Martin Amis: Talking about a revolution

Friday, 5 May 2010

News of JD Salinger’s death comes through shortly before I arrive chez Martin Amis, in the house that everyone routinely locates in Primrose Hill (swanky, serene, A-list haven) but which in fact lies just as close to Camden Town (scruffy, hysterical, boho purgatory). It depends from which direction you travel. Editors ring to commission 500 words of instant tribute; one mocking, ribald voice of the bright last boys (and quite a few girls) of his era on another. He turns them down.

Amis does admire “a purity” in Salinger. But the passing of the Great Recluse also prompts thoughts of the man who tried to climb over his wall: Amis’s late, close friend Ian Hamilton. The poet and critic has a far gentler point out the injured manner of ageing athletes to get me a cup of tea (later followed by wine). Back with the mug, he says, “I don’t protect myself”.

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Indeed not. So we think we own him, through feuding and families, divorce and dentistry, and have done for a quarter-century. Since, perhaps, the bull’s-eyebraza of his 1984 satire Money (soon to grace BBC TV screens) upgraded an already closely-observed whisper-snarper prodigy into a leader of the pack. Money took aim at a newly brazen Britain of junk-TV stunts and gobby-in-your-face celebrity that, in its later, much more toxic strain, has fuelled the novel that will follow The Pregnant Widow. Amis is now within a few pages of finishing the first draft of a satire about a crook who wins the man who tried to climb over his wall: Amis’s late, close friend Ian Hamilton. The poet and critic has a far gentler point out the injured manner of ageing athletes to get me a cup of tea (later followed by wine). Back with the mug, he says, “I don’t protect myself”.

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I'm of that generation, less and less affectionately known as the baby boomers, that is going to break the system.

"I didn't coin the phrase, 'a silver tsunami'. That's what demographers call it... There's going to be a huge transfer of wealth from the young to the old and not every young person appreciates that. In the US, they call this issue 'the third rail': the subway analogy. If you tread on it you're electrocuted. So the conception is subterranean."

Amis, as ever, rouses the breathing dragons from their lairs. His assault on joyless, "no talent" JM Coetzee certainly had this critic breathing fire. Here, though, he backtracks a bit. Amis does brand Coetzee's Disgrace (which, as a Booker judge, I eagerly helped steer towards the prize in 1999) as a novel "much adored, particularly by... "Oh, all the more I say, "I shouldn't have a go at other writers. I'm sure, if he ever looked at my stuff, it wouldn't do a thing for him either. We're just diametrically different."

Which brings us to The Pregnant Widow. Subtitled "inside history" and wearing its art on its sleeve (two semi-naked lovelies by a Hockney-esque pool, to be precise), Amis's novel tells of the sexual revolution, its Bastille, its guillotines and its Torrors. By and large it takes place in a castle in Italy over the summer of 1970. Flash-forwards and a hefty coda frame the action, and the cast, in hindsight. This long view of what Amis calls "the biggest social shift of my lifetime" scans the later progress of the principals. It shows us how "some came through, some more or less came through, and some went under, but they all had their sexual traumas".

Trauma-carrier in chief is Keith Nearing, adopted child of an academic clan and sly, clever Eng Lit student on the brink of 21. Keith yearns to be a ready Red Guard of the bedroom insurrection. Life — and his author — have other plans for him. "He's below average," Amis insists. "There was a time when men had great opportunities, and he's rather slow to take them up... He's typically English in his diffidence. He's far more unusual in being very literary, and talking quite well."

In height, Keith may occupy "that much-disputed territory between five foot six and five foot seven". He may have a 1949 birthday in common with his maker. Keith may also feel about his defencesless, out-of-control sister Violet, just as Amis allows that he did about Sally: the sister whose death at 46 in 1999 helped to darken the entire palette of his work.

Yet The Pregnant Widow only exists because Amis cut loose from his experience. It began as "part of a huge abandoned novel". A couple of years ago, this natively autobiographical project resembled "a corpse". Then "I realised after two weeks of stunned horror, having abandoned it, that it was actually two novels." After bisection, the creative juices flowed again.

"It was getting away from autobiography that was the huge relief and release," Amis says. He felt "a mannequin influx of freedom as I completely de-autobiographised it." Keith, who was "jerry-built for the novel", becomes a brash but edgy orphan who must labour to gain a new family's love. "Whereas I, for my sins, am the son of Kingsley Amis".

Keith, after his X-rated idyll in Italy, spends bleak stretches of time in what Amis calls "Larkin-land". This desert of loneliness and frustration is named after the emotional moonscape of his father's best friend, the poet Philip Larkin. But, according to Amis myth, the son of one of Postwar Britain's most-admired novelists himself enjoyed that tutto e subito ("everything and now") plenitude that his young guns seek in the castle. As the legend runs, Amis the pocket Casanova had (after an unattractive "coined to define it. That which is unfair, and likely to provoke resentment among others. The attractiveness business is invidious."

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Yet Amis knows the scenery of Larkin-land pretty well. In the novel, Keith gets to grasp the melancholy truth that, in love as elsewhere, success breeds success; failure, failure. "It's like conkers," Amis comments. "You can go from a one-er to a 45-er in one bout. "And..."

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For all the fizz and fun, you might argue that The Pregnant Widow adds up to the most historically engaged work that Amis has ever done. It tries to draw up a balance-sheet of the benefits and deficits of sexual liberation, for women above all. Soon enough we learn that “every hard and demanding adaptation would be falling to the girls... The boys could just go on being boys. It was the girls who had to choose.”

Writing from within this revolution, Amis only nods to the “shame and honour” crimes of the patriarchal ancien régime. His stress falls on the damage wrought by licentious rather than restraint; such as “the complete banishment of emotion – or indeed of significance – from the bedroom.” Gloria comes across (in every sense) as a surface-loving, soul-denying pomo queen before her time. She is known as “the Future.”

In spite of such abuses (and self-abuses), Amis has no wish to turn the erotic clocks back. “I still think it was a heroic choice, watching the revolution. As revolutions nearly always are, no matter how they end up, to break the continuities with the past is very brave. And it wasn’t brave of men; it was brave of women. I think the bondage beforehand was infinitely worse.”

Amis reports that, although he was well on the way already, Gloria Steinem “completely converted” him to feminism “in the course of a day” in the early 1980s. His feminism, like that of the reluctant older Keith, has a practical bedrock: a “50-50” spirit of responsibilities at home.

“Having it all!” Amis snorts. “The reality of that is Doing it All. They do most of the kids’ stuff, most of the housework, most of the administration.” Without “50-50”, he fears that feminism amounts to “this reckless accumulation of powers that don’t give pleasure”. Yet the revolutionaries of 1970 failed to secure this base, from which “everything else would have followed”.

Instead they fell, he thinks, for an “equalitarian” delusion of head-to-head sexual competition. Whether lyrical, lofty or ludicrous (sometimes all at once), the book’s sex-chatter captures the moment when emancipation meant, for some women, “acting like a man”. In such a contest, Amis warns, biological men would always win.

Most women “realised quite soon that the model of the boy’s behaviour does not work” for them. In the novel, indeed in Amis’s eyes, the ultimate wrong in the realm of sexuality rests not in any particular kind or frequency of behaviour. It lies in the denial of one’s true self: “The great sin is to go out of your nature – the great mistake “Here, men caper if not compel the spirits of the times”. And in 1970 that spirit tends, so Amis presents it, to bum them dry. As a sexual dystopia, The Pregnant Widow comes close at several points to the novels of Michel Houellebecq, such as Atomised and Platform. And what a platform pairing they would make.

Always, back in England but forever in harm’s way, hover Keith’s sister Violet: the broken child of the revolution. Naive, dependent, abused in body and spirit, she is the howling ghost at this feast of love.

Amis makes no bones about the kinship of the fictional Violet and the actual Sally: addicted, depressed, and dead at 46. “Violence against women is the thing that I care most about,” her brother says. “And if you said it was because of what happened to my sister, you wouldn’t be far wrong. You don’t need a sister like I had to be against ill-treatment of women, but it lends it immediacy and urgency.”

“This was the time to write about my sister, who was going to struggle in any society – but the sexual revolution formed the setting for it, and the style (perhaps the only society she could have flourished in would have been a very strict one: Islam, for instance.)

Readers may recall earlier Amis controversies over politics and faith, when accusations of Islamophobia flew around the writer’s head. “The austerity, and the demands made on you by that religion. And she had many religious impulses.”

What about the ethics of this transfer into fiction? “I once rescued her from some terrible situation,” he remembers, “and paid up what was necessary to release her from it, and took her home and patched her up. And she looked at me and I know she wanted to thank me, and she was wondering how to do that. Normally she thanked people by having sex with them. But she just said: ’Write about me, Martin. You can say anything you like. I won’t mind.’”

“Maybe without that remark – she looked as clear-headed as she ever looked in her life, it reminded me very much of how she looked in the moments after Kingsley died, really seeing something, her future or something – without that, maybe I couldn’t have done it.”

After her death, he says, “I did have a kind of breakdown... It took a long time to see that it was that.” The result of guilt? “It was the pity of it. A certain amount of guilt, certainly. I didn’t do as much for her as my brother did, and nothing like as much for her as my mother did. And nothing like as much as Kingsley did. He was always off to admissions wards and sometimes I’d go with him. But I couldn’t bear it.”

In the novel, Keith on his spree is “trying not to think” about Violet. “Which is what I did,” Amis goes on. “I couldn’t bear to watch. I was very close to her as a child. I was there at the beginning and I was there at the end. And not there enough probably in between.” But might she have flourished in another, more protective time and place?

“She would have had a better chance. There was a lot of talk for a while about going in the army. We sensed that it had to be a really rigorous environment... I thought that there was perhaps a bit of hope there, but it wouldn’t have lasted. Only something as monolithic as a great world religion – a religion that really asks a lot of you – could have absorbed her energy.”

Amis’s own energy seems to have enjoyed a boost of late. After his state-of-England burlesque will come the separated second half of The Pregnant Widow. Some version of Philip Larkin himself (in whose erotic misery and death Amis detects “a failure of courage, a failure of energy– the desire to love just wasn’t strong enough”) may play a leading part in that novel.

Its author worries rather less these days about the age-related death of talent that has vexed him over recent years. But that isn’t the end of friends such as Saul Bellow, the great master of Amis’s youth, had given him a horror of the fading writer’s final acts.

“It just seemed to me: thank you very much, medical science. The body outlives the talent. So we have that to look forward to.

“I’m a bit calmer about that now,” Still, “it’s something you can’t help thinking about. I talk about it with Ian McEwan a lot. He says the thing is, you’ve got to adjust scale. Attempt shorter things. I don’t feel that at the moment. I feel full of words, having had a very good time with this book.”

Can a novelist retire? “But then life would be so miserable. And Kingsley, when he was really sort of nuts towards the end, my mother said: ‘I like the sound of a typewriter.’ It was a manual typewriter, the ‘S’ key almost split in half by his fingernails over the years. She said: ‘He still makes that noise that I like to hear. But I looked in the other day and all he’d written was, ‘Seagulls Seagulls Seagulls Seagulls.”"
Like The Shining? “Yes, all work and no play. Yes, like The Shining. But he still needed to do it. This is the love of your life. It’s what I want to do when I wake up. Nothing feels so absorbing, so fulfilling.”

*The Pregnant Widow* by Martin Amis is published by Jonathan Cape (£18.99)

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