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## Books of The Times; Time Runs Backward To Point Up a Moral

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**Lead:**

**Time's Arrow** Or, **The Nature of the Offense** By Martin Amis 168 pages. Harmony Books. \$18.

The idea behind Martin Amis's latest novel, "**Time's Arrow**," is this: the life story of a former Nazi doctor named Tod T. Friendly is told in a reverse chronology, beginning with his incognito existence in an American suburb in the present and moving back to the days when he was a doctor in the medical section of Auschwitz. The story is narrated by Tod's "soul," a curiously naive consciousness that seems powerless to affect Tod's behavior or understand the implications of his actions.

**Text:**

This gimmick of an inverted time scheme has been used before, of course: Harold Pinter used it to chronicle a love triangle in "Betrayal," and Stephen Sondheim and George Furth (working from an old George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart play) used it to chronicle the show business careers of three longtime friends in "Merrily We Roll Along." But whereas these stories moved from the disillusionment of time present back to the idealism and hopefulness of time past, Mr. Amis's story moves from phony innocence to a past of unrelieved horror. The emotional effect of the story is thus subverted: instead of seeing how youthful expectations were betrayed, we simply see how one man's sins were whitewashed and concealed.

In fact, much of the narrative of "Time's Arrow" feels incongruously comic in tone. Like a movie run backward, Tod Friendly's life is presented in fast rewind, giving Mr. Amis lots of opportunities to indulge in his penchant for sexual and scatological humor. Tod finds love letters in the fireplace or trash, fights with women before going to bed with them and eats and defecates in reverse. He makes love backward and eats and drinks backward, too.

Every day that passes leaves Tod feeling younger and healthier -- his body grows firmer and stronger, progressively shedding infirmities and ills. And as a doctor, his work, too, defies logic and biology: he implants tumors and aborted fetuses, breaks casts and limbs, heals cuts with a knife and always makes sure he sends patients away in worse shape than when they arrived.

For that matter, the whole world, seen from the narrator's skewed perspective, seems wacky and out of kilter. Garbage men arrive every morning to dispense the trash, and every night pimps give their call girls plenty of cash. Gas gets cheaper and cheaper, while cars become slower and less efficient. "People all have jobs now, at the steel mill and the auto plant," the narrator observes. "They wash the wind. Just as they clean up all the trash and litter, they also clean up the earth and the sky, transmogrifying cars, turning tools, parts, weapons, bolts into carbon and iron. They've really got to grips with their environmental problems, facing them squarely, with common purpose."

Time passes. The Vietnam War gives way to the Korean War and the Korean War to World War II. Tod Friendly changes his name to John Young, and later to Hamilton de Souza and Odilo Unverdorben. He leaves America for Portugal, and Portugal for Germany, where he becomes a member of the Nazi command at Auschwitz. The Nazi dream, the narrator tells us, is: "To dream a race. To make a people from the weather. From thunder and from lightning. With gas, with electricity," with excrement and fire.

In the crematories, smoke is turned into corpses, and the corpses are given life. Gold is placed in the mouths of these bodies, and hair is put on their heads. Families are assembled -- the narrator marvels at the perfect matchmaking skills of the Nazis; and the Jews are "channeled back into society." The ghettos disappear, and people are ferried back to their village homes.

What's more, the narrator reports, all the medical experiments at Auschwitz are a success: "A shockingly inflamed eyeball at once rectified by a single injection. Innumerable ovaries and testes seamlessly grafted into place. Women went out of that lab looking 20 years younger." Suddenly, for the first time in the narrator's existence, the world "makes sense."

With such shocking passages, Mr. Amis creates a devastatingly specific portrait of the Nazis' warped mentality: only in a completely upside-down, backward world, he suggests, are their actions comprehensible.

Unfortunately, the bulk of the novel seems like an extended setup for this emotional payoff -- pages and pages of sophomoric humor laid as groundwork for one huge philosophical point. As a result, the reader must wade through the first three-quarters of the book, which reads like a virtuosic but mannered performance by a writer eager to exploit the comic possibilities of a structural gimmick, before getting to the heart of the matter.

Perhaps this is exactly what Mr. Amis intended, but it's a risky narrative strategy more suited for the short story form than a novel. As it is, the top-heavy jokey part of the book overshadows its somber conclusion, blunting its larger moral ambitions.





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