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Guardian book club with John Mullan



Time's Arrow by Martin Amis

Week four: readers' responses



John Mullan
The Guardian, Saturday 30 January 2010
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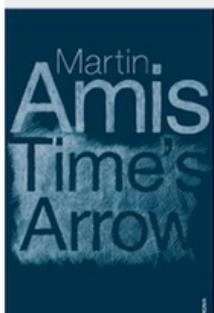
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Martin Amis interviewed for the Guardian Book Club Photograph: Martin Argles

The very last person to ask [Martin Amis](#) a question when he came to talk about *Time's Arrow* to the Guardian Book Club put his finger on something. "I wonder why you think you have been such a target over the years?" When he set out to be a writer, had he imagined that he would excite so much antagonism? "No I didn't – everyone was so nice to me when I began." He thought it was to do with his father. While taught not to mock any person for their background, we were all free to despise Prince Charles (and he could see good reasons to do so). "So I'm sort of the Prince Charles of literature." He had become the British novelist about whom "you can say absolutely anything you like".

Time's Arrow
by Martin Amis



Whatever the explanation, you only have to look at the comments on the Book Club website to confirm the impression of a writer who provokes readers – to denunciation or to delight. He is a "bigot"; he is empty of talent; he is brilliant, the most cunning satirist. The sceptics angrily complain that he has conned the book-buying public; the enthusiasts debate the ranking of their top five "MA novels". The complainers, to be sure, tend to brandish a word that, in another place, might be thought to praise: "clever". *Time's Arrow*, says one, is "a dismal book. Its purpose is to show off its own

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cleverness." "Yes, he's pretty clever," says another, "but he exhausted his brand of cleverness after *London Fields*."

Among the comments, there was more than one tagged "this comment has been removed by a moderator". Amis attracts dispute. We were discussing *Time's Arrow* on the very day that the author had created headlines by advocating "euthanasia booths" for aged

citizens who had tired of living. Some readers presumed he was winding us up. "I thought the booths for old people idea was hilarious. Especially when someone took it seriously."

So thought some of the audience. "Hearing you observe that the Holocaust began with euthanasia camps, I'm reassured that the comments reported about euthanasia booths were a kind of satire of attitudes to ageing." "No, I mean it quite seriously – it's utopian, of course, it will never happen." Amis embarked on a defence of the ailing individual's right to end it all. Another reader declared: "You cannot separate Auschwitz from the comments you just made about the old people . . . they are the same thing." Some of those who come to hear Amis speak do so, like this one, to argue with him, and the author seemed happy to take up the challenge. "To die is a noble and human privilege that we should all have."

Some accusations clearly do make him angry. Amis's recollection of being called antisemitic for *Time's Arrow* was indignant. In response to one reader's recollection of the novel's reader acceptance in America, he expressed his distaste for the ease with which such labels were used in Britain. But you couldn't help feeling that controversy also stirred him. There were some in the audience who were thinking more of his comments on political and religious issues than of a particular novel. One member of the audience asked him "what sort of a response you felt you had to the book from the Islamic world?" "It never crossed my mind." "You must have had some Muslim readers, surely." "Not as many as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* or *Mein Kampf*, which are perennial bestsellers in the Islamic world." Soon he and the reader were in a dispute about whether or not the *Qur'an* encouraged hatred of Jews.

Amis told us he had re-read *Time's Arrow* shortly before the Book Club event, with some "wincing" at the "indecorum" of its comic early pages. There was much discussion of how a writer "earned" the right to his descriptions (the metaphor was Amis's own). "I don't for a minute think I am explaining anything about the Holocaust." A secondary school teacher who had introduced some of her pupils to *Time's Arrow* spoke of having been told by her head that she was not allowed to teach the book. The author was sardonically delighted by the forbidding head's word – "inappropriate" – but surprisingly willing to accept the thought behind it. "I do think it's hairy . . . I would not champion it . . . It's the ghastliest possible subject."

By the end of the evening, perhaps the singular and clever novel with which we began had rather been left behind. Its achievement (as the author himself hoped) was not to offer some new comprehension of the Holocaust, but to activate the reader's knowledge and imagination (or imagination based on knowledge). A contributor to the Book Club website who had relished "the fluency, fluidity, elegance of it" cut through some of the huffing about how the Holocaust was being represented. He or she observed how the backwards chronology and the narrator's incomprehension made true representation the reader's task, not the novelist's. "What was the effect, on the reader, on this reader, of his going backwards? That may be a more interesting question, certainly a more answerable one."

John Mullan is professor of English at University College London. Join him and Peter Carey for a discussion of *Oscar and Lucinda* on Wednesday 3 February at 7pm, Hall One, Kings Place, 90 York Way, London N1 9AG. Tickets are £9.50 online (www.kingsplace.co.uk) or £11.50 from the box office: 020 7520 1490.

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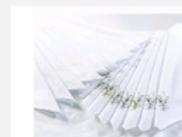
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