

From [The Sunday Times](#)

January 24, 2010

[MY PROFILE](#)

Martin Amis and the sex war

Martin Amis has dazzled his readers for decades and wooed a succession of beautiful women. Now 60, he talks about the sex war and its casualties, fear of losing his spark, and his obsession with death

Camilla Long

Martin Amis is the sort of man who'll give a girl whisky and, luckily for him, I'm the sort of girl who'll drink it. So he stops playing pinball in the huge sitting room of his house in Primrose Hill, a book-lined therapist's waiting room where, later, he will use a paperback — an Updike — to record my mobile number, and saunters off to fix it, muttering, "Scotch on the rocks, scotch on the rocks".

After a bit of clinking and purring at a tiny daughter (he has two girls with the writer Isabel Fonseca, one of whom seems to be quite inquisitive and hangs around in the hallway a lot), he creeps back in with a Kingsley-sized tumbler, and a small beer for himself. Taking a stool in the centre of the room and flipping one faun-like leg over the other, today, he says, he's feeling "uncool".

Sixty last August — "a new level of stress", he says in his smoky, 16rpm drawl — the former firestarter of British fiction is now also a grandfather. He's thrilled with one-year-old Isaac: "They're like little drunks, toddlers, staggering around the place." But they are "also a telegram from a funeral parlour".

Which is, yes, pretty "uncool", but otherwise things seem to be fairly groovy for the suntanned millionaire author of *The Rachel Papers*, *Money*, *Success and Experience*. In fact, he is just back from Christmas in Uruguay, where he has a second home, and is feeling quite "buoyant" and looking forward to the publication of his new book, *The Pregnant Widow*.

This is partly because he found it so dreadful to write, having had, as he did, an "awful crisis" halfway through when he discovered he couldn't write about sex any more. "The pornography was fine," he gasps, "but not the nuanced, emotional stuff. Not autobiographical sex." For a couple of weeks he even thought his writing career was finished. "Come to the end. I hadn't given up on writing... Writing had given up on me."

But after slashing 90%, he was back in business, and here it is, nine years later, an explicit, fantastical comedy inspired by the sexual revolution: "The most eagerly anticipated novel of the year," blares the jacket. "Martin Amis at his fearless best." Amis himself is confident. In fact, it's got him on a roll: "I've got the first draft of the next novel done," he says, "and another novel ready to go after that." As for the critics... "Pffff," he waves a hand. "I'm not nervous, no. Not really."

Still, he can't have forgotten the pasting he received for his 2003 novel, *Yellow Dog*, a "meditation on male violence", which one critic described as "not-knowing-where-to-look bad". Even his own father, Sir Kingsley Amis, the novelist and author of *Lucky Jim*, was critical of his son's flinty, experimental style, "breaking the rules, bugging about with the reader, drawing attention to himself".

Today, however, Amis is defiant. On the question of a return to form, he says tartly: "What's this *retum* shit? I don't know how this will go down, but my talent seems to me to be *perfectly vigorous*." He is aware of the scope of his undertaking, the fact that "people might worry that the kind of novel I write, satirical, [may not be suited] to the sex war".

But Amis has never been shy of big themes — money, mortality, the Holocaust, the gulag. And here, he attends to sex, setting *The Pregnant Widow* in 1970, the moment that "something was changing in the world of men and women". The protagonist is Keith Nearing, a 20-year-old student of English literature and sexually anxious short arse dazzled by the sudden array of babes on offer at a house party in Italy. He spends the entire summer torn between his girlfriend, his hostess, and an attractive fellow guest, an experience that "takes 25 years' getting over".

EXPLORE BOOKS

- BOOK EXTRACTS
- BOOK REVIEWS
- BOOKS GROUP
- AUDIO BOOKS

Our new websites
are now live.

THE TIMES
THE SUNDAYTIMES

→ Register now

Amis himself has spent decades observing the subject matter, and indeed Nearing is a version of the author, complete with anxieties about appearance and height ("The bit of his body Keith hated was the bit that wasn't there. He suffered for his height") and, of course, ageing. "You'd look a bit better, Daddy, if you grew some hair," says Keith's small daughter. Even today, Amis winces when I ask what he sees when he looks in the mirror. "Don't ask," he whispers. "I look *finished*. My definition of youth is that feeling when you look in the mirror and go 'Everyone dies, but clever you...'"

There are differences: Keith is less clever, less successful, and "finds it more difficult to get a girlfriend than I did. He has far fewer and less good ones", he leers. Still, as a nervous 17-year-old in the mid-1960s, Amis can easily remember how "going to bed was suasion over a long period. You might have got what my father called 'one of those' — a married woman. But generally, it was pretty uphill". Then, "in came sex before marriage, and the girls didn't care, and started behaving like boys.

"And the men thought, wow, this is good for us. You could see them observing what the women were doing and thinking, how's this all going to end? Because it's women who are going to come a cropper. There were casualties — because when do you have a revolution without casualties?"