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# The Second Plane by Martin Amis

Reviewed by [William Dalrymple](#)

Martin Amis and politics have always been uneasy bedfellows. Even during his creative peak in the mid-1980s, when he was producing dazzling satires such as *Money* and his brilliant American essays, *The Moronic Inferno*, politics was always the arena where Amis seemed most out of his depth. His oddly naive collection of stories about nuclear Armageddon, *Einstein's Monsters*, was his first weak book; later, *Koba the Dread*, his simplistic study of Stalin, showed a similar lack of nuance.

This was something the author's facility for wordplay not only failed to conceal, but actually seemed to highlight. When writing about subjects as sombre as the Holocaust or the Gulag, Amis's taste for the extreme and grotesque (such a strength in his best fiction) worked against him: the stylish prose felt inappropriately showy, like a go-go dancer at a scholarly conference. At his best, Amis could make the frivolous (bars, greed and pornography) seem deeply serious; but the endless puns and stylistic acrobatics sometimes made his more serious political non-fiction appear self-indulgent and flip.

The weaknesses of these two books are horribly amplified in Amis's new collection of 12 essays and two short stories (all previously published) on the world after 9/11. *The Second Plane* is certainly witty, clever and polished. But while *The Moronic Inferno* gained much of its stature from the complexity of Amis's love/hate relationship with America, a country he knew intimately, and whose finest writers were his close friends, here we have a wholly un-nuanced book about Islam by a man who appears, to judge from this text, never to have visited an Islamic country or to have talked seriously to any Muslim. Like *Koba the Dread*, *The Second Plane* is a compilation of second-hand views, in this case lifted from Islamophobic neocon primers (the works of Bernard Lewis, VS Naipaul and Paul Berman) about a subject on which the author has no personal experience, but which he still strongly dislikes. The result is not just flawed, but riddled with basic misunderstandings.

In one essay, Amis expresses surprise that in Pakistan human faces can be shown on T-shirts. Apparently unaware of the Arab, Persian and Mogul miniature traditions, and the fact that images of men and women are common on billboards across the Islamic world, he piously informs his readers that "it is forbidden, in Sunni Islam, to depict the human form, lest it leads to idolatry".

Later, Amis assures Tony Blair that "the Sunni are more legalistic. The Shia dreamier and more poetic and emotional". It is a ridiculously broadbrush generalisation, like many in the book: Ayatollah Khomeini, a legalist if ever there was one, was for example a Shia, while Jalaluddin Rumi, and most of the great Sufi mystics, were Sunnis.

Only in one place in the book does Amis actually come across a living Muslim. Arriving at the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem after it has closed for the night, he tries to talk his way into the enclosure, and is rebuffed by the guard. "I will never forget the look on the gatekeeper's face," he writes, "when I suggested . . . that he . . . let me in anyway. His expression, previously cordial and cold, became a mask; and the mask was saying that killing me, my wife, and my children was something for which he now had warrant."

This hysterical reaction, and the strong whiff of racial prejudice it gives off, is smelled again and again throughout this book.

Islamists, in Amis's view, are not people with a political complaint against the West and its foreign policy. Instead, they are all

"irrationally abstract" in their hatred of America, "haters of reason" whose "armed doctrine is little better than a chaotic penal code underscored by impotent dreams of genocide", "fanatics and nihilists" who have created "a cult of death" and wish to "eliminate all non-Muslims".

It is the lack of nuance that is most alarming. For Amis, all Islamists are the same, whether mass-murdering jihadis, or completely non-violent but religiously conservative democrats. Nor is it just the militant Islamists he dislikes: ordinary Muslims are regarded with equal contempt. He writes, with deep distaste, of "the writhing moustaches of Pakistan" and "the shoving, jabbing, jeering brotherhood" that Christopher Hitchens encounters in Peshawar. It seems, to Amis, that people's religion and ethnicity can remove them from rational discourse, and relegate them to the position of *untersmenschen*.

Like many Islamophobes, Amis believes that the march of political Islam represents the triumph of an anti-liberal "Islamofascist" ideology that aims to conquer the West through jihad and establish a universal caliphate. Although there are pan-Islamic ideologues who do indeed talk in these terms, to see this as the principal thrust in political Islam is ignorant and simplistic. Almost everywhere where they have had the chance to vote (Turkey, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Pakistan, Algeria) Muslims have lined up behind those parties that have been seen to stand up against American intervention in the region. Yet while determination to resist western hegemony is an important driving force of political Islam, the movement has local causes, too. Some, such as the promotion of Wahhabi Islam by Saudi-funded madrasahs, are religious; but most are not, and it is often entirely secular factors that bring the Islamists to power.

In Palestine, the corruption of the PLO led many to support Hamas. In Lebanon, the rise of Hezbollah has been a result of its successful resistance to the Israeli invasion of its country, and its provision of a wide range of medical and social services. In Pakistan, the Islamist parties have benefited from the unpopularity of the feudal and military elites who have held power since 1947.

Amis is at least aware of his weaknesses: "Geopolitics may not be my natural subject," he writes in the introduction, "but masculinity is." This is the basis for the most crass of all the arguments made in this book: that bombs are going off because Muslims are not getting enough sex. Amis comes to this bizarre conclusion through a reading of Sayyid Qu'tb, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, who was horrified by the decadence he perceived in 1950s America. Taking this as his starting point, Amis effectively proposes that 9/11 was caused, at least partly, by mass Islamic sexual frustration: "It has been suggested . . . that suicide mass murderers are searching for the simplest means of getting a girlfriend. It may be, too, that some of them are searching too for the simplest means of getting a drink. Although alcohol, like extramarital sex, may be strictly forbidden in life, there is in death no shortage of either." Here western criticism of Islam comes full circle: the Victorians once accused the Islamic world of being sensuous and decadent with an overdeveloped penchant for sodomy; now Amis attacks it for what he believes is its impotent frustration and homophobia.

Amis's simplistically Freudian explanation of terrorism ignores the stream of explicitly political statements issued by Al-Qaeda. From Osama Bin Laden's Declaration of War Against the Americans, issued on August 23, 1996, he has made it clear that his grievance against the West was not cultural or religious, or indeed sexual, but political. He is fighting against American foreign policy in the Middle East, in particular its support for both the House of Saud and the state of Israel. These ideas have been repeated by Bin Laden's followers, such as Mohammad Siddique Khan before the London bombings: "Your governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people all over the world . . . Until we feel security, you will be our targets. And until you stop the bombing, imprisonment and torture of my people, we will not stop this fight."

All terrorist violence, Islamic or otherwise, is contemptible. But because we condemn does not mean that we should not strive to comprehend. Amis does not try to understand. He does not even begin to penetrate why it is that groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, or the Ikhwan in Egypt, are steadily gaining in popularity. As far as one can tell from this book, he does not engage with

Muslims, visit their countries, or talk to them. Instead, he merely uses his great stylistic gifts to denounce. The result is a book that is not just wilfully ignorant, a triumph of style over knowledge, but that, for all its panache and gloss, is at its heart disturbingly bigoted.

## **The second plane by Martin Amis**

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