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Guardian book club with John Mullan



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[Martin Amis at the Guardian book club](#)

The novelist joins John Mullan to talk about his novel from 1991, *Time's Arrow*

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Martin Amis on writing *Time's Arrow*

Week three: The author explains what led him to write this novel, and why it wasn't 'a decision'

Martin Amis

The Guardian, Saturday 23 January 2010

[Article history](#)



Practising 'the spooky art' ... Martin Amis. Photograph: Guardian

"Why did you decide to write a novel about the Holocaust?" This challenge, which I still sometimes hear, can only be answered as follows: "But I never did." Similarly, I never decided to write a novel about teenage sexuality, or Thatcher's England, or millennial London, or, indeed, about the Gulag (which I nonetheless completed in 2006). With its hopelessly inapposite verb, and presumptuous preposition, the question reveals an understandable naivety about the way that fictions are made. For the novel, as Norman Mailer put it, is "the spooky art".

Deciding to write a novel about something – as opposed to finding you are writing a novel around something – sounds to me like a good evocation of writer's block. No matter what its length (vignette, novella, epic), a work of fiction begins with an inkling: a notion that is also a physical sensation. It is hard to improve on Nabokov, who variously described it as a "shiver" and a "throb". The throb can come from anywhere, a newspaper report (very common), the remnants of a dream, a half-remembered quote. The crucial, the enabling fermentation lies in this: the shiver must connect to something already present in the subconscious.

Time's Arrow depended on a coincidence, or a confluence. In the mid-1980s I started spending the summers in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, where I made friends with the distinguished "psychohistorian" Robert Jay Lifton. Bob was and is the author of a succession of books on the

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Lifton. Bob was and is the author of a succession of books on the political horrors of the 20th century: books on thought reform in China, on Hiroshima, on Vietnam. And in 1987 he gave me a copy of his latest (and perhaps most celebrated) work, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*.

Here, Lifton's historiographical mission is to establish nazism as an essentially biomedical ideology. It is there in *Mein Kampf*: "Anyone who wants to cure this era, which is inwardly sick and rotten, must first of all summon up the courage to make clear the causes of this disease." The Jew was the agent of "racial pollution" and "racial tuberculosis": the "eternal bloodsucker", "germ-carrier", the "maggot in a rotting corpse". Accordingly, the doctor must become a "biological soldier"; the healer must become a killer. In the camps, all the non-random murders were supervised by doctors (and so were the crematoria). As one of their number put it: "Out of respect for human life, I would remove a gangrenous appendix from a diseased body. The Jew is the gangrenous appendix in the body of mankind."

That year, too, I already had it in my head that I might attempt a short story about a life lived backwards in time. This tenuous proposition appealed to me as a poetic possibility – but it seemed fatally frictionless. I could find no application for a life so lived. Which life? As I began *The Nazi Doctors*, I found myself thinking, most disconcertingly, *this* life. The life of a Nazi doctor. "Born" in New England, as an old man; "dying" in Austria, in the 1920s, as a baby boy . . .

After more than a year of further reading, and of daily struggles with a sense of profanity and panic (by what entitlement could I address this sepulchral subject, and from such an apparently "playful" vantage?), I began to write. And at once I made an emboldening discovery: the arrow of time turns out to be the arrow of reason or logic, expectably enough; but it is also the arrow of morality. Set the cinema of life in reverse motion, and (for example) Hiroshima is created in a single moment; violence is benign; killing becomes healing, healing killing; the hospital is a torture chamber, the death camp a fount of life. Reverse the arrow of time, and the Nazi project becomes what Hitler said it was: the means to make Germany whole. Which still strikes me as some kind of measure of this terminal and diametrical atrocity: it asked for the arrow of time to point the other way.

We often ask ourselves who was worse: the little moustache or the big moustache, Hitler or Stalin? Well, 15 years later I wrote a novel about the Russian holocaust, too (*House of Meetings*); and the latter, incidentally, was the more difficult to write, because it focused on the victims and not the perpetrators. But that is by the way. In our hierarchy of evil, we instinctively promote Hitler. And we are right.

The Gulag – and this is not widely grasped – was first and foremost a system of state slavery. The goal, never achieved, was to make money. Still, this is a motive we can recognise. The German idea, with its "dreams of omnipotence and sadism" (Lifton), was utterly inhuman, or "counter-human", in Primo Levi's judgment, like a counter-clock world. The Nazis were on the intellectual level of the supermarket tabloid. It should not surprise us to learn that there was a government department, in Berlin, set up to prove that the Aryans were not descended from the apes; no, they came from the lost continent of Atlantis, in the heavens, where they were preserved in ice from the beginning of time.

Join John Mullan and Martin Amis for a discussion about *Time's Arrow* 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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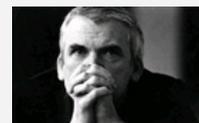
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dobester
23 January 2010 9:01AM

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Martin Amis writes "Reverse the arrow of time, and the Nazi project becomes what Hitler said it was: the means to make Germany whole." That is one of the most intensely stupid things and morally cretinous things he has ever said. You can't make anything "whole" by exclusion, robbery and murder, you buffoon.



walkingthedog
23 January 2010 11:09AM

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'The German idea, with its "dreams of omnipotence and sadism" (Lifton), was utterly inhuman, or "counter-human", in Primo Levi's judgment'

describing acts performed by humans as inhuman or counter-human takes us away from understanding. everything done by humans is human.

<http://nickmanho.blogspot.com/>



beginner
23 January 2010 11:26AM

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dobester - i think if you read the book you would understand quite what Martin means by "reverse the arrow of time"

imagine a film reel played in reverse: exclusion becomes inclusion, murder becomes healing, robbery becomes giving - (crucially) tearing-apart becomes making-whole.

this is what Martin means and - rather than being a 'buffoon' - he's quite nicely showing us how the 'Nazi project' was the complete negation, antithesis, (in fact) reversal of a human response.



dobester
23 January 2010 1:00PM

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Hello beginner,

I read the book when it first came out and thoroughly enjoyed it.. As for imagining a film running backwards, Kurt Vonnegut Jr described that in Slaughterhouse 5, an inspiration Martin Amis has acknowledged. You can listen to Vonnegut reading the relevant passage in a little over two minutes here:

<http://www.archive.org/details/WarInReversebillyPilgrimAndTheLateMovie>

For me, Amis is a buffoon because he seems to believe that his clever short novel will help readers to better understand the moral, cultural and intellectual cretinism of the Nazis and the horrors they created. There are thousands of non-fiction books and novels that explain the Nazis' callous greed and cruelty without recourse to artifice and tricksiness. So perhaps buffoon isn't quite the right term. Condescending, smug, conceited buffoon is an alternative to consider.



Bassim
23 January 2010 1:14PM

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There is no doubt that the UK is one of the countries in which mediocre writers like Mr. Amis can achieve a celebrity status and get the attention which they do not deserve.

And to Professor Mullan I would like to say that maybe he should read more novels from other countries and not only these conceited authors who has nothing new to say.

Reading Martin Amis's novels is like drinking stale tea.

If you think Mr Amis is one of the greatest British novelists there must be really something wrong with your mind.



jpsmith
23 January 2010 2:19PM

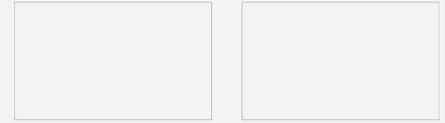
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Years ago I was commissioned to review *Time's Arrow* for a literary magazine in the States that, alas, went under before my piece was published. For what it's worth it can be found here: <http://www.redroom.com/blog/jp-smith/once-upon-a-review>



Laon
24 January 2010 8:58AM

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Amis is one of the most important novelists around today, as well as one of the most readable. I tend to suspect that a lot of the attacks he cops have nothing to do with his books, but more with various stands he's associated with, sometimes accurately, sometimes not. Often I agree with him, and other times I think he's being ridiculous. None of that has anything to do with the merit of his books, which is considerable.

But I always had a problem with "Time's Arrow". There's a long sequence in Kurt Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse Five", in which time runs backwards and the bombs fly out of Dresden, and buildings and people knit themselves back into wholeness, and the bombs are gathered up in aeroplanes, who fly them backwards to bases where they are disassembled, and eventually the bomb materials return as minerals to the earth.

It's quite a powerful piece of writing. It's a few pages long. My problem is this: Isn't "Time's Arrow" essentially Vonnegut's idea, reworked at much greater length?

I guess that Martin Amis doesn't read Guardian comments, for fairly sound reasons. But I really would like someone to ask him about the resemblance to "Slaughterhouse Five".

This isn't a plagiarism accusation; no-one owns "time running backwards", not even the guys who make the first Christopher Reeves "Superman" movie. I'm just curious if Amis saw it as a homage to Vonnegut, or a corrective, or if he's never read "Slaughterhouse Five". Or what. I wish someone would ask, is all.



Laon
24 January 2010 9:02AM

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Oops. Dobester's comment mentioning the Vonnegut wasn't there when I started typing my earlier post. Glad Amis has acknowledged the Vonnegut connection.

I'm afraid calling Amis a buffoon strikes me as an odd thing to say. "Time's Arrow" was powerful, and seemed genuinely felt. ("Genuinely felt" isn't in itself a literary merit, I don't think, but it's relevant to whether someone's being a buffoon.)



rotherfieldpeppard
26 January 2010 9:13AM

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He has read and acknowledges the influence of Vonnegut. Amis is certainly many things, some good, some bad -but having heard him talk yesterday he is certainly no buffoon....



klondiker
26 January 2010 11:44AM

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I had the pleasure of hearing him talk yesterday, and he was wonderful! I don't know why it's become so fashionable to dislike him. The man constantly has interesting things to say, and constantly finds interesting ways in which to say them.

One question, however, that I was too timid to ask last night:

Why must the arrow of reason be turned backwards for the Nazi regime to make sense? Some people have argued that the horrors of the Holocaust were, in fact, the result of Enlightenment reason taken to its furthest extreme. This would imply that the arrow of reason was actually moving in the "right" direction when the Holocaust took place. In other words, was the Holocaust a result of inverting reason, or was it a result of blindly following reason?



duskybeauty
26 January 2010 2:35PM

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This is an open letter to Professor Mullan of Guardian Book Club.

Dear Professor Mullan,

I attended Guardian Book Club last night with Martin Amis and I was surprised and disturbed to see how little actual debate there actually turned out to be.

I have attended a number of Guardian Book Clubs before, have enjoyed them and there was always a lively discussion. This time however, very little counter-argument was offered to Martin Amis' assertions. It is as if everyone including yourself is in the grip of total celeb worship. Worryingly, it is as if it is muffling free speech.

He made several assertions about the power hunger of doctors, the way black Americans talk and about the desirability of euthanasia. So far, so predictable: he

needs controversy to sell his books.

However, when I asked him about the Islamic world's response to "Time's Arrow" his answer was first that he didn't really know and secondly that it didn't matter because the Quran is intrinsically anti-semitic, to which I replied that was untrue and I was about to come up with examples to back up my own assertion. At this point the discussion was stopped. I feel this was a cop-out on your part as chair to the debate. Also, his reply simply was not good enough or informed enough for a cultural discussion at this level. It may have been good enough for a Sun or Sport roadshow, but not for a Guardian "Words on Monday" at Kings Place. What else do we pay £9.50-£11.50 for?

I am MA qualified in history from the Institute of Historical Research and LSE London, having specialised in both European and Islamic social history, and last night I had evidence to back up what I had said, which if I had been allowed to articulate them, would have shown his assertions about the Quran to be untrue. As it turned out, it turned into a "yes it is, no it isn't" sort of exchange, which may have been entertainment value but was not in the spirit of informed discussion. Neither, unless I am mistaken, is it in the spirit of the Guardian paper itself.

This wasn't the only case during the evening of true debate being effectively scuppered. I was similarly astonished to find that he was allowed to face an all-ages audience and say what he did about ageing and no debate was encouraged following these assertions either. Neither did anyone challenge him. This actually made me feel rather queasy and uneasy as everyone would naturally have had some kind of take on euthanasia. Authors such as Elizabeth Jane Howard, is in her 80s is still publishing novels, and he would be aware of this. He really needed challenging on what he was saying last night, yet everyone was like rabbits frozen in headlights.

I would like to ask you one question: why has the atmosphere at Guardian Bookclub become so submissive? You have showed fine interviewing skills and have challenged famous authors before during Bookclub evenings. Why not Martin Amis?

I was disappointed with the standard of Guardian Bookclub last night. If the assertions of the establishment are not permitted to be challenged in an informed way, no change will happen.

I am also a writer, having written for broadcast on BBC Radio 4.

Yours sincerely,
Jasmine Sharif.



John Mullan
28 January 2010 2:04PM



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Dear Jasmine Sharif,

I'm sorry that you were disappointed that the issues you raised at the Guardian Book Club were not fully debated.

There were two main reasons why I did not think it a good idea to pursue your fundamental difference of opinion with Martin Amis about the Quran.

The first was simply that we were at the end of a long evening's discussion, and I was looking to bring the event to a close.

The second is that I was trying to marshal a discussion of a novel: Time's Arrow. If we had been staging one of the moral/political debates in which Martin Amis often participates, my role would have been to be ready with arguments and counter-examples. But I was trying to talk about a novel, and how it worked. Admittedly, the author is himself drawn to controversialism, but I was there to keep reminding us that we should talk about the book.

I think that Martin Amis was challenged strongly and eloquently enough from the audience on the euthanasia issue. The challenge was the more lucid because it seemed to draw on the logic of the very novel that we were discussing.

I don't know if this cuts any ice with you. In my column for next Saturday's paper on readers' responses I cite your own clash with the author and discuss how literary criticism seemed often to give way to political/moral dispute. I hope you will think I have done so in a fair-minded and non-submissive manner

John Mullan



iLuvMaxGogarty
1 February 2010 2:06PM

This comment has been removed by a moderator. Replies may also be deleted.



Bassim
1 February 2010 8:40PM

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Dear Mr. Sharif

Thank you for your wise words. Unfortunately, many of so called intellectuals in the West do not see Muslims as equal human beings, although they wear the masques of humanists and liberals.

Martin Amis has said such stupidities about Islam that one wonders if the man was drunk or under influence of some kind of drugs. Today for example in his interview

on BBC radio 4 he says that female mutilation is part of Islam!

There are also some other "great British authors" who often get a chance to show their own narrow mindedness and foolishness and they are praised by critics as genius. They like to attack Islam because they are envious that the Quran is one of the greatest books that ever existed on earth and they will never be able to understand its beauty.

Mr. Amis and people like him are nothing more but a spec of dust who will soon pass into oblivion



duskybeauty

3 February 2010 1:13AM

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Dear Bassim,

Thank you very much for your support.

I was a little shaken by the vitriol of a commentator who got personal. I didn't understand that because I hadn't been personal to them.

I was also somewhat shaken during the above debate because when Mr Amis told me blatantly in front of 300 people that the Quran was antisemitic, it wasn't easy to take if you have been brought up in that tradition but what I want is to move the debate on to properly presented factual economic and social historical ground as far as is possible. This is a much needed development. Then maybe people who want to know will see it. Kind of like Simon Schama.

Anyway, thanks again.



duskybeauty

8 February 2010 8:38PM

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Dear Professor Mullan,

You will recall my open letter to you after the January Bookclub with Martin Amis.

I am fully aware that it was "Time's Arrow" under discussion, rather than a moral/political debate.

As you say, in your review of the evening, a lot of the question and answer session was given over to this and there was a discussion of the novel. However, what moral/political debate there was, was given over to the author's declarations, as if his opinion was the only one that mattered, of his views on the world as he sees it. Even then I held back from saying anything. In "Time's Arrow," his playing with time in the narrative, doesn't work for me, but I wanted to give the audience a fair crack of the whip. And anyway, I had come to the talk to get some tips on writing if I could. But the sheer lack of balance in the debate - one person disagreeing with Martin Amis constitutes a debate? - and the nonsensical things being said by the author in his culturally dictatorial way, led me to make the points that I did. When I did speak, I was almost immediately told to "shut my mouth", loudly, by a fan from the other side of the hall. If you did not hear that, you must have been one of the few there who didn't. You may also like to know that after the talk had ended, I was followed to the Tube by demented Amis fans shouting threats. These same fans actually stood there and glared at me as I went through the ticket barrier to continue my journey. Free speech anyone?

OK, this is a personal experience of mine and, you may say, no responsibility of anyone else's. But I think it really interesting that the atmosphere around Mr Amis allowed no real opposition to his assertions, particularly on Islam. His word was law, free speech was out the window, and he knows all about the Quran, having naturally read all of it. Whoa, respect!

Two points are perfectly clear to me: firstly, that there is nothing Martin Amis would like better than to have a fatwa slapped on him, just like Salman Rushdie. It would be absolutely perfect PR for his new book, "The Pregnant Widow" and classically timed for history to repeat itself. I would entreat anyone even mildly concerned with his remarks, to avoid doing this. In fact, it would probably just be better to leave out the subject of him altogether, which I intend doing from now on.

Secondly, while I acknowledge your sterling work with Bookclub, I am simply trying to raise your awareness of the fact that you will never be able to stick to "just the book". There will always be a wider debate which you would need to be prepared for - actually, with any author. The next Bookclub - another novel dealing with the Holocaust - a coincidence? - is a particular case in point. I can also see that to a considerable extent, you have to dance to the tune of the author's publishers and PR people.

I look forward to better experiences with Guardian Bookclub in the future.

Regards,

Jasmine Sharif.

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Hosted by John Mullan, professor of English at University College London, the Guardian's Book Club examines a book a month, via a weekly column in the Guardian Review. The first three weeks discuss the book in question; the final column consists of a selection of your comments from the Book Club blog

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