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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

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By Julia Molony Sunday December 06 2009

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.

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 sister. The free love movement of the late sixties and early seventies did not liberate, but victimised women, he claims.



ELUSIVE: Kingsley Amis, right, with his wife Hilly and their children, Martin, left, Sally and Phillip.

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 dawning of the sexual revolution say that with hindsight, the new freedoms that era ushered in did more to serve the interests of the men.

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.

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.

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.

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, Elizabeth Jane Howard.

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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*

*Sunday Independent*

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