

'This remarkably tedious novel': Michiko Kakutani skewers Martin Amis

New York Times reviewer of The Pregnant Widow has a wince with words for English novelist

Ed Pilkington in New York
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Martin Amis, who is accused of self-indulgence in The Pregnant Widow by New York Times critic Michiko Kakutani. Photograph: Christopher Thomond for the Guardian

It is the curse of the English novelist. First, you have to sit back and take it on the chin as literary critics from the British papers hurl rotten tomatoes at you then, just as the dust has settled and you are starting to pick yourself off the floor, the American edition of your novel comes out and it is the turn of Michiko Kakutani of the [New York Times](#) to give her verdict.

The name alone is enough to induce terror in a writer. From the very first sentence of her notoriously direct criticism you know how things are going to go, which is why [Martin Amis](#) must have winced when he read the opening of [Kakutani's review](#) of his new book The Pregnant Widow today.

"This remarkably tedious new novel," was how she began. And it only got worse from there.

Kakutani accused Amis of deploying cheap tricks and exchanging his mastery of language for "a mannered, self-indulgent style". She reserved her worst opprobrium for the characters he has depicted, whom she described as "a bunch of spoiled, self-absorbed twits, who natter on endlessly about their desires and resentments and body parts".

The main hero of the work, Keith Nearing, was a "pretentious jerk, blathering on about the novels he's read". As a whole the characters were "shoddily drawn" and "off-the-rack generic" to the extent that one cared little about them.

Amis might draw comfort from the long and distinguished list of Kakutani's literary victims. Since she joined the New York Times in 1979, where she is now chief literary critic, the largely reclusive journalist has skewered the likes of Salman Rushdie. Jonathan Franzen and Nick

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...and the likes of Salman Rushdie, Jonathan Safran Foer and John Hornby. Nicholson Baker memorably likened her review of his book to "having my liver taken out without anaesthesia", and Norman Mailer dubbed her a "one-woman kamikaze" who disdained white male writers and couldn't be sacked by the Times because she was an "Asiatic feminist".

On the other hand, Amis will already be sensitised to her excoriating feedback. This is by no means the first time she has fried him slowly over a red-hot grill. In 2008 she [applied herself](#) to his collection of essays on the post 11 September world, *The Second Plane*, calling it "weak, risible and often objectionable", adding the advice that he should stick to writing fiction "as he's thoroughly discredited himself with these essays as any sort of political or social commentator".

To be fair, she [rather liked his 2007 work, *House of Meetings*](#), which she praised as powerful and deeply affecting. If only the same could be said of his 2003 effort, *Yellow Dog*, which [Kakutani said](#) read like a sendup of a Martin Amis novel. "It bears as much resemblance to Amis's best fiction as a bad karaoke singer does to Frank Sinatra, as a kitchen magnet of Munch's *Scream* does to the real painting."

In short, the best that can be said about Martin Amis's morning, as he sat at the breakfast table reading the New York Times review, is that he's been here before. It's doubtful though that repetition will lessen the pain of Kakutani's multiple stab wounds.

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