Amis takes aim at the wrong target

The sexual revolution didn't kill Sally Amis as her brother, writer Martin, has claimed, says Julia Molony

By Julia Molony
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Martin Amis believes the sexual revolution was to blame for the death of his sister. Sally Amis died aged 46 from complications contributable to alcoholism. Hers had been a tragic adulthood. By her brother's description, she was "pathologically promiscuous".

Before she finally succumbed to an infection in hospital, she was living in a council flat in Kentish Town. Her life story was a sad portrait of intractable dissolution: a failed marriage, a string of abusive relationships, an unplanned pregnancy she claimed was the result of a one-night stand, a daughter given up for adoption.

In Martin Amis's new novel, The Pregnant Widow, the famous controversialist fictionalises his latest thesis, developed through the experience of the loss of his free love. The sixties and seventies as a toxic society, but of a deeply dysfunctional early family life.

Knee-jerk conservative revisionism? Perhaps. All revolutions claim some casualties. And in Amis's observations about the darker side of sexual freedom there may be some personal truths.

Anecdotally, I have heard several women who came of age at the dawn of the sexual revolution say that with hindsight, the new freedoms that era ushered in did more to serve the interests of the men. Many speak of their experiences in terms of unfulfillment, coercion, disrupted relationships and corrosive sexual jealousy instead of an equal, joyful embrace of pleasure. Looking back, it seems that for all those women who had a wonderful time at the time, there were also a good few in denial about how their claim to sexual empowerment often came at the expense of self-protection and genuine fulfilment.

But Sally's society was not to blame for her problems. Nor those, in fact, of any (to use Amis's word) "promiscuous" woman of the times. Certainly, the choppy waters of gender relations in the midst of a maelstrom of wholesale cultural shift are unforgiving to those who are not psychologically robust enough to successfully navigate them. At the height of the sexual revolution, social censure against women acting out their erotic desires had progressed, but the attitudes of the men the ladies were sleeping with had not necessarily caught up.

In Sally Amis's own account of how she conceived her child, by a heavy drinking Irishman, the emotional need and vulnerability behind the façade of sexual liberation rings out loud and clear. "I didn't want to be pregnant" she was living in a council flat in Kentish Town. Her life story was a sad portrait of intractable dissolution: a failed marriage, a string of abusive relationships, an unplanned pregnancy she claimed was the result of a one-night stand, a daughter given up for adoption.

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In Sally Amis’s own account of how she conceived her child, by a heavy drinking Irishman, the emotional need and vulnerability behind the façade of sexual liberation rings out loud and clear. “I didn’t want to be pregnant” said. “but sometimes you feel lonely and you want a cuddle and want to feel warm. But he left me the day after. Three weeks later, I found I was pregnant.”

This, and the other unfortunate relationship failures that characterised Sally’s life were not the fault of the permissive values of the time. As with drugs and alcohol, both women and men have always used sex as an agent of self-destruction. They didn’t need the sixties and seventies as an excuse. Sally’s freefall into emotional crisis was not the inheritance of a toxic society, but of a deeply dysfunctional early family life.

She didn’t exactly get the best start. The earliest emotional earthquake occurred when, as just a toddler, she discovered the dead body of her grandmother, and was then left alone with the body for a whole day.

Not long afterwards, her father, legendary author Kingsley Amis, as famous for his prodigious promiscuity as he was for his devotion to drink, walked out on the family to set up home with a new lover, Elisabeth Jane Howard. Kingsley Amis was no model parent. He was frank about his ambivalence towards the role of father from the outset. He was your average drinking Irishman, the emotional need and vulnerability behind the façade of sexual liberation rings out loud and clear. “I didn’t want to be pregnant” said. “but sometimes you feel lonely and you want a cuddle and want to feel warm. But he left me the day after. Three weeks later, I found I was pregnant.”

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The legacy of sexual liberation has not largely been social pressure and broken women. After the earthquake of the sexual revolution, we are left, certainly, with some destruction. But mostly its legacy has been choice. Of his sister, Amis said "it would have needed the Taliban to protect her". But under social conditions where women's chastity is strictly controlled, under the guise of their protection, women's interests, sexual or otherwise, are rarely prioritised. As the case of Sally Amis proves, choice always carries a risk of damage. Most women are able to handle the responsibility of that choice. They do not need protection from themselves.

- Julia Molony

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