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Martin Amis: interview

By Jonathan Derbyshire

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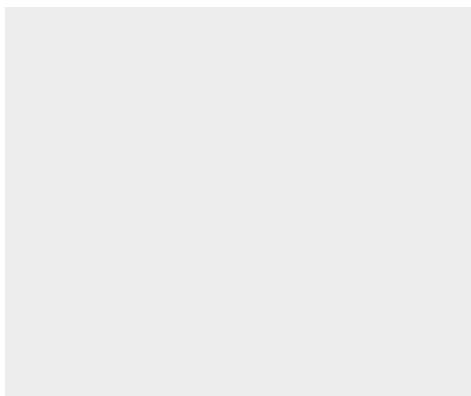
Martin Amis's maligned collection of essays and short stories, 'The Second Plane', is more than 'a book about Islam' – it's an exploration of the fraught imaginative legacy of September 11



Martin Amis: 'All I was doing was trying to express what I felt' (image: Tom Craig @ Bill Charles Agency)

Martin Amis's study, which occupies part of a converted garage behind his house in Primrose Hill, shows the signs of work in progress: his laptop sails on a tide of paper and there are books everywhere, in teetering piles or splayed in medias res on the tables and chairs. He tells me he's in the middle of writing a novel: 'It's about what we're living through.'

And 'what we're living through' is also the central preoccupation of the book Amis has just published, a collection of essays, reportage and short fiction. 'The Second Plane' is subtitled 'September 11: 2001-2007', which suggests that it's the consequences of that dreadful day in New York, as much as the attacks themselves, that exert on Amis what he admits is a 'desperate fascination'.

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The book is arranged chronologically, beginning with a piece, also entitled 'The Second Plane', that Amis wrote for The Guardian a week after the suicide pilots of Al-Qaeda has staked their claims to a place in paradise. There's a dazed, anxious eloquence about these few pages that sets the tone for the rest of the book. 'All I was doing,' he says, 'was trying as hard as I could to express what I felt. That piece is sort of vulnerable. It's gibberish. It's written in shock.'

Despite feeling 'species shame' and 'species fear', Amis was nevertheless able to collect himself sufficiently to attempt, in the same article, a paragraph or two of sober geopolitical analysis. 'It will also be horribly difficult and painful,' he writes, 'for Americans to absorb the fact that they are hated, and hated intelligibly.' These are lines Amis now disowns – or at least he disowns the word 'intelligibly', which he says is freighted with 'rationalist naïveté', a term he borrows from the American political writer Paul Berman.

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The rationalist naïf refuses to believe that a warped and atavistic theology can be all there is to jihadism, whereas Amis came, slowly, to the view that a properly 'rational' response would sound more like 'an unvarying factory siren of disgust'.

He says he got over rationalist naïveté some time around Christmas 2001. 'I stopped thinking that September 11 was a proportional response to anything I recognised. People like Eric Hobsbawm or Noam Chomsky place a value on imperturbability in one's reaction to things, but I don't. I think moral shock is necessary.'

However, some of Amis's critics have argued that the 'siren' of shock and disgust has long since turned into a kind of manichean whine. For example, there is a passage in the longest piece in the book, 'Terror and Boredom: The Dependent Mind', in which Amis describes waiting while an airport security official 'methodically and solemnly' searches his daughter's rucksack. 'There ought to be a better word than boredom for the trance of inanition that weaved its way through me. I wanted to say something like, "Even Islamists have not yet started to blow up their own families on aeroplanes. So please desist until they do. Oh yeah: and stick, for now, to young men who look like they're from the Middle East."'

Amis rolls his eyes when I mention Terry Eagleton, who in the autumn ignited a brief and not especially edifying public spat when he suggested that the novelist was flirting with views one would expect to come from the mouth of a 'British National Party thug'. He reminds me that Eagleton was actually referring to an interview in which he'd confessed to feeling a 'retaliatory urge' after the foiled bomb attack on the Tiger Tiger nightclub in the West End. 'There is a distinction between those two mental activities: confessing to a retaliatory urge just after the revelation of the third murderous plot in 13 months and advocating it in an essay. But it was the distorted position I was being asked to defend and that suited Eagleton down to the ground. It's so sloppy. He's a disgrace to the academic profession. He's like an old boxer who keeps picking fights. But it's time for him to take off his trunks.'

Eagleton may be a washed-up ideological hack, a 'commissar', but he represents a strain of liberal or leftist opinion that is as much part of 'what we're living through' as the ravings of the mullahs or the 'awful rictus' that took up residence on George W Bush's face once things went awry in Iraq. 'It's onerous beyond belief to be faced by something so irrational, by a death cult,' Amis says. 'It's an incredible drag to make the effort to say this is what it is. I think it's a kind of prim decency that stops people from recognising these things. An enormous imaginative effort is needed to put yourself in the place of someone who really does think that if they besplatter themselves over a bus in Israel they won't die but will be snatched into paradise before the moment of death.'

Amis attempts such an imaginative effort in one of the two short stories included here, 'The Last Days of Muhammad Atta'. The presumptive pilot of American Airlines flight 11 is presented as ravaged by constipation and intoxicated with the sweet feeling of killing ('Here was the primordial secret ... killing was a divine delight'). Yet the attempt to inhabit Atta seems botched, somehow, and Amis is unable to turn the sterile blocks of debased Wahabbist theology into something palpable and intimate.

'The Second Plane' is not a 'book about Islam', as one reviewer put it: it's really about what a world-historical event like September 11 does to the literary imagination. And it's an altogether more uncertain, agonised work than its critics have allowed. Amis devotes several pages to an account of how he abandoned a novella entitled 'The Unknown Known', which was narrated by an Islamist planning a terrorist operation of extravagant ingenuity.

'I was having a lovely time with it,' he recalls. 'But then I just got more and more uneasy about it. It wasn't fear of consequences, at least not hostile consequences for me and my family. It was more the idea that there would be consequences for my conscience, in that it wouldn't look tenable as a satirical idea. It was odd to feel any kind of inhibition. But politics impinges, world history impinges. Earlier in my writing life I used to think, blithely, that the imagination could exist without a relationship to power. But there's no way around it.'

'The Second Plane' is published by Cape at £12.99.

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