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Peer Review: Martin Amis, Funny Man

By John G. Rodwan, Jr.

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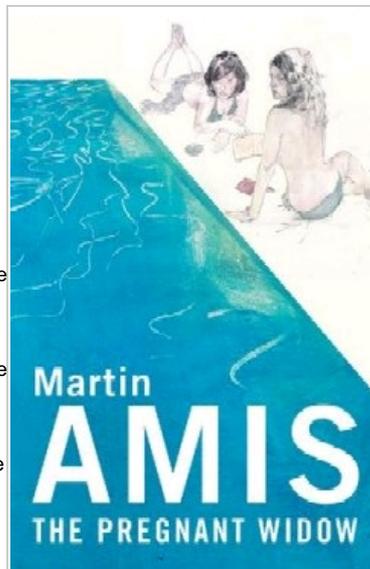
The Pregnant Widow

By Martin Amis

Knopf, 2010

This regular feature reviews the reviewers who review new books

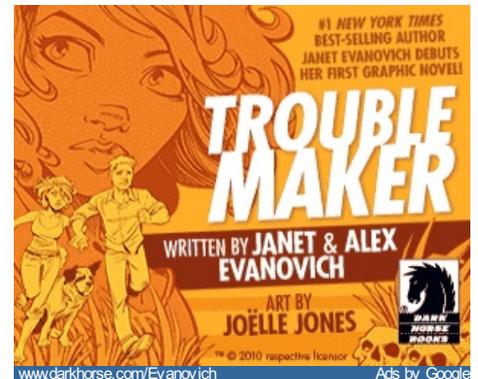
Make them laugh and critics will forgive much – but not everything. Ashaky structure or a plot problem can get a grudging pass if a novel is packed with enough laugh-out-loud moments. Even if professional fault-finders sense unevenness or a slackening of pace, they just might go along with a scribbler who shows them a good time. Only reviewers glumly determined to resist Martin Amis's attempts to entertain, or resolutely committed to frowning at his clowning, fail to find something worthwhile in *The Pregnant Widow*. But even those who relish its strongest elements can't completely overlook its flaws. These include a perceived disparity in quality between the first half or three-quarters of the book and its last portion, though critics disagree about which is better. For more than a few, they also include questions about whether the famously flashy stylist gets his facts right in his depiction of a particular time and place and whether he holds the proper attitudes.



Several scrutinizers insist the last half or quarter or some other fraction of *The Pregnant Widow* is superior to the rest. Katha Pollitt, writing for *Slate*, says the novel "picks up speed as it goes along." John Davidson, writing for *The Second Pass*, marvels at Amis's facility for "keeping the pages turning despite the absence of incident," because in the first half of the novel, "nothing happens." In a *Guardian* review, Christopher Taylor dismisses "the first half or so of the book" as "a weird, slow-moving sexual comedy set in a posh girl's holiday castle in Italy," but finds more relaxed, effective writing in the second half, where "the writer seems to embark on a different book." Similarly, Leo Robson in *The New Statesman* expresses gratitude for "the book's epilogue, a canter through the 40 years after the holiday." *The Washington Post's* Ron Charles complains of poor plotting and what feels to him like a shoddily stitched together patchwork of novelistic scraps, but allows that the last hundred pages zip right along, albeit haphazardly. Even Michiko Kakutani, who in *The New York Times* disparages Amis's work as "remarkably tedious" and "annoying," nonetheless concedes that the plot "picks up in the second half of the novel."

Yet other critics think Amis loses his way in the latter sections. "It's funny, clever and if it all falls apart in the end – well, so does life," Jonathan Jones writes in a *Guardian* blog post, where he also declares that *The Pregnant Widow* deserves the Booker prize. In *New York* magazine, Sam Anderson says that "at least for 75 percent of it" is "a nearly perfect comic novel."

Related to critics' effort to chart the speed of Amis's storytelling is their attempt to calculate the energy of his prose (though none follow his lead and use "Einsteins" as units of measure). Anderson says Amis "is so dependant on the energy of his prose that, when that energy weakens even slightly, his faults become unbearable." This, he believes, explains generally negative critical reaction to previous novels like *Night Train*, *Yellow Dog* and *House of Meetings*. But with *The Pregnant Widow*, he believes, the old Amis matches the energy levels attained by "work of young Amis." "There's a full-throated energy to this



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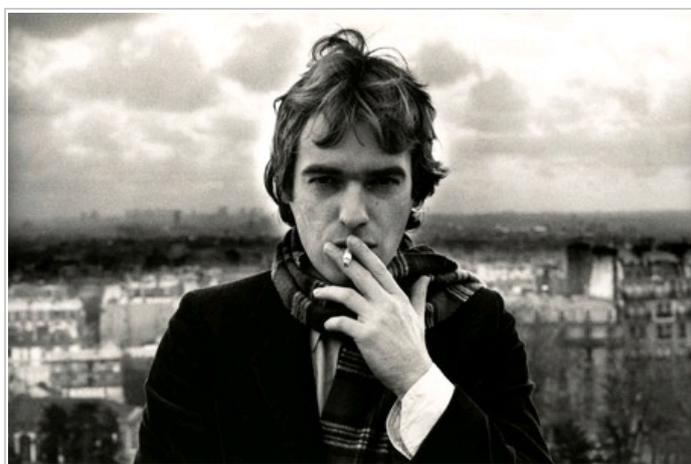
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book that makes perhaps more respectable contemporary novels look like a turgid waffle,” enthuses Jones. Tayler says it represents “a regathering of artistic energies.”

Peter Kemp’s analytic instruments produce contrary results. In *The Sunday Times* of London, he says that, compared with Amis’s earlier fiction, the “energy has dropped.” While Robson takes a more favorable view of the book than Kemp, he too thinks Amis’s voice in *The Pregnant Widow* “lacks the power it had in earlier works.” Kakutani takes what may be the least favorable view of the book of any reviewer and, comparing it to 1976’s *Dead Babies*, asserts that it “lacks its predecessor’s snap, crack and fizz”

These energy assessments make plain which critics believe *The Pregnant Widow* ranks among Amis’s best work – usually taken to mean novels from the 1970s and 1980s like *The Rachel Papers*, *Success*, *Money* – and which do not. One critic, however, just can’t make up his mind about the matter. In *The New York Times*, Graydon Carters calls writing “the only art in which the creator is publicly judged by people who do precisely the same thing, but as a rule less well,” and then offers evidence to support the assertion. The *Vanity Fair* editor reviews the ways reviewers review something other than Amis’s work when they focus on his reputation, his promotional activity, his friendships, his famous father, his houses and his teeth – and in the process does the very same thing. He disproves Davidson’s contention that in the United States, unlike Amis’s England, “it is the books that come under scrutiny, not the life.” Carter also recounts the repeated speculation over whether each successive Amis novel will mark the long hoped for “return to form,” but can’t decide for himself in this case. “This may not be the Roman candle of a novel some of his followers are looking for,” he writes. “Perhaps the next one will do the trick.” Two paragraphs later, however, he wonders if Amis doesn’t pull it off after all. “In a way, the book is his welcome attempt to return to the old Martin,” he cautiously says.



Amis in the 1970s

Something about Amis inspires qualified superlatives from detractors as well as fans; critics can’t quite allow themselves to call him our best contemporary writer, but they regularly designate him as *among* the greatest despite the occasional misfire. He’s “one of the true original voices to come along in the last 40 years,” Carter writes. “Whatever else one might think of him,” Davidson says, “inarguably Martin Amis is one of the most original prose stylists of his generation.” Even Kakutani, who might seem inclined to argue about that “inarguably,” pronounces Amis “one of the great stylists of the English novel” (though, in her assessment, he “oddly traded in his mastery of language” for a “self-indulgent style” in *The Pregnant Widow*.) “There’s not a smarter, cleverer writer alive than Martin Amis,” Charles declares soon before wondering why he has “become such an exasperating novelist.”

In *The Pregnant Widow*, Amis makes startlingly exact observations about small matters. Flies are “vague flecks of death,” and butterflies “party toys, doll-scale fans and hankies – hopeless optimists, twittering dreamers.” Keith noticing a small wound on his hand leads to this: “These little hurts were like little pets or potted plants you were abruptly given the care of, needing to be fed or walked or watered.” A helicopter is “like a furious asterisk.” Rooftop television antennae become “insect nests of aeriels.” Amis pays careful attention to the details and, as Robson puts it, possesses the “ability to hit upon just the right word or couple of words to catch an ironic or idiosyncratic perception.” Amis’s stylistic playfulness doesn’t amuse everyone. “If you never liked Amis, you’re not going to like this,” Jones warns. Amis says Keith “insomniated” next to his then-girlfriend Lily, and this provides a good test of how readers will respond to the novel. They’ll either wonder how we made due without that verb or think, “What’s wrong with saying *lied awake*?” Selecting option number two, Tayler grumpily singles out this neologism as characteristic of Amis “eccentric mannerisms” in what he finds the “stilted, fiddling and rarely funny” section of novel.

Amis tackles large topics, too, such as religion, sex and death – and the connections between them. “Religion’s always been my enemy,” Keith muses. “It teaches girls to be a drag about sex.” Or, more

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concisely, "religion was the antichrist of eros." Some of Amis's most devastatingly witty remarks concern the myriad disasters of aging. Like his critics, his characters worry about the inevitability of decline. "When I was young," Keith reflects, "old people looked like old people, slowly growing into their masks of bark and walnut. People aged differently now. They looked like young people who had been around far too long. Time moved past them but they dreamt they stayed the same." In his mid-fifties, Keith has an epiphany about aging: "you resigned yourself to a simple truth: each successive visit to the mirror will, by definition, confront you with something unprecedentedly awful." Even the reviewers disinclined to like *The Pregnant Widow* can admire such aperçus. Pollitt, for example, calls Keith's reports on his physical deterioration "poignant and all too true." For her part, Kakutani says the story can't support "the heavy garlands of pontification that Mr. Amis insists on draping over everything."

If critics agree on anything about *The Pregnant Widow* it's that the novel is "about" the sexual revolution, which Amis sums up this way when recounting Keith's on-again-off-again relationship with the intelligent but not especially beautiful Lily: "Lily and Keith broke up because Lily wanted to act like a boy. That was the heart of the matter, really: girls acting like boys was in the air, and Lily wanted to try it out." Even at the time, Keith can understand why "girls" would want no-strings-attached sex, but it leaves him unsure about how to behave. "*There will be sex before marriage. Women, also, have carnal appetites. So far, so good. But there were other clauses in the manifesto, some of them written in fine print or invisible ink.*" Of course, since Amis is mining humiliation for laughs, he has Keith behave rather badly, trying and failing to drug Lily and sneak off to an assignation with her stupendously beautiful and busty friend Scheherazade. Keith confronts "new rules – and new and sinister ways of getting everything wrong."

Predictably, many critics think Amis gets things horribly wrong in his depiction of the revolution's impact on women. Though, as Anderson puts it, Amis revels "in the richest comic material the human race has yet to discover . . . the whole titillating tragicomedy of carnal desire," the novelist sees a serious side to the shift in cultural attitudes toward sex that so baffled Keith in 1970. (Or, as Kemp phrases it, "raunchy goings-on are subordinate to lofty soundings-off.") The sexual revolution of *The Pregnant Widow* is not a bloodless one, and one of its victims is Keith's prodigiously promiscuous, ravenously alcoholic sister Violet. Amis leaves ambiguous whether the ability to "act like a boy" and separate sex from feeling was the direct cause of her destruction, which would seem to make her a symbol of the dangers of women acting contrary to their natures, or whether she perished for less abstract, if not clearly stated, reasons that would leave her as an individual rather than an emblem. Although Davidson says "the book seeks to explore how the era's changing sexual mores affected men as much as it affected women," *The Pregnant Widow* is really a portrait of one young man's confusion and how events of a single season shaped the rest of his life. Amis doesn't develop any of the many female characters – in addition to Lily, Scheherazade and Violet, there's Gloria Beautyman, who cannot conceal her awe-inspiring posterior rotundity but does have other secrets – to anywhere near the extent of Keith. Taylor takes a mild view of this imbalance. "There's . . . an effort to see things more squarely from the women's point of view – not an altogether successful one, maybe, but an effort nonetheless," he says. Charles makes a harsher judgment, calling Amis "an author who portrays his female characters as breasts, bottoms or dead."

For some critics, the failure here is not so much artistic as political, and in this respect, Pollitt is typical. "As far as I can make out," she says, "Amis seems to be saying that feminism and the sexual revolution, which he thinks, wrongly, are the same thing, made nice girls like Lily and Scheherazade act against their nature, which is to be girls, not boys, leaving the bad girls, like Gloria, too old to have babies when the music stops." She says *The Pregnant Widow* "just doesn't ring true to feminism as experienced by women in 1970," which amounts to condemning Amis for not writing a book he gives no indication of having set out to write. She recommends Marge Piercy's *Small Changes* "if you really want to know what the time felt like for women experiencing the confluence of the sexual revolution and feminism," but if providing such information had been Amis's aim, he wouldn't have written the book he did the way he did. More specifically, a novelist assuming the role of politically correct historian and social anthropologist chronicling the lives of women – women in general, that is – at a specific time almost certainly would not make a male character's conscience the narrator. (Several reviewers dismiss this as a cheap gimmick, but, as Robson accurately observes, Amis used a similar device in *Time's Arrow*. Unlike him, I think it works better in *The Pregnant Widow* than in the 1991 literary experiment that failed.) Complaints like Pollitt's can only result from a fundamentally different idea of what novels are for than the one underlying Amis's fiction.



Amis does not treat novels as arguments or characters as case studies. Perhaps the lines from *The Pregnant Widow* that best summarize the novel are these: "They were all of them very young, they were all of them neither one thing nor the other, they were all of them trying to work out who they were." Although these gropers (about whom Kakutani finds it "hard to care very much") may not spend enough time discussing "consciousness-raising, sisterhood, political lesbianism, left-wing politics, the war and the bomb, not shaving your legs or underarms, the women's health movement, [and] the myth of the vaginal orgasm" to satisfy Pollitt, they do frequently reflect on literature's function. Besides sexual scheming, reading and conversations about books account for the bulk of what activity occurs in *The Pregnant Widow*. Without being postmodernly twee, or tweely postmodern, Amis treats lives as though they were texts. He describes lived experience in terms of fiction, and the real owes its realness to its correspondence to literature. "Walking in his studio, and getting out of bed, and all the rest of it – this was no longer a Russian novel," he writes of Keith's evolving middle-aged despair. "It was an American novel. So, not much shorter, but with perceptible gains: a general increase in buoyancy, and far less stuff about everyone's grandfathers." The undergraduate Keith works his way through many an English classic over the course of that pivotal Italian summer. Lily notices degeneration in his thinking when he believes he's discovered the key to visualizing the bodies of Jane Austen's characters. He theorizes that when Austen says in *Northanger Abbey* that Catherine Morland's figure gains consequence that *consequence* is "code for big tits." As Lily observes: "First it was all moral patterning. And felt life. Then it was all drugs and fucks. Now it's all tits and arses." And young Keith's way of looking at books, and at life, does follow the pattern of reducing everything to the base and elemental: "*Pride and Prejudice*, Keith could have said, had but a single flaw: the absence, toward the close, of a forty-page sex scene."

Despite the shallowness of Keith's interpretations – or perhaps because of them – he goes on to become a respected literary critic. He'd wanted to become a poet (which his exact contemporary Pollitt did), but failed. "A hostile reading of *The Pregnant Widow* might be that it blames Keith's moral quasi-degradation and failure as a poet on too close or too early an association with naughty ladies," Taylor writes. "A more sympathetic one would be that the novel portrays the 70s as the ground zero of a narcissistic baby-boomer culture that coarsened both sexes, a culture in which Amis's writerly enterprises is implicated too." While critics do take these two positions, another way of looking at the novel remains available. As the part of Amis's protagonist that relays his story remarks, "a work of art has no designs on you. It may have hopes, but a work of art has no designs." Put another way, art is not trying to convince you to do anything; it does not serve a cause. Hitting a similar note, the *Guardian* arts blogger Jones anticipates Pollitt when he writes: "Maybe, for some people, Amis has nothing to say, but maybe those who look to art for a message or a reflection of their own worldview are wrong about what art is." Like his conscience, Keith knows he could never become a novelist. "To become a novelist, you had to be the silent presence at the gathering, *the one on whom nothing is lost*." Amis meets Henry James's definition of a writer alluded to here – and he's damn funny. "*The Pregnant Widow* has its pleasures – more pleasures than profundities, which may not be what Amis was aiming at," Pollitt writes. Then again, perhaps she and several of her peers misidentified his target and he hit the mark after all.

John G. Rodwan, Jr., is the author of *Fighters & Writers*, a collection of essays about boxing and books. He lives in Portland, Oregon.



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Martin Amis & His Critics « Rodwan Writes said:

[...] July 1, 2010 by John G. Rodwan, Jr. There's something special about Martin Amis. He provokes strong feelings. With *The Pregnant Widow*, he once again brought forth bucket loads of critical ink, which I sample over at *Open Letters Monthly*. [...]

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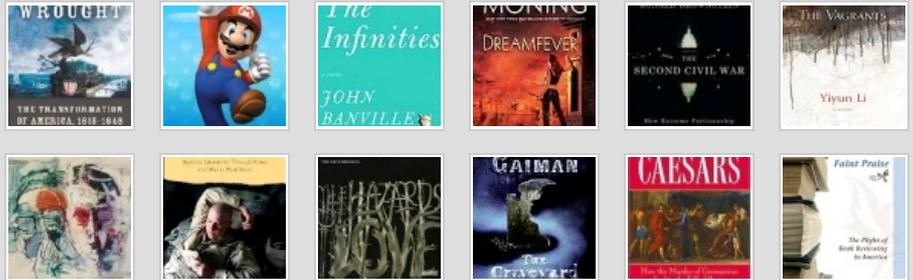
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