



Martin Amis Slams Islamism, Mocks Bin Laden, Scorns Appeasers

Review by George Walden



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Jan. 24 (Bloomberg) -- When it comes to world affairs, most contemporary British authors suffer from a bad case of group thinking these days. Less predictable is Martin Amis, who spurns the warm-slipped conventions of the U.K. literati.

His independent streak is again on display in ``The

Second Plane," a new collection of essays, reviews and short stories, most of them about terrorism.

One oddity about our age of terror is how enthusiastically godless European leftists have rallied to the defense of Islam. Amis is more consistent. Though he has turned from atheism to agnosticism, his distrust of religion remains unabated. Since it's now impermissible to disparage individual faiths, he writes, let us disparage all of them.

Amis does reserve a special derision for Islamism, saying its adherents view indiscriminate killing as ``a divine delight." Islam may not be bent on murder, but Islamism is, he says. That makes him an Islamismophobe, not an Islamophobe -- if the word phobia even applies. A phobia is an irrational fear, he points out, and ``it is not irrational to fear something that says it wants

to kill you."

His contempt for the intellectual vacuity of Muslim fundamentalists in general -- and for Osama bin Laden in particular -- is blistering. "Was Osama just the product of his family background?" he asks, alluding to the sheer number of his siblings. "Seventeenth out of 57 is a notoriously difficult slot to fill," he writes.

Atta's Mouth

Many a recent film, novel and play has sought to "understand" terrorists in a way that borders on moral complicity. There is none of that in Amis, most certainly not in his reconstruction of the last days of Mohammed Atta, the Egyptian leader of the 9/11 gang. Atta's disgusted mouth reflected his "all-inclusive detestation, his pan-anathema" on the world, Amis writes: Only one human being took pleasure in setting eyes on Atta, and that was bin Laden.

Amis brings his most merciless satire to bear on the leading intellectual of the Muslim Brotherhood, Sayyid Qutb, who was hanged in 1966 by the Egyptian regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser for plotting to overthrow the state.

A civil servant and a virgin, his nausea in the presence of women wasn't helped by a stay in Greeley, Colorado, where he saw lustful bosoms everywhere, Amis says. In the eyes of this dour man, the American Satan was above all a temptress, though he himself "never encountered anything that resembled an offer," Amis writes.

Unworthy Animals

Not that Qutb was guilty of gender discrimination: He maintained that all Americans -- not just women -- were infidels and animals unworthy of life. Yet he remains a highly influential Islamist

philosopher to this day. The keys to his creed are self-righteousness, self-pity and self-hatred because Islam has been decaying for more than 300 years, Amis argues.

Modern Islamism is also indebted to fascism and communism, he writes. Though secular ideologies they, too, were death machines devoted to cults as unrealizable as the return of the 7th-century Muslim Caliphate, for which Islamists kill.

The West, says Amis, keeps making the mistake of asking, "What are the reasons for this?" In fact, there are none, because we aren't dealing in reason, he writes.

Tremulous souls will fret at Amis's intransigent tone. Others may balk at the stylishness and humor of his prose, finding it ill suited to the gravity of the subject matter. They would be wrong.

In "The Second Plane," the style and wit serve a worthwhile cause. It's not often that we see high intelligence and unflinching honesty deployed on terrorism and religion, and the fact that the book can also be read with pleasure is a bonus. Unless, of course, you believe that pleasure is evil.

"The Second Plane" is published by Cape in the U.K. and is scheduled to be released by Knopf in the U.S. in April (212 pages, 12.99 pounds, \$24).

(George Walden, a former U.K. diplomat and member of Parliament, is a critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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