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Champagne for the brain

Defender, though not of the faith

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Philip Hensher on Martin Amis' new book



These journalistic pieces and two themed short stories have been written by Martin Amis after, and under the direct influence of, the events of 11 September 2001 in America. In a time of increasing specialisation, some supercilious amusement has been expended on the idea of novelists expressing their opinions on current affairs. Terry Eagleton, the academic who, by maintaining a semblance of Marxist thought in the 21st century, revives the dictionary meaning of the word 'incurable', is among Amis's noisier critics. He remarked in a recent interview that he didn't know why anyone should read novelists on these subjects in preference to window cleaners. The answer, that novelists tend to write better and have more actively used faculties of imagination than most window cleaners or, indeed, Marxist academics do, ought to be obvious to anyone even without reading this vivid collection.

The pieces are arranged in chronological order, beginning with an immediate response, published a week after the attacks. I don't think Amis has much of a gift for prediction, in common with most of us, and the virtues of the collection, as he himself sees, largely reflect the attempts to come to terms with a rapidly altering world, and to make sense of it.

Nevertheless, the collection reflects some ongoing and unshiftable commitments. A distaste for religious belief is one Martin Amis shares with his father. Kingsley, asked whether he was an atheist, once said, 'It's more that I hate Him, really.' In a number of books, notably *The Anti-Death League* and *The Green Man* — in which God, with an 'untrustworthy' face, puts in a personal appearance — Amis the elder assaulted God with an exhilarating directness.

Martin Amis's distaste for religion is all-encompassing. 'Today, in the West, there are no good excuses for religious belief — unless we think that ignorance, reaction and sentimentality are good excuses.' It has served its purpose by now. Granting that 'the soul has legitimate needs', he himself offers up literature to fill the gap. It's a tempting vision, of something which provides 'something tangible to venerate'; something which 'nonchalantly includes the Bible and all other holy texts'. Unlike the long succession of religions in world history, a spirituality based on literature would actively seek to preserve its predecessors, the great beauties of the book of Ecclesiastes and the sublime poetry of the Qu'ran.

Nice idea, but people like me or Amis for whom these things are not just sufficient but boundlessly sufficient are always going to be the targets of fervent believers. I love the image, and the hope, but you can't formulate it without an immediate sense of its tragic vulnerability.

The reason we ought to read a novelist — a great novelist, one must add — on our current predicament is not a simple one. As many people have observed, it takes at least 20 years before world-shaking events start to be rendered authoritatively in fiction, and it is never an easy or a simple transition — the great novels of Napoleon's wars only start to be written 30 or so years after the fact. What we can ask of a novelist now is the display of the imagination.

Of course, it is difficult, and often emerges here in slightly George Steinerish statements of the impossibility of the imaginative exercise. In one piece, Amis narrates the events of an abandoned novella about an Islamist in some detail, and one suddenly realises that the narrative wasn't abandoned; it's being told here and now, in an unorthodox narrative mode. Evocations of the unimaginable are, too,

exercises in the imagined. On thinking of being a passenger on one of the 11 September planes, 'It is hard to defend your imagination from such a reality'; or, again:

Whenever that sense of heavy incredulity seems about to dissipate, I still find, an emergent detail will eagerly replenish it ... what was it like to be a passenger on that plane? What was it like to see it coming towards you?

The controversy raised by Amis's views on religion as specifically embodied by Islamists is an empty one. He will tell you that his loathing is limited to Islamists, not even to Islam and certainly not to the ethnic groups concerned. The point, I think, is demonstrated, and the openness with which he has been willing to think out loud could usefully be emulated by political figures, addicted as they are to weasel words and double talk. I have to say that from non-practising Muslims I've heard language and opinions on Islamists which are far less temperate than anything Amis uses. In comparison to the private expressions of voices of modernity within Muslim societies, Amis is almost exaggeratedly respectful.

The two short stories are on compelling subjects, which ultimately defeat Amis's imagination; one is narrated by one of the numerous 'doubles' which Saddam and his family employed for safety's sake, the other the narration of the last days of 11 September terrorist, Muhammad Atta. He does his best with the material; but the material is too grave, and it just sits there, somewhat inertly.

Buy the book, however, for, among other things, what must be regarded as an extraordinary classic of political reportage, an extended interview with Tony Blair in his last days in office. Amis conveys in astonishing style the dizzying constant realisations of sheer power; he exactly captures the grand dullness surrounding the absurdly matey posturing of its central figure. It reads almost like a dream of wish-fulfilment, so exactly realised is the character of Blair. Somehow, too, Amis's own political positions, which can often be described as those of a clever undergraduate, don't diminish the allure of the portrait but enhance it:

'German is obsessed by transparency,' I had said to him. 'Some think it's because what it fears most is itself.'

'That view's old-fashioned,' said Blair.

As indeed it is. But what the author of *Dead Babies* is, rather unexpectedly, turning into, is an old-fashioned defender of truth, beauty and the values of literature against the massing dark. There is something noble about this book, and even when it is wrong it is never deplorable.