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Guardian book club with John Mullan



Time's Arrow by Martin Amis

Week two: narrative voice



John Mullan
The Guardian, Saturday 16 January 2010
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The novelist joins John Mullan to talk about his novel from 1991, *Time's Arrow*

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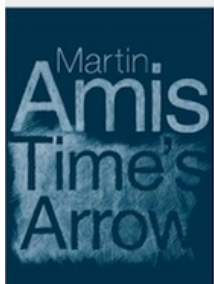
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Martin Amis. Photograph: Juan Martin Misis/EPA

Tod T Friendly, doctor and sometime philanderer, is a man whose inner self seems hidden from his passing conquests. "I don't feel I really know you," (or something similar) they say. His longtime girlfriend has an old word for what seems absent. "Perhaps Irene puts it best – she certainly puts it most often – when she tells Tod that he has no soul." Amis's protagonist, revealed in the novel's reverse chronology to have been a Nazi doctor called Odilo Unverdorben in his previous life, has no known inner life. We do not get told his thoughts. But he does have a soul. For the novel is narrated, in the first person, by some observer of his reversed career who is attached to him, who shares his inverted fate, who cares about what he does.

Time's Arrow
by Martin Amis



The narrator calls himself "an ardent ghost". Tod is "the body I live and move in". When he comes back from the effects of a heart attack in his garden, it is with inner sensation – "an audible pop in the ears" – and a kind of self-spectatorship: "a rich consciousness of solitude, and a feeling of love and admiration for this big stolid body I was in". Sometimes the narrative voice is proprietorial, using a royal "we" to speak of Tod. Sometimes narrator is distant from character. "Beneath, the body does what it does, in mechanical exertions of

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will and sinew, while the soul waits."

The narrator begins in perplexity at a spectacle run the wrong way, in which he is inescapably playing a part. "Wait a minute. Why am I walking backwards into the house?" The reader might understand (there is a cover blurb, after all, to tell us what is happening) but the sequence of events is at first a puzzle to whoever is telling the story. "What are its rules? Why are the birds singing so strangely? Where am I

heading?" Or rather, not telling the story so much as watching it. Amis's narrator just watches and listens – mostly the former; only occasionally, in the fragment of a reversed dialogue with a lover or a helper on the postwar escape route for Nazis, do we hear Tod/Odilo speak.

What he sees unsettles him. Tod likes to go to church, perhaps, the narrator guesses, because he needs "the forgiving look you get from everybody on the way in". But at collection time you see what he is after. "Christ, he's so shameless. He always takes a really big bill from the bowl." He gets better at divining the logic of the novel's reversed events, but many things continue to puzzle him. As we rush back in time towards the war, the narrator is puzzled to find Odilo hiding in haylofts and cowsheds in the mountains between Austria and Italy. "Personally I longed for human society and for exercise (a good long tramp for example), but no doubt Odilo had his reasons". Yet the narrator has intimations of horror, a kind of subconscious that he cannot plumb. "How I hate doctors. Any doctors," he says in the first paragraph. The image of a man in a white coat with black boots haunts his dreams. An antipathy to doctors seems one of his "preselected feelings", and the narrator takes a parenthesis – "(now where did *that* come from)" – to acknowledge that there is something behind this.

"How many times have I asked myself: when is the world going to start making sense?" By the most savage irony, it is only when we go back to Odilo's time as camp doctor at Auschwitz that it does. Only the utterly perverse becomes comprehensible. Odilo is hard at work restoring Jews to life and reuniting them with their loved ones. The narrator feels at one with his character. "For a while it worked (there was redemption); and while it worked he and I were one, on the banks of the Vistula." But in the end the two must part, for there is no comprehending this character.

Trying to understand the backwards film spurs the narrator to flares of inventive phrasing, but his voice has something else, too: a crackle of cliché. The narrator is cheerily ready with "no bowl of cherries . . . swings and roundabouts . . . head over heels . . . flattering to deceive . . . like a house on fire". They are all there. Why such fondness for the worn and familiar form of words? Because, while catching the strangeness of what he observes, the narrator must try to find it comprehensible.

Watching Josef Mengele restore women to health and youth in Hut 1 of Auschwitz he reaches for a cliché made appalling by the novel's chronological trick: "Women went out of that lab looking twenty years younger." But still, in this work of life-restoration, there is much to be endured. "You know it isn't all sweetness and light here, not by any manner of means." You can almost imagine the ordinary grumbles of the everyday murderers. As he pursues his "war on death", extracting phenol and prussic acid from his Jewish patients, he gets no thanks. "Oh, I'm not complaining. But it would have been nice." Out on the ramp, where, with the "the madhouse tannoy squawking *links* and *rechts*", the selections are reversed as reunions, the narrative voice commiserates with the protagonist. "I thought: It's all right for some." For some.

John Mullan is professor of English at University College London. Join him and [Martin Amis](#) for a discussion on Monday 25 January at 7pm, Hall One, Kings Place, 90 York Way, London N1 9AG. Tickets are £9.50 online (www.kingsplace.co.uk) or £11.50 from the box office: 020 7520 1490.

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