

Martin Amis can't be trusted

By Jenny McCartney

Last Updated: 12:01am GMT 09/12/2007

Page 1 of 2

 [Have your say](#)  [Read comments](#)

The British novelist Martin Amis spoke last Monday in a debate on Literature and Terrorism at Manchester University, which had been billed as an intellectual duel with Terry Eagleton, the Marxist literary critic. When Eagleton cancelled his appearance because of a "diary clash", however, the audience was robbed of the electricity generated by live animosity.

The two men, colleagues at the university, quarrelled in October after Eagleton attacked remarks that Amis had made about Muslims in an interview in 2006. At the time, Amis was quoted as saying: "There's a definite urge - don't you have it? - to say, 'The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.' What sort of suffering? Not letting them travel. Deportation - further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they're from the Middle East or from Pakistan... Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children."

Eagleton later compared Amis's words to the rantings of a "British National Party thug" and compared Amis fils to Amis père, whom he dubbed "a racist, anti-Semitic boor, a drink-sodden, self-hating reviler of women, gays and liberals".

advertisement Amis described his own remarks as "a thought experiment" and emphasised that he had never advocated, but merely adumbrated, discriminatory treatment of Muslims: he also dubbed Eagleton "an ideological relict". The novelist Ronan Bennett vigorously denounced Amis as a racist, and Ian McEwan and Christopher Hitchens spoke in Amis's defence. One can still sense the crackling excitement in the air, the swash of stylish insult: there hasn't been this much ideological sparring among the literati since the fall of the Berlin wall.

I am no great fan of Amis's chief critics. It was deeply shabby of Eagleton to attempt to wound the son by savaging the dead father. And Bennett, in castigating Amis for his "intolerance of otherness", notably avoided addressing just how one should feel or act when an extreme "otherness" such as Islamism proves fiercely intolerant of you.

Yet still there remains something fatally blurred, something not clearly confronted, at the heart of Amis's arguments. When an audience member last week returned the writer to the delicate question of his controversial 2006 remarks, he explained that they came shortly after the revelation of an Islamist plot to blow up 10 transatlantic flights in transit, saying: "You can pretend to be a pious post-historical automaton and not have these responses or you can admit to having transient retaliatory urges."

But against whom precisely are these "transient retaliatory urges" experienced, if they must later be denied? I have retaliatory urges myself when I hear of Islamist terror plots, but against the planners and perpetrators of the potential carnage: I wish to see those people pursued, arrested, convicted, and sentenced to lengthy imprisonment. These urges are not transient in the least: they are constant.

I do not, however - and I don't mean this piously - wish at any point to retaliate against the pleasant Pakistani man who works all hours in our local dry-cleaners, or the Turkish bank teller down the road. To do so would clearly be obscene. Yet the lingering notion of an entire community's culpability sporadically crops up among Amis's "urges", like a loutish youth who is regularly booted out of the debating hall but can't quite keep away.

There is a world of difference between encouraging a minority community - and what a mercurial concept "community" can be - to help defeat terrorism originating from fanatics within its ranks, and holding it communally accountable for that terrorism. The former may well provide our police with a tip-off that averts the next British suicide bomber; the latter will trigger attacks upon elderly Muslims who have never espoused jihadism. An immensely articulate Muslim writer such as Ed Husain, who has personal experience of Islamism and takes its formidable dangers extremely seriously, negotiates such delicate distinctions every day.

The tentacled concept of communal culpability was precisely what plunged us in Northern Ireland into sectarian squalor for nearly 30 years. Individuals found themselves reinterpreted, frequently against their will, as crude symbols of their community. If the IRA murdered an innocent Protestant, the loyalists retaliated by gunning down a blameless Catholic. Bereaved relatives, glazed with grief, would immediately plead for "no retaliation" in order to break the killing cycle.

 [Have your say](#)

Continued

1 [2](#) | [Next page](#)

Information appearing on telegraph.co.uk is the copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited and must not be reproduced in any medium without licence. For the full copyright statement see [Copyright](#)