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Martin Amis: You Ask The Questions

The novelist writes in answer to 'Independent' readers about misogyny, Islamism, Iran's nuclear threat and Kirk Douglas's naked body

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Are you an Islamophobe? ALISDAIR GRAY, Edinburgh

No. What I am is an Islamismophobe. Or better say an anti-Islamist because a phobia is an irrational fear, and there is nothing irrational about fearing someone who professedly wants to kill you. The form that Islamophobia is now taking - the harassment and worse of Muslim women in the street - disgusts me. It is mortifying to be part of a society in which any minority feels under threat. On the other hand, no society on earth, no society imaginable, could frictionlessly absorb a day like 7 July.

More generally, the difficulty has to do with the nature of national identity; and the American model is the one that we (and everyone else) should attempt to plagiarise. A Pakistani immigrant, in Boston, can say "I am an American", and all he is doing is stating the obvious. Can his equivalent, in Bradford, say the equivalent thing in the equivalent way? Britain needs to become what America has always been - an immigrant society. That, in any case, is our future.

The phrase "horrorism", which you invented to describe 9/11, is unintentionally hilarious. Have you got any more?
JONATHAN BROOKS, by email

Yes, I have. Here's a good one (though I can hardly claim it as my own): the phrase is "fuck off".

I wasn't describing "9/11", as you call it. I was describing suicide bombing or suicide-mass murder. And the distinction between terrorism and horrorism is a real one. If for some reason you were about to cross Siberia by sleigh, you would be feeling "anxiety"; when you heard the first howl of the wolves, your anxiety would be promoted to "fear"; as the pack drew near and gave chase, your fear would become "terror"; "horror" is reserved for when the wolves are actually there. Some acts of terrorism are merely terrible. Suicide-mass murder, the act of self-bespattering, in which your assailant's blood and bones and organs become part of the argument, is always horrible.

What do you think should be done about Israel and Iran's looming nuclear stand-off? Would you support an Israeli pre-emptive nuclear strike? CLIVE MARR, Cambridge

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, after the goons' rodeo in Tehran (where Islamist scholars questioned the historicity of the Holocaust) and his recent electoral reverses, is probably on the wane; but even Rafsanjani, Iran's most prominent (and corrupt) "pragmatist", has said that a nuclear attack on Israel would obliterate the Jewish entity, whereas any retaliatory strike, however devastating, would be "absorbed" by Greater Islam.

It is understandable that Israel should be far from enthusiastic about the emergence of a suicide bomb that can be measured in megatons. The only way forward, I think, is diplomacy, and it has to be led by America, which, in turn, must recognise that the West's two-tier nuclear position is a moral and philosophical non-starter. The West must give some face, and start cutting arsenals with a view to the utopian goal: the zero option, worldwide.

Can the war on terror be won? AMBER ALWAN, by email

When historians come to write about this era, I persistently imagine, they will begin by saying that, at first, the West panicked and wildly overreacted, and that the strategy for prevailing was slow to crystallise. Remember the axiom: the danger of terrorism lies not in what it inflicts but in what it provokes. September 11 could be contained and survived; the ramifications of the Iraq war are still unknowable, and are already vast and multiform. Islamism has received a great boost from its rejection of reason and its embrace of death, both of which are hugely energising, as Lenin and Hitler well understood. But Islamism is simply too poisonous to survive for very long. What happened within Islam was not a civil war (between the moderates and the radicals); it was more like a revolution - a revolution which is already starting to devour its children. We won't "win", exactly. But there will come an end to the Age of Vanished Normalcy.

Have you made up with your old friend Christopher Hitchens after your spat over Stalin? MARLIJN EVANS, London

We never needed to make up. We had an adult exchange of views, mostly in print, and that was that (or, more exactly, that goes on being that). My friendship with the Hitch has always been perfectly cloudless. It is a love whose month is ever May.

Which is your favourite of your own novels and why? RICHARD LONG, by email

Your novels are like your children, and you try not to have favourites. But you tend to favour the one that has had the hardest time of it, so I will go for *Yellow Dog* (and, to repeat, Tibor Fischer [the reviewer who wrote "*Yellow Dog* isn't bad as in not very good or slightly disappointing. It's not-knowing-where-to-look bad. I was reading my copy on the tube and I was terrified someone would look over my shoulder ... It's like your favourite uncle being caught in a school playground, masturbating] is a creep and a wretch. Oh yeah: and a fat-arse). I had a soft spot for it anyway, but when I saw it being scragged in the playground ...

How do you think you might have ended up spending your working life if your father hadn't been a famous writer? JOHN GORDON, Eastleigh

Well, John, that would depend on what my father had chosen to do instead. If he had been a postman, then I would have been a postman. If he had been a travel agent, then I would have been a travel agent. Do you get the idea?

Now that Saul Bellow has passed away, who do you regard as the greatest living American novelist(s)? PHILIP EAST, by email

John Updike, and then your namesake, Mr Roth. With Don De Lillo coming up on the flank. That's just my opinion. One of the extraordinary things about Bellow was that his pre-eminence stared you in the face. As someone or other said of Shakespeare, "Others abide our judgment. Thou art free."

Why are you such a snob? BEATRICE FRANKS, by email

A snob is "a person who has an exaggerated respect for high social position or wealth and who looks down on those regarded as socially inferior". I have described the institution of the monarchy as "a wank" - a phrase, free, I think, of exaggerated respect. As for the so-called socially inferior, I have devoted many hundreds of pages to them, in fiction, and only the lousiest novelist can write with a sneer.

On the other hand, I think snobbery ought to make a comeback. Not the old "class" shit but mental and verbal snobbery. Sometimes snobbery is forced upon you. So let's have a period of exaggerated respect for rationality; and let's look down on people who use the words everybody else uses. Funnily enough, Princess Diana was also the princess of second-hand speech, of mouldering novelties, of what might be called herd-words. Seen it, done it, got the T-shirt. Had a banana - I don't think so.

Whats the worst thing that's ever happened to you? NESA GARDEZI, by email

One day I returned home from a book tour in the US, and I noticed that the leading edge of the toilet roll in the bathroom wasn't folded into an inviting V - as it was in all those American hotels.

Not only that. I then had a tedious five minutes issuing instructions about the new arrangement to my wife.

Is it true that the Lorne Guyland character in Money was based on Kirk Douglas and, if so, did old Kirk really stand naked in front of you and ask 'Is this the body of a 65-year-old man?' JOHN NIVEN, by email

Lorne Guyland was, let us say, inspired by Kirk. He didn't go nude for me but, on the set, he was always ripping his clothes off. Movie stars are funny that way, or they used to be. During the same shoot I had dinner with Harvey Keitel in his room at Claridge's, and he was stripped to the waist throughout. It was a hot night, I admit. Kirk was very bright, and very sweet in his way. As he said to the director (who was soon to be fired), "The thing is, John, I'm unbelievably insecure." He was, again, naked at the time.

Do you ever worry you have inherited some of your father's misogyny? Wasn't Julie Burchill right that Nicola Six, in London Fields, is a murderer dream-girl? JENNY DONOVAN, Cardiff

To spell this out: I am not only a feminist - I am a gynocrat. That is to say, I believe in rule by chicks. Feminism is in fact the subject of my next novel, which is called *The Pregnant Widow*. Why the title? The Russian thinker Alexander Herzen said that after a revolution we should, on the whole, be braced by the fact that one order has given way to another; but what we are left with, he added, is not a birth, not a newborn child but a pregnant widow - and there will be much grief and tribulation before we hear the baby's cries. In other words, consciousness is not revolutionised by the snap of a finger. And feminism, I reckon, is about halfway through its second trimester.

I love this stuff about "dream-girls". The heroine of House of Meetings has been described, here and there, as a "male fantasy figure". All they're saying is that she's pretty. The subtext is that certain reviewers think that novelists can't pull, or can only pull eyesores, and are reduced to having male fantasies about the pretty ones.

How has your motivation for writing changed throughout your career? BOB SWANKIE, Dundee

I don't think "motivation" is quite the right word. Writing is less mental and more physiological than is generally understood - decisions and calculations, matters of reason, hardly ever come into it. It took me years to find out how true this is. When I was younger, I would come up against a difficulty in the narrative and I would beat my head against it for hours and days at a time. Now I feel prompted to leave my desk and pick up a book; and I don't return to my desk until my legs take me there, and I find that the difficulty has been resolved. Your unconscious does it. Your unconscious does it all.

How did you research your new novel, The House of Meetings. You have not, I believe, ever been to Russia? OKSANA EVERTS, London

No. I did it by reading (and imagining). The Daily Mail school of criticism would have it that all writers, including Tolstoy and Shakespeare, are sneak thieves and bagsnatchers (see the recent non-scandal, indeed non-story, centred on Ian McEwan). But reading is the other half of writing, or the other third: you write, you read, and you live.

What is the most depressing thing about Britain you have observed since your return? And the best? GRANT MULLIN, Surrey

The most depressing thing was the sight of middle-class white demonstrators, last August, waddling around under placards saying, We Are All Hizbollah Now. Well, make the most of being Hizbollah while you can. As its leader, Hasan Nasrallah, famously advised the West: "We don't want anything from you. We just want to eliminate you." Similarly, when I went on Question Time the other week, a woman in the audience, her voice quavering with self-righteousness, presented the following argument: since it was America that supported Osama bin Laden when he was fighting the Russians, the US armed forces, in response to September 11, "should be dropping bombs on themselves!" And the audience applauded. It is quite an achievement. People of liberal sympathies, stupefied by relativism, have become the apologists for a creedal wave that is racist, misogynist, homophobic, imperialist, and genocidal. To put it another way, they are up the arse of those that want them dead.

The best thing has been to find myself living in what, despite its faults (despite a million ills), is an extraordinarily successful multi-racial society. This is a beautiful idea, with a good chance of becoming a beautiful reality, too.