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Martin Amis lays bare a sexual trauma

Humiliation and family scorn haunt the hero of the author's avowedly autobiographical new novel

Maurice Chittenden

MARTIN AMIS, once the enfant terrible of British literature, has revealed in his latest novel the angst of a man fast approaching 60, haunted by past sexual humiliations and scorned by his own young children.

Amis, who will be eligible for a bus pass in August, has been working on the partly autobiographical *The Pregnant Widow* for more than five years.

He was 56 when he started the latest draft, the same age as his main character Keith, who suffers "sexual trauma" at the hands of two 20-year-old blondes and is mocked by his offspring for looking like a tramp. He has used Keith as a character before - in his 1975 novel *Dead Babies* - and Amis experts suspect it is an alter ego on which he unloads any feelings of self-loathing.

The novel is set in a castle in Italy during the sexual revolution of the early 1970s where, according to the publishers, "half a dozen young lives are afloat on the sea change".

Amis's previous claims that *The Pregnant Widow* would be semi-autobiographical are likely to have had former girlfriends such as Tina Brown, the New York socialite and former editor of *Vanity Fair*, and Emma Soames, the granddaughter of Sir Winston Churchill, flinching.

"I am not going to stick my neck out and say that I have nothing to fear," Soames said earlier this year. "But writers have to draw on their past experiences, so I do not mind if Martin has done so with ours."

In the book Keith goes from bar to bar flanked by the blondes called Lily and Scheherazade and is sexually humiliated by one of them. Amis writes that it was to ruin "Keith" for 25 years.

Unveiling his novel last week at the Norwich Playhouse, Amis said the book was originally meant to be based much more closely on his own life. However, he had introduced more fictional passages after realising the format was not working.

"In 2003 I tried for a couple of years," said Amis. "I flailed about and it all felt awful. Bits were autobiographical but I had to completely rethink it. It was an uncontrollably long and pointless novel of 200,000 words. But the summer in Italy, I drew that out."

Amis writes at the outset of the novel: "Everything that follows is true. Italy is true, the castle is true, the girls are all true . . . Not even the names have been changed - why bother to protect the innocent? There were no innocent - or else all of them are innocent but cannot be protected."

In *The Pregnant Widow*, Keith talks about parents who invent phantom handicaps such as "little shit syndrome" as an excuse to drug their children. James Diedrick, a professor of English and author of *Understanding Martin Amis*, said: "Martin's father called him 'little shit' in one of his letters to Philip Larkin.

"It sounds like whenever Amis names a character Keith, he loads that character with all the self-loathing and regrets that he's stored up over the years."

Amis, the son of Sir Kingsley Amis, author of *Lucky Jim*, is now a grandfather: his daughter Delilah, from his first marriage, had a son last year.

Amis has two much younger daughters, Clio and Fernanda, by his second wife, Isabel Fonseca, the writer.

His new work, to be published in 2010, suggests that, like Keith, he suffers some of the pains of late fatherhood. Keith complains about his children's "voices, their shrieks when they try to find the limits of the universe, for example, or when they say unbelievably hurtful things about his appearance. " 'You'd look a lot better, daddy, if you grew more hair' - oh really? - or 'Daddy, when you laugh you look like a mad old tramp'."

Amis writes: "At this time of life - he was 56 - you resign yourself to simple truths. Each successive visit to the mirror will by definition confront you with something unprecedentedly awful."

He adds: "When you become old you find yourself auditioning for the role of a lifetime, then after interminable rehearsals you find you are starring in a horror film, talentless, irresponsible and . . . low-budget.

"Above all else, as is the way for horror films, they are saving the worst for last."

Additional reporting: Richard Goss

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