia booths on street corners, but his novel is more subtle on the approach of death. The ageing Keith is pitch perfect. He's now in his fifties, 'as old as Nato', with four children: Nat, Gus, Isabel and Chloe, who unwittingly wound, saying things like: 'You'd look a lot better, Daddy, if you grew some more hair.' The minutes drag by, while the years tumble over each other and disappear.

Keith's body ages in opposite directions: his hands get colder, his eyes hotter; shrill noises are sharper, but he's deafer. Oh, and not forgetting the undercurrent of the book – his breasts get bigger, while his wife's shrink.

The Pregnant Widow

By Martin Amis

JONATHAN CAPE, £18.99, 470pp

Available from [Telegraph Books](#) 0844 871 1516

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