

Martin Amis is feeling vulnerable

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— The night before this, Martin Amis was in a fight. It didn't involve brass knuckles or shattered pint glasses, or anything like the solid thwack of male flesh on male flesh. Those are young men's fights, rutting-season rumbles over girls or respect, and they seem rather quaint in a city where 52 people were bombed to death under the earth three years ago.

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This tussle did, however, have something to do with his controversial new book, *The Second Plane – September 11: Terror and Boredom*. These days, men of Amis's station and age (he's 58) fight not over girls but over Whether America Has Lost Its Moral Authority.

Amis was arguing on the No side of that debate earlier this week at London's Royal Geographical Society; that is, he was in America's corner, with his allies, historian Simon Schama and novelist Howard Jacobson.



British author Martin Amis photographed in his London home. (*Randy Quan/Special to the Globe and Mail*)



Did it feel odd, to be taking America's part? “Yeah,” says Amis the day after, digging fingers into eye sockets, “it did, slightly. I thought, ‘We're going to get humiliated here.’ But we didn't.”

An understandable panic: Arrayed against him, dancing over the corpse of America's moral authority, was the heavyweight team of John Gray (political philosopher), Will Self (novelist) and Matthew Parris (columnist).

Amis and Schama argued – to grotesquely telescope their views – that America may have dirty skirts, but that they could be made clean. On the other side, Gray said that the sanctioning of torture renders questions of moral authority meaningless. At the beginning of the debate, nearly a quarter of the audience was undecided, and by the end almost all those votes had gone to Amis's side. Still, 57 per cent of attendants agreed with Parris that “America has lost her moral authority more often than Fanny Hill lost her virginity.”

It's a good line, the kind of snarl you would have expected from Amis in full bilious sail, before he became so anxious about the state of the world, so preoccupied with the struggle of reason against irrationality, so sad. Yes, one of the great satirical novelists of our age, the arch mocker, seems freighted with worry – at least within the pages of that hotly debated new book. *The Second Plane* is dedicated to his five children, which perhaps provides some clue to his mental state.

“There have been moments in this story,” he says, in the quietness of his vast living room in north London, “where you felt that you might not win. That our society, with its freedoms, is tremendously vulnerable. That we're wide open.”

Not that it's a world without sun. After the debate at the Royal Geographical Society, even the forces of anti-Americanism “were talking about the power of hope, as represented by Obama. People do want to hope, and the thoroughness with which he would rewrite perceptions of America in his own person has a real glamour, in the best sense.”

The last time I met Amis was 10 years ago, in Toronto, just after the publication of his metaphysical detective novel, *Night Train*. He was sleek as an otter, smoking roll-ups, an arsenal of devastating lines no farther away than his beer, each one uttered in a luxuriant drawl. He was still preoccupied with nuclear

proliferation, the great shadow he'd lived under all his life, which had fuelled the stories in *Einstein's Monsters* and the millennial tensions in *London Fields*.

A decade later, the world has changed unutterably. No, it's changed utterably, that's the point. Amis, in the 14 pieces in *The Second Plane*, is trying to articulate how the world has shifted since Sept. 11 (the nomenclature is important; he loathes the abbreviation 9/11).

The first essay was written just days after the attacks on the United States, and the last on their sixth anniversary: His attempts to reason his way through fundamentalist thought, along with some rather intemperate public statements, have earned him the harsh label "Islamophobe." Rather, he argues, he is an "Islamismophobe." But he must have known how fraught this exercise would be: He's a novelist, a celebrity, a Brit, for God's sake.

"Hmm. Well, I didn't think it would be quite so fraught." Amis, sitting with his arms crossed on a red velvet sofa, doesn't look much different 10 years on. His hair's a bit thinner, but the sly, sideways smile is still very much resident. There are boxes and books and paintings everywhere – he's in the process of moving back to London with his wife, writer Isabel Fonseca, and their two daughters after two years in Uruguay. In the corner, an Eye of the Tiger pinball machine sits derelict, obviously too beloved to lose.

"I haven't been reading these attacks – but the objection is to what? Dilettantism?" He waits, expectant, and I realize I'm supposed to deliver the poisoned chalice. Does he really want to know? "Just give me a précis," he says, dryly.

I tell him about the arguments against the book (which I'm pretty sure he's familiar with, cheeky devil). The most specious is that the pyrotechnics he's famous for – the snaky sentences, the "boo!" startling images – obscure his message. This is like accusing a greyhound of running too fast, and anyway it's a book about what is, in many ways, a war of words.

More damaging is the accusation that what he knows about Islam and Muslims is gained from books, not first-hand knowledge, and that he goes too far in imputing dubious motives. (In one now-famous line in the central essay, *Terror and Boredom*, he writes: "I will never forget the look on the gatekeeper's face, at the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, when I suggested, perhaps too airily, that he skip some calendric prohibition and let me in anyway. His expression ... was saying that killing me, my wife, and my children was something for which he now had a warrant.")

Oh, and did I mention that the book was called "chuckleheaded" in *The New York Times*?

Amis sighs, or least lets out an exasperated breath. He's had more public lashings than most critics have had free lunches, and you sense this latest won't finish him off. "Is the discourse so limited?" he asks. "Is there not room for this? I make no recommendations in this book, I propose no actions. This is just the novelist in the street having a response to an enormous development."

A little disingenuous, this last. He's not just any novelist, but a very famous one, especially in Britain. For years, his personal life – his marriages, his teeth, his feuds, his abandonment of one agent for another – was front-page news. He's a celebwritey.

This is why he got in such trouble for comments he made on the day the news broke in 2006 of an alleged plot to blow up planes leaving British airports. He told a reporter from *The Times* of London: "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 letting them travel. Deportation – further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they're from the Middle East or from Pakistan ... discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children."

Now, being reminded of the remarks makes Amis shift in his seat. “I was angry, and depressed. I grew out of it the same day.” He talked it through with the friend he was staying with, novelist Jeffrey Eugenides – it’s normal Amis conversation to hear about “Jeff” calming him down, or “Saul” (his late friend Bellow) talking about his days as a Trot – and he thought that was that. “It was only an impulse, and it was a stupid thing to say.”

Last year, though, literary critic Terry Eagleton unearthed the remarks, and accused Amis of “advocating” an anti-Muslim position, likening him to a member of the far-right British National Party. Eagleton called Amis’s late father, the novelist Kingsley, a “racist, anti-Semitic boor.” (This may have been the more grievous insult in the eyes of Amis *films*.) Then it was quill pens at dawn. The feud raged in op-ed pages and around dinner-party tables for a while, and wasn’t helped by the fact that Amis had taken a job teaching creative writing at the University of Manchester, where Eagleton also worked.

The tempest has died down, which presumably has left him time to return to novel-writing. Two of the stories in *The Second Plane* are fiction, one imagining Sept. 11 ringleader Mohamed Atta as a psycho with stopped-up bowels, an apostate who’s only in it for the killing. This piling up of repulsiveness, blending the profane and the profane, is pure Amis. Elsewhere, on this subject at least, irony has deserted him. Perhaps that’s what’s making him sad: his hunch, his certainty, that satire and the comic novel are in retreat.

For example, he abandoned a novella that centred around Ayed, “a diminutive Islamist terrorist” when he found his writing hand “loath” to take the action any further. “You can only write satire about moral disasters that have passed away, only when it’s over. Otherwise every sentence is a hostage to fortune. You think: How funny would this be after a dirty-bomb attack on a city?”

Surely there must be some fertile ground left, and there is: *The Pregnant Widow*, a novel he’s finishing now, “an oblique look at feminism.” He can’t be serious. Martin Amis takes on the birth of modern feminism? There are probably little friction fires springing up all over London as critics rub their hands in glee. He’ll never get out alive.

“I know,” he says, blithe for a moment. “I’m obnoxious. I just am.”

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