

LATELINE.

Tony Jones speaks to Martin Amis

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An author from the United Kingdom who has written an essay on Islamic extremism and its links to Western sexual morals speaks to Tony Jones.

Transcript

TONY JONES: Well, now to tonight's interview with the British author Martin Amis. His latest novel, *The House Of Meetings*, was set in Russia during the time of the gulags but the twin subjects of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism have been occupying his mind a fair bit recently. He's written a short story called *The Last Days of Mohammad Atta*, which attempts to get inside the mind of the operational leader of the September 11 attacks.

In a recent essay, penned for *The Observer*, before the anniversary of those attacks, he traces the roots of Islamic extremism and critiques the West's hesitant response to it. The essay was called *The Age of Horrorism*, and the themes it unravels have a particular relevance in Australia today because of the fierce debate over the Ramadan sermon by the mufti of Australia, a diatribe in which the sheikh describes women as Satan's soldiers, wielding the weapons of seduction, and suggests those who don't wear the veil and stay at home behind closed doors are uncovered meat and may be complicit in their own rapes.

Martin Amis joins us now in our London studio. Thank you for being there.

MARTIN AMIS: Pleasure.

TONY JONES: Now, you clearly don't think the word "terrorism" adequately describes the Islamist assault on the West. You've coined your own word, "horrorism", can you tell us why?

MARTIN AMIS: Yeah. I mean, it's a nice distinction, I think. When you are being – you're on your sleigh going through Siberia and you hear a wolf howl, that is fear or concern. When the wolf is pounding after your vehicle, then that's terror, and horror is when the wolf is actually there. I think Islamism has turned up the dial of terror, so it becomes horrific. That is there. That is their single achievement so far.

TONY JONES: Your essay takes us back to the very roots of Islamism after the World War I, a time you call "the great leap backwards". How and why did that happen?

MARTIN AMIS: I think World War II - it begins with Sayyid Qutb, this amazingly repressed and lustful thinker, so-called, who came to America in 1948, '49 and didn't like it. I've been thinking recently that perhaps - I think Islamism is the death agony of imperial Islam, the final twitch in that exploration, but I also think it was very much connected with the formation of the state of Israel and the defeat of six Arab armies simultaneously. I think this was the final straw to Islam's dreams of regaining its primary place on the planet, which it enjoyed for a good two or three hundred or years. It's now powerless and this is a way - an attempt to kind of flip the whole thing and regain God's favour, because the feeling behind all of this is that the covenant with God has been broken, that - Islam used to be sustained by the argument from manifest success and what has replaced that in the last couple of hundred years is the argument of manifest failure. God has smiled on the infidels, and this is the apocalyptic hurt of the Islamists.

TONY JONES: Sayyid Qutb you are talking about there. You say he effectively wrote the Mein Kampf of Islamism. Within it there are interesting psychological traits which emerge and you exploit them in your essay to describe a man who

appears to be both obsessed with and repulsed by Western sexual mores. How significant do you think those issues were for him and how do those themes go into Islamism today?

MARTIN AMIS: I think it lies very close to the heart of it. The patriarchal superiority of the male is the last bastion of Islam and it's that which horrifies them about modernity. That is the key thing. You may be interested to know that in training camps in Afghanistan you'll spend the morning learning about suicide bombing and the afternoon will be spent with acids and asphyxias and so on. But the rest of the day is propaganda about how women are, as your mufti pointed out, the troops of the devil. Instilling hatred of women is the other twin pillar of the Islamist project.

TONY JONES: You seem to be suggesting in the case of Sayyid Qutb, that his mind, in effect, was poisoned by a few encounters with American women.

MARTIN AMIS: Well, yeah. I mean, it's hilarious. It reads like *Pale Fire*, an Nabokov novel where the narrator's self-knowledge is less than zero. It's almost as if self-examination of any kind is unmanly, unvirtuous, unrighteous. There he is clearly boiling for lust for these wanton American women, as he sees them. He is always talking about their bursting hips and their bulging breasts and their thirsty lips and when he does write about it, he goes into a kind of frenzy of hellfire, although he died a virgin.

It is embarrassing to say so, but it does seem to be male insecurity on steroids.

TONY JONES: Flowing from all of this, you outline his chief tenets, that America is controlled by Jews, that Americans themselves are infidels and animals unworthy of life. I mean, how much of that goes back, do you think, to that psychological portrait you've just painted of him in?

MARTIN AMIS: It's a sort of displacement. The whole hatred of America not only is irrational, but also very abstract. I don't know about Australia, but in England people are still floundering around and talking respectfully about the reasons for Islamist rage and so on, as if it's just business as usual and ticking off a few historical grievances and us in Iraq, us in Afghanistan. What hasn't been grasped is this isn't a rationalist project. We keep attributing reason to them, but they don't boast of it themselves. "Throw reason to the dogs" was one of the Taliban's great slogans.

We think they are reacting to things and they are not. The energy is coming from an ideology that's been grafted onto a religion and it's an ideology, like all of the dangerous ones, that allows you to be at once very violent and very righteous.

TONY JONES: Of course, some of the ideology and the core bits of it are distorted, but still drawn from the Koran. You make the point yourself, the very last line of the Koran is a line about the seductive power of Satan.

MARTIN AMIS: Yes, that's what is meant by Khomeini in Iran, his emphasis on the great Satan. It's the great tempter. Now, we find ourselves in the West in the position of finding out that our whole society, everything you see around you, all of those buildings, all of those institutions, all of that culture is there for the sole purpose of tantalising good Muslims, and that's their main beef.

TONY JONES: Your short story about Mohammad Atta, the operational chief of the September 11 attacks, draws things out into a fictional account of what it is like inside his head in the final day, in the final hours in fact before the attack. How hard was it to actually do that and how close do you think you got and what sources were you relying on, apart from your own imagination?

MARTIN AMIS: I read everything I could find about Mohammad Atta, but I took an enormous liberty in that I made him an apostate, rather than a religious maniac, which is probably what he was - almost certainly what he was. I did that for purely utilitarian reasons, in that it would have bored me blind to look into the mind of someone who was fanatically religious. I make him a cynic who is there just for the killing, and I wanted to emphasise that, that's it's a secret no longer well-kept, that killing people is tremendously empowering and exciting.

We must never lose site of the fact that this is like other movements that we're familiar with, Nazism and Bolshevism. This is an ideology that has freed itself from reason, and you get a huge push when you do that because suddenly everything is possible, and it has freed itself from reason and it is feeding on death.

Now, this is what people find so difficult. It is effortful to come to an understanding of that. Much, much nicer to wallow in rationalist naivete and say that it is our fault. In England, there were middle class whites walking around during August with signs saying "We are all Hezbollah now." Well enjoy it, enjoy being Hezbollah while you can, because its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, famously said of the West, "We don't want anything from you, we just want to eliminate you."

TONY JONES: Going back to Atta just for a moment, you may have made him an apostate but in the last moments when he's on the plane he builds for himself a mind picture which he is going to use to deal with the fact they are about to murder the airline hostess, and he dreams of or thinks of a situation in the past which once again points out this obsession you believe these terrorists have with women.

MARTIN AMIS: Yeah. He recalls a time when - this actually happened to a friend of mine. He was on the plane where a lot of Muslims filed into the aisle and started praying, and the pilot was saying he'd have to return the plane to Bahrain unless they sat down, and suddenly this huge beauty appeared with, as my friend said, "Make-up, suit, big tits, and just shrieked at them, 'Vamoose, vamoose ariba conju. On your feet you,'" and they did. Mohammad Atta was present on that plane, in my story, and he feels a murderous urge there because he is seeing a woman empowered.

TONY JONES: There is a broader argument you are making here about the need for reformation within Islam. You suggest the necessary upheaval is a revolution, the liberation of women. Could it happen?

MARTIN AMIS: Yeah. I think that's utopian for now. I mean, what is going to happen next is - it's been argued that the most momentous consequence of the Iraq war will be the ignition of the civil war between the Sunni and the Shiah, which has been brewing for a millennium. Now, Pakistan's bomb is the Sunni bomb. If Iran gets the boom, that will be the Shiah bomb, and we've got to imagine something like a 30 year war, nuclear 30-year war, or 100-year war to get this - to get the sectarian stuff out of the way. Then we've got to twiddle our up thumbs while they have a reformation and then in due course an enlightenment and then perhaps the Middle East will be ready for democracy and sexual equality.

TONY JONES: That war between Sunni and Shiah, you think, is a direct result, or may well be a direct result, of the war in Iraq?

MARTIN AMIS: No. No, no. I mean, it's been brewing for a thousand years. The ignition of it may be entirely attributable to Iraq, but the enmity is age-old.

TONY JONES: I took your advice, Martin Amis, in the essay. I Googled the words "al-Sistani" and "sex" and I found there were 170,000 entries. Now, for anyone who is uncertain of who we are talking about, we should state that Ayatollah al-Sistani is the most powerful Shiah Muslim cleric in Iraq. The most recent entries...

MARTIN AMIS: He's also - he's almost the most...

TONY JONES: Let me finish. The most recent entries talk about an online Fatwa, in which he calls for the killings of lesbians or gay men in the worst, most severe way possible. The trouble is, of course, is that al-Sistani is the moderate ayatollah, whom the west is banking on.

MARTIN AMIS: He's far and away the most moderate voice in Iraq. Actually, some of his advice about sex I found very helpful, quite moderate really, but he again is - you've got to think of him as on the left and the most liberal of these voices and, as you've read, he is - he has murderous hostility towards women.

TONY JONES: Now, reflecting, as you have very recently, not only in your essay, but in other articles, on everything that's happened since September 11, you outline the opposing sides, murderous fanaticism on the part of the terrorists,

and in Washington, a vertiginous power rush that's finally evolved into self-hypnosis. Tell us what you mean by that?

MARTIN AMIS: Well, I think - I think the really tragic moment with Iraq was not the weapons of mass destruction business, because every intelligence agency on earth thought Iraq had these weapons. Even the Iraqi intelligence service thought they had them. In fact, Saddam was lying about it because he was terrified that Iraq or Syria would take advantage of his not having them. So that's a side issue, I think. It's very important and all that, but when - we lost it I think when it was just visible in every dash and comma, Bush's body language, that he had submitted to a huge power surge.

American hegemony was something of a distraction before September 11 and then suddenly it became a war plan cracked out on the President's desk and he was looking at capabilities, not just possibilities. We all know what power does. It screws us up even when we have the tiniest bit of it - and suddenly this tax-cutting, destroying, dry drunk from west Texas was the most powerful man in human history. There's no culture in America for trying to put checks on the power rush, as there is in England, in old Europe, as Rumsfeld insultingly called it, and Blair would be very aware of this danger, but Bush wasn't, and he looked like a drunk in a bar. He looked like he'd just done a snowball of cocaine. He recruited all around him with an ideological filter so that everyone on the team was on the team and no dissenting voices were allowed - or was a classic marsh of folly, and there wasn't a plan for the peace. There was no plan.

TONY JONES: Martin Amis, we're nearly out of time, but I can't leave without mentioning one of the strangest things about your essay on horrorism, and that is that you - in it you describe a work that you've actually abandoned, a satirical novel that draws on many of the themes we have been talking about. It's a rare thing for a writer to talk in detail about a work they've abandoned. In this case I believe it's because satire simply can't do justice to the actual story.

MARTIN AMIS: It's not quite that. It's more this is becoming - we've started this war very badly and this is becoming more and more serious, and when I realised that there were young Englishmen living in my country who wanted to convert to Islam for the mere purpose of suicide mass murder, I thought this thing, Islamism, which is trying to poison the world, is actually mutating like bird flu, and I suddenly thought, how funny will my novella be after a dirty bomb in London, say, or some other big disaster? Really, I just felt I was giving such an enormous hostage to fortune. I'll write that story when the war is over - if it ever is.

TONY JONES: You may never live that long, Martin Amis. I'm afraid we haven't got time to spend that long talking to you. We have to leave it there with our talk tonight. We thank you very much for taking the time to come in and talk to us.

MARTIN AMIS: Pleasure.

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