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The truth stirrer

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ALMOST FOUR DECADES AGO, when he was a student in Oxford, Martin Amis had dinner with Philip Larkin, then a visiting professor at All Soul's. Working in academia, the poet confided, was "like the Church in the 18th century - a fine, soft option for younger sons. It's an easy, cushy profession."

Not so, however, for the newly appointed creative writing professor at Manchester University. Instead of cushy cogitation or quiet devotion at the altar of literature, it's straight into battle with cutlasses flashing, slashing away at Islamofascism on one side and Terry Eagleton, the university's Marxist professor of critical theory, on the other.

The media storm broke a month ago, when Eagleton accused Amis of inheriting his father's racism, homophobia and hatred of women. It rumbled on for a further fortnight, when Amis admitted to occasionally feeling odd racist impulses, and then argued that some Muslim societies had not evolved as fully as countries in the West.

Nor should anyone expect Amis to disappear from the headlines anytime soon. His next book, *The Second Plane*, a collection of his writing about Islamofascism, will be published early next year. For his next novel, *The Pregnant Widow*, he promises "a couple of bombshells about what feminism has wrought". And no, he's not going to tell me what they are.

WE MEET AT MANCHESTER Picadilly station and adjourn to a nearby bar: him with an hour to kill before travelling first class back to London, me with a few innocuous questions about teaching creative writing and his last novel, the incisively brilliant *House of Meetings*, set amid the horrors of Stalin's gulags.

But first to Islamofascism and Eagleton's attack on him. "The trouble is, back in 2006, I did say something about how we ought to put pressure on moderate Muslims to get their house in order - and an urge to place restrictions on their travel, perhaps deportation further down the line.

"Those remarks were something I don't stand by now. They were made to a journalist in Long Island in the summer of last year on a day when I was enraged at the latest ignominious surprise - you remember, the proposed bombing of ten transatlantic airliners. As usual, it was an absolutely disgusting idea - women and children would surely outnumber men in those circumstances. One of the journalists who had flown out to interview me told me that he hadn't been allowed to carry a book on the plane. I tried to imagine a flight without a book and thought what a wonderful ironic and symbolic victory it was for the humourless bastards."

He now agrees that suggesting a ban on Muslims flying on planes was wrong, and accepts that the fight against Islamofascism can be won only with the support of moderate Muslims. As apologies

Yes No

Yes No

Yes No

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go, though, it's hardly abject. "You may wonder why they [moderate Muslims] have been so quiet during all of this, but maybe not so many people in 13th-century Spain said 'I think the Inquisition's gone too far' - you'd be upside down with a red-hot poker up your bum in ten minutes flat. It can't be very easy for them - but why have there been no marches trying to reclaim their religion?"

There's similar ambivalence over Eagleton. One minute Amis is accusing him of "combining venom and sloth" and being "a great misrepresenter", most recently in the case of his friend Salman Rushdie, whom Eagleton wrongly accused of supporting the Iraq war. The next, though, he is saying that he is "perfectly well disposed towards Eagleton". Certainly the last thing he would do, he adds, is to follow up his father's Lucky Jim with a Noughties campus novel in which he could get his revenge on Eagleton in fiction.

"One of the reasons I took this job was not to write a campus novel but to write one with a different setting, other than London, and a whole other population: not just my colleagues but also the young." Although he has grown-up children himself, finding out what the younger generation is thinking clearly demands a more representative sample.

Those postgraduates in the two seminars he teaches on creative writing will find their new professor not only a supremely good text editor ("He's ferociously good at it", Julian Barnes once observed) but someone prepared to talk about the novel in an inward way, and when reading them not to identify with the characters but with what the author is aiming to do. "Today, I was telling them that they've got to make a journey into their own self at the same time as having that arrogant belief that what they have to say will be original and universal."

For all his media image (type "sneer" and "Martin Amis" into Google and you get 21,500 matches), he is not as arrogant or disdainful in person as one might expect. Writing *House of Meetings*, for example, he was uneasy about whether or not he had succeeded in portraying the bleak realities of gulag life, creating scene after scene without being able to fall back on any of his own experience. For months he stuck to the idea that it would only work sandwiched between other stories and preceded by a long introduction - hardly a mark of overweening confidence.

The novel he is working on now will draw on his own life a lot more. He called it *The Pregnant Widow* after Russian socialist Alexander Herzen's dictum that any revolution in human thought begins like that, with the old order dead and a traumatic birth still ahead. That certainly applies to feminism, "the great revolution of our times," he argues, and we are still working through the consequences of rejection of the old order and waiting for the dawn of the new.

In the process, he says, feminists made the mistake of pressing for power before equality. "The pattern has been that women start taking on more responsibilities in the home and men have become far lower profile. Now they're overextending themselves when instead they should just have insisted that men do more in the home."

The book's not due out until next August, and I can hear wingbeats of approaching headlines. But if there's anyone capable of holding their own in any controversy, Manchester University's new creative writing professor is that man.

- *House of Meetings* by Martin Amis is published by Vintage, price £7.99

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