

He helped as much as he could, paying for hospitals and providing handouts (Sally gave birth to a baby girl, who was given up for adoption), but matters worsened when Kingsley, whom Sally adored, himself descended into alcoholism after the break-up of his second marriage. Eventually he wound up as a kind of obese grinch in the Kilmarnocks' house in London, but when he died in 1995, Sally was devastated.

Amis recalls in his autobiography, *Experience* (which tells the story of another ill-starred female relative, Lucy Partington, a cousin who was one of Fred West's earliest victims) how his sister erected "a shrine" to Kingsley in her tiny bedsit, and four years on, "was still capable of calling me in tears when she was 'having a bad Dad day'".

"It was a miracle she made it to 46," says Amis. Writing about Violet was a way of getting Sally back, but he still feels he failed her. "My brother [his older brother, Philip, an artist] tried far more than I did, but you would have needed the Taliban to control her. If she'd been conditioned by a really strong culture of self-denial, she might have made it, although in any kind of shame-and-honour arrangement she would already have been killed by her father, her uncle and brother Nicholas." (Nicholas is Keith's brother in the book: Amis often slips between fiction and reality.)

Isn't that a bit heavy-handed? Amis shrugs. "Nothing else would have controlled her. She would have found it difficult in any system of sex."

For Amis himself, the sexual revolution was indeed a "cornucopia of opportunities", a fact that was rather reconfirmed last year when the writer Julie Kavanagh wrote a gushing account of their affair in the 1970s. The half-sister of Amis's former agent, Pat Kavanagh, whom Amis acrimoniously ditched in 1995 to get a bigger advance for *The Information* — money that he then spent on a new set of teeth — Julie was a young fashion journalist when she met Amis, already famous for *The Rachel Papers*. Affectionately dubbing him "Lazy Shit", she described him as "coldly alluring", with "Jagger lips, moody monobrow and fag between two fingers".

In between drinking sessions with Clive James, the poet James Fenton, the novelist Julian Barnes (Pat's future husband) and the journalist Christopher Hitchens, Amis pursued a love life of Byzantine complexity, flirting with Claire Tomalin, dating Tina Brown, playing footsie with Lorna Sage, not to mention his affair with the married artist Lamorna Seale, the issue of which was a love child, Delilah, now 33 and the mother of Isaac.

Ever the revisionist, Amis now claims that he was actually "on a quest for love, for clever girls", and that he's "brightist", though when I ask if he would boff someone unattractive, he winces, goes "er, uh..." and changes the subject. Then there's the fact that both his wives have been clever and also very beautiful, at which he smirks, looks goaty and says "Yes..." in a way that makes me blush and drain my whisky, and remember that, as Lily says in the book, "short men try harder".

Mind you, I'm not sure he's always dreamy. Sure, he can be interesting, sometimes shading to over-interesting. I sat next to him at dinner once and he was so serious that when I asked if he believed in Santa, he said something like "Well, Santa is the self, of course..."

He can also be "verbally caustic", but none of this cramped his style: he even managed a small gay crush. Keith Nearing is obsessed with the possibility that he might be gay; when I ask Amis about this, he says: "Every man wonders from time to time, thinks, ah shit... here comes trouble." At one point he met Peter Schlesinger, a boyfriend of David Hockney. "He was a friend of my girlfriend at the time, and used to ring up. Once he rang up and said, 'Hi, it's Peeder,' and I got the kind of dryness in the throat, the same as when a major chick... It's your body that tells you, not your mind."

There were casualties, of course. One dumpee, the journalist Emma Soames, read the piece that her former best friend Kavanagh had published and realised that Amis must have been two-timing them both. She wrote a fiery response, depicting the novelist as a bed-hopping love rat.

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Although Amis admits nothing she wrote was untrue, she got details wrong, "little things," he says, put out. "In fact, she seems to have forgotten half of it. We didn't go out for one year, we went out for two. The whole tenor of it... We had a great time, and it depresses me that she finds it so hardly worth the memories. I very much enjoy the memories of her, and felt nothing horrid or bad."

Does he think she was rather dismissive, suggesting he was socially unsophisticated and describing him as "the scribbling dwarf"? "Dismissive of the past, of fond memories," he says. Bitter? "Yes," he says. "But that's not to do with me, that's to do with the rest of her life."

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