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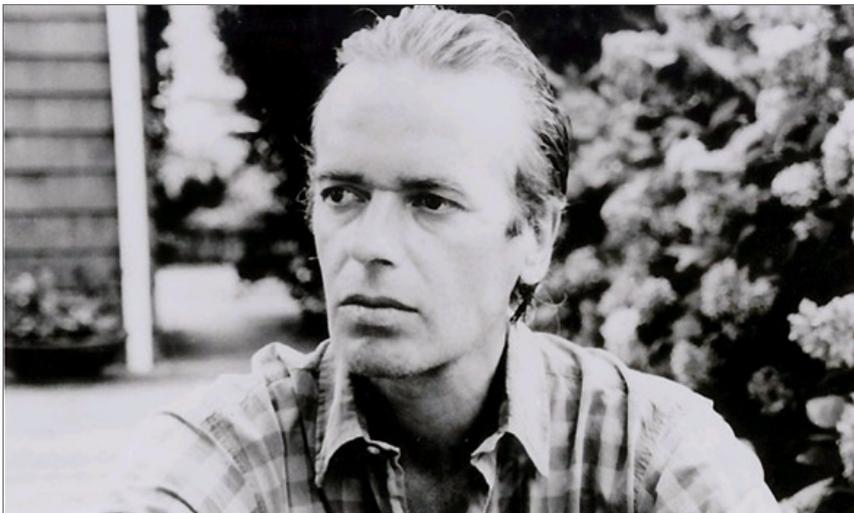
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The mouth that roars

British author Martin Amis defends his new book on 9/11

Last Updated: Monday, May 5, 2008 | 4:55 PM ET Comments 24 Recommend 44
By Andre Mayer, CBC News



British author Martin Amis takes on terrorism, torture and the Twin Towers in his provocative new book *The Second Plane*. (Random House Canada)

Known mainly for his cutting satirical novels (including *Money*, *London Fields* and *The Information*), British author **Martin Amis** has turned social commentary into a profitable sideline. Whether he's taking on the cinematic works of Brian De Palma, the cruel reign of Josef Stalin or his own family history, the 59-year-old British author is clever, pointed and unafraid to get up people's noses.

His latest work requires little explanation. *The Second Plane: September 11: Terror and Boredom* collects his writings on this century's galvanizing event and its explosive fallout. The volume includes his first response (in London's Guardian newspaper on Sept. 18, 2001) and a 10,000-word essay on the futility of satire in "the age of horrorism," as well as two short stories: one about Saddam Hussein's torture palace and another entitled *The Last Days of Mohammed Atta* (about the man suspected of leading the Sept. 11 attacks).

Ever the provocateur, Amis has been dodging charges of racism after venting to a reporter in the summer of 2006. The quote in question: "There's a definite urge – don't you have it? – to say, 'The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.' What sort of suffering? Not let them travel. Deportation, further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they're from the Middle East or Pakistan... Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community, and they start getting tough with their children." Amis's salvo inspired outrage in the British press. Suffice it to say, the release of *The Second Plane* has only emboldened his critics.

Though fierce in print, Amis gives a gracious, garrulous interview. Speaking to CBCNews.ca from his home in London, Amis discussed his evolving views on 9/11, the so-called Race Row and his dreams of a "multiracial" — not multicultural — society.

Q: What should readers take from *The Second Plane*?

A: It's not different from any other kind of writing in that respect. You just want to stimulate and get people thinking. What I would stress is that there are no recommendations in that book. I'm unaffiliated; I don't represent any bloc or party. In the political arena, that habit of assigning you those positions, and everything you say sends a signal to some other signal — I'm not used to that kind of discourse. All I hope to represent is an independent mind.

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Q: In the essay “The Lonely Voice in the Crowd,” you examine the need of so many novelists to respond journalistically to Sept. 11. What were your own motivations for weighing in?

A: The answer I give in that essay is that they wrote about Sept. 11 because they couldn't write about anything else. I adduced the Kafka story about **Josephine**, the opera-singing mouse. It's a typical Kafka story: here's a mouse who goes around doing concerts and singing opera. At the last concert she gives, someone turns around and says, 'Sing? She can't even squeak.' I think a lot of novelists felt like that in the weeks after Sept. 11. It's the measure of the event, that something of this weight and mass happens, and your confidence in your ability to contribute to anything is crushed. You have to wait for your fighting spirit to get going again. I talked to novelists about this, and they said, not only what they were writing but everything they'd written seemed, in that time, to have shrunk into miserable autism, really, and insignificance. I wanted to get going again, and not be like Josephine, and try and project a voice again.

Q: Reviews of *The Second Plane* have been largely unkind. Many have stated that the writing is stylish but lacking in original ideas. How do you respond to that?

A: I don't see what's so threatening about that. I cast myself as a non-expert, a novelist in the street. This is my contribution; the measure of it is whether it's stimulating.

I felt a kind of license in writing about this in that I did think it called on habits of mine that had been groomed in me by writing fiction, and by writing satirical fiction. I don't think it's a very rational landscape, and I felt I could respond to it with certain tendencies in satire. Is the discourse so narrow that it can't accommodate that?

Q: Have you sensed any difference in the reactions of American and British reviewers?

A: It's mixed the picture up a bit. [The book] got pretty even-handed treatment here [in Britain], and it seems more fierce in America. I think there's a fair bit of proprietoriality [in reviews by American critics]: this is *our* event, this is our territory, and we don't want someone else wading in; our wounds are too tender for that.



The cover of Martin Amis's *The Second Plane: September 11: Terror and Boredom*. (Random House Canada)

Q: In *The Second Plane*, you say that Islam is “totalist” — that it makes a total claim on a person’s existence. Isn’t that a generalization? Surely, there is nuance among the world’s one billion Muslims.

A: There's every kind of nuance. But I think [Islam] distinguishes itself from the other monotheisms. As the **Ayatollah Khomeini** used to say — in scandalized terms — affiliates of other religions think that they can go to church once a week, or even pray once a day, and that's that. He said, Islam isn't like that. The whole wave of Islamism is the revival of the idea that Islamism is the total guide to existence, that it's not on the edges but right in the centre. If you adhere to this literalist way, [Islam] does follow you into every room in the house. It's without its grandeur and beauty if you deny this central severity.

Q: But you're quoting the Ayatollah Khomeini, whose interpretation of Islam was clearly zealous and not representative of the entire faith.

A: Yeah, sure. I am talking about the fundamentalist wing, which is the one that has emerged. It's in direct contravention of other schools of Islam. But we're not hearing from **Sufi Muslims**; we're hearing from **Salafi Muslims**.

Q: There's been a great deal of controversy over your remarks about the Muslim community in the summer of 2006. Can you clarify what you meant?

A: I made those remarks preceded by the words “There's an urge to say,” and on the day I said it, there was an urge to say it. I'm not a politician. I am not ashamed to have these ugly thoughts, which lasted 24 hours. And let me remind you of the context: it was just after the revelation of the third plot in 13 months to cause random death on British and American citizens, in this case with **10 transatlantic airliners**.

I was chastened to see that these remarks set off, activated, certain revulsions. It was a stupid thing to say, an aggressive thing to say, but I didn't advocate it. I just came out with it. Nabokov, in one of his essays, says, “I think like a genius; I write like a distinguished man of letters; and I talk like an idiot.” I've written in praise of the multiracial society on many occasions.

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I've always been a passionate multiracialist; what I've never been is a passionate multiculturalist. I don't think anyone really is. If you recast any of the arguments we've been having as feminist questions, no one thinks that female circumcision or nine-year-old brides or honour killing is something we can feel good about. One of the brave things that Barack Obama has said is that female circumcision is not something that any civilized country can tolerate.

Q: Non-believers like Christopher Hitchens and yourself stress that the majority of Muslims are peace loving. At the same time, you dismiss all people of faith as inherently irrational. If I were a Muslim, I'd be confused, and not a little offended.

A: It sounds like a simple-minded view, but individuals are on the whole very manageable. It's conglomerates of individuals that give us the world's ills. Part of [Islam] has been taken over by an ideology. It's an ideology grafted onto a religion; it's two-ply. It's a feeling of mine that an ideology is *always* going to be violent; religion not at all, necessarily. When you commit yourself to a total system of belief, a system that will answer all questions — which, when you think about it, no system can do — once you make that leap, it feels very empowering, because you're with the like-minded. But it will always tend to be violent. When the orthodoxy is challenged, it can't defend it with mind alone, because there's such a commitment to the irrational. The response is always likely to be glandular. It's always likely to include body heat, because you need the body to defend, because you can't do it with mind alone.

The Second Plane is published by Random House and is in stores now

Andre Mayer writes about the arts for CBCNews.ca.

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TheParadigmShift wrote:

Posted 2009/12/21 at 6:23 PMET



Google Video: Loose Change Final Cut.

The official story of 9/11 is a lie.

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Sue Hickey wrote:

Posted 2008/12/08 at 12:58 PMET



Obviously NewsWatcher2 knows little about Islamic history, let alone the Qu'ran. I read a fair bit about the former and I have a copy of the latter. Islam is a religion of peace as is Christianity, but unfortunately the faiths get a bad rap thanks to fundamentalists. And if you knew more about history you might have read about "Operation Ajax" - the first coup engineered by the CIA. It happened in Iran in the late 50s-early 60s; that country had a democratically elected government, but the West wanted Iran's oil from the get-go and the Iranians, understandably, wanted control of their own resources. The CIA undermined the country's politics, engineered the coup and what happened? Iran got the Shah (dictatorship and torture R us) and then the Ayallotah - is it a wonder that there's no love lost between parts of the Middle East and the West? More than one analyst has said the roots of 9-11 can be traced back to Operation Ajax! So throw your Islam hatred out the window - and yourself too.

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NewsWatcher2 wrote:

Posted 2008/06/29 at 11:10 PMET

Amis' remarks regarding restrictions and deportations of the Muslim community in UK are indeed a bit aggressive and out of place. But his general opinion about Islam seems mild, and his distinction between Islam and "Islamism" is way too favorable.

Islam is a religion of peace?? Give me a break... The Kur'an is full of verses calling for the killing of all infidels, unless they convert to Islam (or accept the "dimma" where they agree to pay a humiliating head tax to save their lives). This "peaceful" book amounts to a recipe for a totalitarian and violent expansion of Muhamed's religion, which has been followed methodically and successfully Muslim societies from the very beginning of Islam, and until our time.

The significance of 9/11 is not the 3000 people who died on that day, but that it should serve as the "Pearl Harbor" of this renewed Islamic war against the west.

True, not all Muslims are terrorists, but it turns out that the majority of them are terrorist-sympathizers, including "FahriKilic" #15, who thinks he can extort political conditions from the Western "dimmys" in return for his condemnation of terrorism.



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CoryBarnes wrote:

Posted 2008/05/12 at 10:02 AM ET

M.C. in Ottawa. Are you the spokesman for the western world? Who are the "we" you refer to? You and I are both in the western world be I wouldn't presume to know what arguments you will accept or dismiss. You're speaking for yourself not "we in the western world". In the future please use the word "I" instead of we.



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NickKakyakas wrote:

Posted 2008/05/10 at 4:04 PM ET

I actually have read quite a lot of Martin Amis' books and enjoyed them. Unfortunately the fact he actually believes the official 911 fairy-tale of men in a cave magically getting NATO to stand down while men who could not even successfully pass their flight tests on Cessna's fly sophisticated jet aircraft into buildings makes me think he is a complete idiot.

Even the laws of physics do not support the quick demolition of the 3 buildings one of them, building 7 not even hit by a plane. 2 planes 3 buildings falling at free-fall speed. Martin Amis as a typical member of the British ruling and cultural elite obviously puts his racist colonial beliefs above the laws of physics.



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