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The Irish Times - Saturday, February 6, 2010

Amis aims high . . . and misses



Martin Amis: *The Pregnant Widow* is a chaotic joust at youth revisited.
Photograph: Tom Craig/Bill Charles Agency

In this section »

- Connecting to Ireland's ancient history
- Lament for a lost ideal
- The other side of Paradise
- Tackling a terrible trembling
- Route of a rebel gladiator
- Romanticism's golden boy

FICTION: EILEEN BATTERSBY reviews
The Pregnant Widow, by Martin Amis,
Cap, 470pp, £13.99

YET AGAIN Martin Amis summons a Keith. But this Keith is not tough, working class, financially emasculated and ready for a punch up. Instead he is a dozy university student, taking on the English novel by reading everything while spending a summer sitting by a pool in Italian luxury. He reads and he suffers. The agony is supplied by the near-naked bodies of the girls with him; one is Lily, his old girlfriend now more like a sister but willing to try again, the other is her pal, Scheherazade, who stands 6ft tall without her socks as she doesn't wear all that much. Keith, as expected in Amis land, is short and inhabits that yawning chasm between 5ft 6in and 5ft 7in.

The year is 1970 and the subject is sex; cartoon sex devoid of passion, lacking true desire, a sexuality mesmerised by bosoms and bottoms. The newly liberated girls discuss the subject the way men debate football, except that these men don't discuss football, they only talk about which girls will co-operate – but are shocked by those who do 'it'. Be warned *The Pregnant Widow* resembles a party that never seems to end but never really got started either. The older Keith worries about having become old, just as the younger Keith fretted about girls and their bodies. Keith's regrets are vague, the hurt is insufficiently defined. Can we care about him? No. Can we care about any of the characters? No, not really. Is there a plot? No, not really; in fact not at all. Is it funny? Only mildly, but no, not really.

The Pregnant Widow arrives full of expectations and delivers none. About the one thing that is certain is that it is not worthy of Martin Amis, particularly the Amis whose *House of Meetings* (2006) proved that Amis, the comic moralist, had matured impressively in a powerful novel independent of linguistic gags. Not that we were complaining about the stylistic cartwheels. Amis is capable of playing language the way a cat works a mouse, with vicious grace. *Money* (1984), *London Fields* (1989) and most emphatically, *The Information* (1995), his big books, are three of the finest British novels of the 20th century, sharp, cohesive and deadly on target in a way that *The Pregnant Widow* is hamfistedly not. The scant light relief is provided by a knowing scattering of literary references from Richardson to George Eliot, from Shakespeare to Larkin.

SOCIAL CLASS AMUSED the younger Amis as did fast food and assorted sexual frenzy. He was alert to nuance, had embraced popular culture and street argot as shrewdly as he had the classics, and could expose the pretensions of just about everything. Increasingly, his preoccupations became darker; death emerged as a theme in *London Fields*, while *The Information*, a hilarious tale of two rival writers, is all about fear; fear of loss, fear of losing face, fear of the now and terror of what's coming. In it, Richard Tull, a failed novelist doomed to book reviewing – "I already review about a book a day. I can't review more. There aren't enough books. I do them all!" – listens as his small son talks in his sleep and appears to be "pleading with his nightmares."

Amis explored Stalin's myth and when critics objected he was not a card-carrying historian, Amis responded with *House of Meetings*. Before that, he had told his story, admittedly a complex one, in the candidly eloquent memoir, *Experience* (2000), published less than a year after a brilliant collection, *Heavy Water and Other Stories*, which included a comic tour de force, *State of England*.

The Pregnant Widow has been described as an autobiographical novel, but it is merely a comic strip though not as nasty as *Yellow Dog* (2003), just silly, almost half-hearted.

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This reads like the novel of a lesser writer; it fails to reflect the Amis genius which has shimmered and surged since his swaggeringly assured debut, with a couple of hiccups, namely *Night Train* (1997), *Yellow Dog* and now this chaotic joust at youth revisited.

Long ago in 1981, the Amis whose first trio of novels, *The Rachel Papers* (1973), *Dead Babies* (1975) and *Success* (1978) had proved conclusively how jaw-droppingly funny he could be, published *Other People: A Mystery Story*, a metaphysical thriller and lament as well as an unsung masterpiece. *Money* was the first Amis novel I read, one of the first books I ever reviewed. It made me go immediately to his backlist. *Other People: A Mystery Story* suggested that here was one British writer to be read with a similar level of excitement as inspired by the great JG Ballard, one of Amis's literary heroes along with Jane Austen, Bellow, Updike and Nabokov, good heroes all, great heroes.

WHEN AMIS TURNED from social satire and the use of tennis, snooker and chess as profound metaphors, to moral public issues such as nuclear war, terrorism and history, critics became uneasy – admittedly, feminists had hated him from the beginning – but Amis took his chances; sometimes it worked, as in his Holocaust novel, *Time's Arrow* (1991), dedicated to his doomed sister, Sally, sometimes it didn't, but he was never afraid to take risks.

The new novel is only a time out; it's a bewildering, bloated maze of impulse rather than ideas. "I can assure you I'm no stranger," said Keith, "to Islamic talent. They're the best-looking people on earth, don't you think?" It seems an odd remark, but then it is consistent with a novel in which everyone, particularly Keith, is obsessed with physical appearance.

One of the many caricatures is Gloria Beautyman, a sex voyager whose personality is connected to her ample behind and weird taste in swimwear, just as Scheherazade is a bosom attached to a tall body. There are glimmers of comic relief in the self-destructive antics of Adriano, a 4ft 10in Italian count and strangely likeable man of action: "Why, my body, as the map of a battle, itself tells the tale of my love of adventure", but little of Amis's trademark comedy, often grotesque, always funny.

As an Amis devotee, words fail me. Reading *The Pregnant Widow* – what would Russian revolutionary thinker Alexander Herzen (1812-1870) from whose work the title is taken, make of it all? – is demoralisingly, akin to eating cotton wool. It is a career aberration. In one of the few passages approaching profundity, the lovely Scheherazade who has been gazing at horses in a field, remarks to Keith: "Lily tells me you hate flies." The sexually overwhelmed Keith replies: "This is true." His comment is the cue for Scheherazade, a girl enslaved by her own stupendous allure, to reveal a possible intelligence. "In Africa," she said in profile, "all day long you're looking at these poor black faces. They have flies on their cheeks and their lips. Even in their eyes. And they don't brush them away. Just used to them, I suppose. Human beings get used to them. But horses never do. See their tails'."

It is almost enigmatic. "And of course he watched as she turned and moved off – the mannish khaki shorts, the mannish white shirt only half tucked in, the tall walk. Her shirt was damp and there were grass halms on her shoulder blades. Grass halms gleamed in her hair. He sat back. The frogs, massed in the wet ground between the walled flowerbeds, gurgled and comfortably grunted. It came to his ears as a stupor of self-satisfaction – like a clutch of fat old men reviewing a life-time of probity and profit. The frogs in their shallow swamp, in their stupor."

It is the most romantic, quasi-erotic passage in a directionless book which reiterates Amis's vision of sex as a contest, but no more than a terrific joke.

In between the endless dialogues about sex which again confirm that Amis is still far more interested in panic and impotence, than he is or ever was in writing about sex, Keith and his journalist half-brother Nicholas discuss the tragic odyssey of Violet, their wayward, sex-crazed sister. There is no disputing Martin Amis's status as a literary phenomenon, an all-seeing literary writer blessed with linguistic energy and street appeal who alienates award juries so successfully the only major award he has won remains The Somerset Maugham for *The Rachel Papers* when he was 24.

A committed, if at times uneven commentator, he has written valid think pieces such as the 9/11 pieces collected in *The Second Plane* (2008). He is a reader and outstanding literary journalist, abetted by scholarly recall, whose interviews of other writers amount to masterclasses. His criticism is exacting but just. Although it seemed unfair when he subjected John Updike's final book, the posthumous collection, *My Father's Tears*, to a cruelly forensic examination. Applying the same to this new book reveals leaden phrasing such as "Keith imagined her buttocks as a pair of giant testicles (from L. testiculus, lit. 'a witness' – a witness to virility), not oval, but perfectly round."

Why offer *The Pregnant Widow* as a book of the 70's? Amis has already written a sharper, funnier one, *Dead Babies*. The slight tremor of regret experienced by shadowy Keith on reaching middle age or the image of old people "slowly growing into their masks of bark and walnut" is nothing to the thumping disappointment of reading this earthbound new book from a writer who can achieve so much more, and already has.

Eileen Battersby is Literary Correspondent of *The Irish Times* and author of *Second Readings: From Beckett to Black Beauty*, published by Liberties, €14.99

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RTE One	EastEnders	Fair City	Rachel Allen: Home
RTE Two	Messages from Nature	White Lions: King of Kings	
TV3	Dirtbusters	Emmerdale	Coronation Street
TG4	M na Meala	Aoire agus a Mhadra	Feilte 2010
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