

## CULTURAL STUDIES

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## Forever and a day Martin Amis's Sept. 11

By James Parker | May 7, 2006

IT SEEMS ODD that artistic treatments of the events of 9/11--the latest two of which are Paul Greengrass's film "United 93" and Martin Amis's short story "The Last Days Of Muhammad Atta," published in the April 24 issue of *The New Yorker*--should be judged according to the slender canons of good taste. In our lifetimes there may never be another day that so completely supersedes every aesthetic inclination or prejudice, that so thoroughly routs all delicacy. Nonetheless, "United 93" has been praised in *The New York Times*, the nation's organ of discretion, as "scrupulously tasteful," while the consensus on the Amis story seems to be that he has--once more--gone over the line.

Certainly these artists made their choices, but taste had little to do with them. From the opening seconds of "United 93," when hijacker-in-waiting Ziad Jarrah, murmuring Koranic enchantments to himself on his hotel bed on the morning of Sept. 11, is spoken to by one of his fellow jihadis and looks up with the dazed, transparent solemnity of a child, we know we are in the underworld: a place below reason, diabolically energized. Greengrass has taken us here in previous films--in 1999's "The Murder Of Stephen Lawrence," about a racist killing on the streets of South London, and in 2002's "Bloody Sunday," his shattering re-creation of the 1972 British massacre of Irish civil-rights marchers--but never with such immersion, such devotion. The humdrum preflight minutes at Newark seem distorted by subterranean pressure, swarming with it, until the film's first profanity, uttered by a rattled air traffic controller out of Boston, punctures like a needle the buildup of dread: It floods the body.

Martin Amis was writing about 9/11 long before it happened. Or at least, he was writing about America, and air travel, and fanaticism, and planetary foreboding. And in literary terms he was one of the day's first responders. On Sept. 18, 2001, his byline appeared over a piece titled "Fear and Loathing" in London's *Guardian* newspaper. "It was the advent of the second plane, sharking in low over the Statue of Liberty: that was the defining moment." So ran the first sentence. Here's the first sentence of his 1984 novel "Money," and the arrival of subhero John Self in Manhattan: "As my cab pulled off FDR Drive, somewhere in the early Hundreds, a low-slung Tomahawk full of black guys came sharking out of lane and sloped in fast right across our bows." The scale is different, but the trope (and that word "sharking") are the same: an incursion, an irruption, a difference in velocity.

It was no mere feat of style that Amis's *Guardian* piece was by some measure the best prose to appear in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the most alive to the day's catastrophic imagery as well as to its consequences: He had been rehearsing and dry-running it for years.

Sooner or later, Amis was bound to write about Muhammad Atta. From the story's first line--"On September 11, 2001, he opened his eyes at 4am..."--we are trapped in the engine of Atta's skull. The Atta Amis gives us is a walking nightmare; a man who hates music; a nihilist with blocked bowels and a face "growing more gangrenous by the day." His ardor and his death wish are not religious but wholly profane and destructive. "He didn't expect paradise. What he expected was oblivion."

We are deep into the late Amis style here, the high-pressure compound of observational immediacy and global diagnosis. "Jihad was, by many magnitudes, the most charismatic idea of his generation. To unite ferocity and rectitude in a single word: nothing could compete with that." "Rectitude"--again, the echo is from "Money." "I once got bopped by a mad guy and it was like no blow I have ever felt--qualitatively different, full of an atrocious, a limitless rectitude."

Amis's first post-9/11 novel, the much-mauled "Yellow Dog," was too preoccupied with royalty, porn, and berserking footballers to offer much in the way of perspective, but it did make repeated reference to "the thing which is called World"--a thing (in the novel's context) to be detested, an encroachment upon the spirit. I do not recall, amid the book's many reviews, any recognition that this stilted, incantatory piece of phrasing was not Amis's own, but was actually drawn from injunction number seven in the so-called Doomsday Document, the four handwritten pages found after 9/11 in Atta's luggage. "Purify your heart and cleanse it of stains. Forget and be oblivious of the thing which is called World."

With "The Last Days" all of this is made clear, and consummated. As Amis's Atta descends upon Manhattan at 8:46,

he sees it, he perceives it: "There it was ahead of him and below him--the thing which is called World. Cross streets, blocks, districts, shot out from beneath the speed lines of the plane." The last days--the day without end.

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