

# Times of Upheaval

By ROGER COHEN Published: April 11, 2011 New York Times

At the start of his brilliant, funny novel “The Pregnant Widow,” Martin Amis writes: “This is the way it goes. In your mid-forties you have your first crisis of mortality (*death will not ignore me*) ; and 10 years later you have your first crisis of age (*my body whispers that death is already intrigued by me*) . But something very interesting happens to you in between.”

That passage resonated, perhaps because I’ve hit the latter of the ages mentioned, and I recall my father, a doctor, saying that aging is not a smooth process but more like a staircase — you go along heedless for a while with nothing appearing to shift and then, oops, you find you’ve gone down another step and the exit is closer than the entrance.

Amis goes on to say what it is that happens “in between.” Life, he says, “thickens out again.” And the thickening is due to “an enormous and unsuspected presence within your being, like an undiscovered continent.” What is this presence? Amis answers: “This is the past.”

Yes, the past! How rich in consolation it becomes. It grows, eddies, recedes and blossoms by turn, making its claim on the imagination. Amis’s book unfolds in the early 1970s in Italy where, a decade after the arrival of the pill, a group of Brits gathered in a castle go through their iteration of the sexual revolution. The narrator’s pondering of that heady time — of the sex and drugs and rock ’n’ roll and what they wrought on one small circle — provides the elegiac counterpoint to the passions of a faraway Italian summer.

I was in Italy the summer of 1973 with a group of friends before taking the hippie trail to Afghanistan. We discovered Piero della Francesca and Ghirlandaio, but that was not all. Here was one of those moments — from the late ’60s into the early ’70s — when, like in this season of upheaval, time seems to accelerate.

As Lenin once observed, “Sometimes decades pass and nothing happens; and then sometimes weeks pass and decades happen.” The staircase principle works for peoples as well as individuals.

A postwar generation, in Europe and America, came of age. The confrontation could be brutal, as in Germany, where the fight was to overcome the rigidity of what some called “the Auschwitz generation.” Everywhere barriers broke. There was political turmoil — Paris ’68 and Prague and Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy and the Chicago convention — reflecting a social revolution in which the answers to everything seemed wondrously to be, “Yes.”

We were at the end of what the French called “Les Trente Glorieuses” and the Germans the “Wirtschaftswunder” — a 30-year economic miracle in any language — and possibility had no bounds. Perhaps Jim Morrison of The Doors put it best: “The old get old and the young get stronger...They got the guns but we got the numbers. Gonna win, yeah we’re takin’ over.”

I can think of several capitals right now, from Damascus to Tripoli, from Sana to Manama, where autocrats might ponder that line about guns and numbers. A baby-booming Arab generation is also coming of age. There is no turning back however turbulent the passage proves. The dyke has broken. Another generation must have its say.

After reading Amis I turned to the good Keith Richards autobiography, “Life,” in which the Rolling Stones guitarist brings that late-1960s pivot to vivid life. The energy of the moment — and the creative power of the Richards-Jagger combo at the time of “Let it Bleed” (1969) — are irresistible. As Richards writes of the fecund frenzy that could produce “Brown Sugar” in 45 minutes, “Take it away, Mick. Your job now. I’ve given you the riff, baby. You fill it in.” There was not much thought — “It was a groove.”

Richards and Jagger turn 70 in a couple of years; Bob Dylan will be 70 next month. Yes, the past grows. To be young in that moment, rather than a generation earlier, was to have the blessing of late birth.

What worries me is the loss of mystery since that time: The world was uncharted, the unknown was everywhere with its liberating invitation. What reassures me is that progress, however uneven, has been immense. People are freer and live longer. As Dylan put it, “You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.”

The leadership of China, where Dylan has just been touring, knows that. O.K., Dylan was compliant on the surface in Beijing. But he’s as subversive as the epoch in which he came of age. You can’t direct genius like trade sanctions. He said it long ago: “To live outside the law you must be honest.”

Amis’s conclusion is reassuring. “I’m as old as NATO. And it all works out,” he writes, and continues: “Your eyes get hotter — but that’s all right because your hands get colder (and you can soothe them with your frozen fingertips.)” Yes, “It all works out in the end.”

It does — even in times when the world is a “pregnant widow,” one order gone and another not yet born.

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