

LEISURE

Martin Amis at Book Now Festival

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By Will Gore »

When Martin Amis launches a new novel it is always accompanied by a storm of hype and speculation.

The hullabaloo that is gathering around the release of his latest book, *The Pregnant Widow*, is perhaps greater than ever.

Feverish speculation has been stoked by the fact the book has taken six years to arrive and there has been plenty of comment in the press surrounding characters supposedly based on the author's former girlfriends and his father, Kingsley.

Amis will be giving Richmond's Book Now festival a special preview of the novel at the Orange Tree Theatre on Sunday, with the book's subject matter finally out in the open.

"The book is about the sexual revolution in the 1970s," he says. "It is set in Italy one summer and there is a collection of young people staying in a castle. It is like a country house mystery but the mystery is not a murder, but sex."

Amis says that although he started out writing a book inspired by his past, and elements of this made it to the final novel, *The Pregnant Widow* is far from being a piece of autobiography.

"It took me a very long time to write," he explains. "I had written this huge autobiographical novel that didn't work at all. I had an awful couple of weeks and then I realised I had written two novels and I had to separate them. The first part became *The Pregnant Widow* and it was a huge relief to be back in fiction."

Has he always struggled with autobiographical writing?

"Everyone finds it difficult. The only writer who has ever got anywhere with it in my view is Saul Bellow – the curious thing about life is that it is dead when you write it. It's a miracle Bellow got anywhere with it."

The title of *The Pregnant Widow*, according to the author, refers to a quote about revolutions by Russian philosopher Alexander Herzen, who said that when a revolution takes place we should, on the whole, be braced by the fact that one order has given way to another; but what we are left with is not a new born child.



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but a pregnant widow.

"It is almost the best thing said about revolutions," Amis adds. "They don't just end with the death of the old order but with a very painful birth of the new order. I think we are still living through the sexual revolution and will continue to do so for a long time."

While the new novel is primarily set in the 1970s, Amis reveals there are five sections in the book that bring the characters forward to the modern day and looks at how they, and the ideas behind the sexual revolution, have developed.

He has also included "a minor Islamic theme" which he says "has to do with how Muslims and Christians seemed to be getting on reasonably well and we had no idea that this millennium old hatred would burst forward on (September 11)."

Amis is no stranger to media controversy and it was the subject of Islam, or more specifically his condemnation of Islamism, that caused a very public spat with his University of Manchester colleague Terry Eagleton in 2007.

When he hit the news more recently for comments made about Jordan you would be forgiven for expecting these utterances to be concerned with problems in the Middle East.

In fact it was the glamour girl of the same name whom Amis poured scorn on at another literary festival, when discussing how she inspired a character in a novella he has recently completed called *State of England*.

Amis says that the character, called Threnody, does not play as big a role in the novella as the media storm would suggest, but her portrayal certainly contributes to his satirical and pessimistic take on the state of the nation.

"She is a minor character," he explains. "It is not Jordan but a rather different type of woman who gets about as much attention. My character is a poet, not a novelist, on the side as well as being a glamour model.

"I think it is slightly depressing that Jordan's autobiography is a best seller and people queue for five hours to meet her. What does that say about England?

"Snobbery has to start somewhere and if you can't be snobbish about Katie Price you are dead, you've gone."

Martin Amis, Book Now, Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond, November 15, 3pm, £10/£8.50, richmond.gov.uk/book_now_2009

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