

The two faces of Amis

To supporters, he's one of the few public figures brave enough to speak the truth about Islam and the failures of multiculturalism. To opponents, he's just a mouthpiece for racism. So who is the real Martin Amis? Johann Hari finds out

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He seems nervous as he is photographed for this, his first interview since it became standard practice to dub him a racist on the front page of national newspapers. He offers me a slew of absurd compliments: he even tells our photographer I am "handsome", a claim not even my own grandmother would make. He then asks what I would like to drink. A Diet Coke, I say. "Ah," he replies. "The least cool of all drinks." He smiles, then vanishes, leaving me with the mountains of books.

And so I wonder anxiously how we are going to do this. In his new book, *The Second Plane*, Amis writes that 11 September 2001 was "a day of de-Enlightenment," the beginning of a global "moral crash", one that is still thudding and smashing all around us. But his battalions of critics believe this is an unwitting description of the author himself, a portrait of the artist as an ageing man. As the twin towers burned and fell, they believe Amis became radically de-Enlightened, and embarked on a "moral crash" where he mooted the collective punishment of all Muslims.

I try to start with getting-to-know-you chit-chat, asking what he missed about Britain when he was living abroad in Uruguay for two-and-a-half years. Impatient, he immediately brings up the topic I intended to nudge towards. "I was really impressed to come back and see how – I won't say multicultural – multiracial London is," he says. "Thrillingly multiracial. I lived in Queensway for a year when I was in my twenties, but going back to that area now, it's a whole other level of magnitude. It's very moving."

And he has always loved this multiracialism, he says. "At that time, I had a Pakistani girlfriend, I had an Iranian girlfriend, I had a South African girlfriend, all of whom were Muslim. It's interesting. The Iranian one – this is 1969 – was into mini skirts and discos because she was not an inhabitant of an Islamic republic but of a decadent monarchy 10 years before the revolution. The Pakistani girl was just beginning to kind of Westernise. You would – I don't know – just look at her and just feel eons between you." Because of her faith? (Martin is allergic to superstition). "No, no. There were plenty of religious girls. It was that she couldn't go out with me in public. I could go to her house, and I could be left alone in her room, a big house in High Street Kensington, but we absolutely couldn't be seen in public."

He was 22, and his Muslim amour was 21. "I was the first man she had ever kissed, and there were no tongues or anything. I was having a very hard time with girls at that point, and I thought, ah, a kiss." He didn't feel at that time that she was oppressed; it didn't enter his mind. "I was very respectful of it really, and I was fond of her, but she was very vulnerable, and I wouldn't have dreamt of..." He trails off. "No. It was after we kissed that I stopped going round." Was the South African girl the same? "No. She was Muslim, but she had no problems in that area," he says, and chuckles. He doesn't know what has become of any of them now.

So how did the man who courted Muslim girls, who says he loves the ethnic swirl of London, end up saying to an interviewer in the summer of 2006: "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 let them travel. Deportation, further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they're from the Middle East or Pakistan... Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children."

The quote floated past unnoticed until Professor Terry Eagleton fished it out to use in an introduction to a book last autumn – and *The Race Row* began. "I really am not racist, and I just don't feel it," Amis says, inhaling more nicotine. "You have to look at the timing of the thing. The third jihadist conspiracy in 13 months [to blow up a series of jumbo jets over the Atlantic] had just been exposed. My children were taking transatlantic flights all that summer. And – I know this is sublime-ridiculous – but I had just had someone come up from London to stay and they were telling me how they couldn't take a book on a transatlantic flight. I just thought this was a triumph for the forces of stupidity, literalism, ignorance, humourlessness." He says he isn't going to deny he felt that way, for a moment – but it wasn't a proposal, just a "thought experiment", and it wasn't "racist", just "retaliatory".

But is this true? Your impulse wasn't to retaliate against the people who committed the crime; no, your impulse was to moot punishing people who were innocent of any crime at all.

He replies haltingly: "It seems on actuarial, evidential grounds they [Muslims] are more likely to be interested in that [terrorism]. I'm assuming that 95 per cent at least of Muslims are longing to get their house in order, and hate this extremism. I said this to [the former Islamist] Ed Husain and he said yeah, about 95 per cent. So really the feeling was to say then, you can imagine a state would end up coming to the point where..." He pauses. "Say it [jihadi violence] was happening every couple of weeks; are you telling me the state wouldn't do something about it? It's worth thinking about..."

Amis adds quickly: "If it was white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who were doing this, do you think I would be inert about that? I would welcome restrictions on my own existence if it was going to suppress the level of violence."

This seems to be a defence of collective punishment, in certain circumstances. He has said that he was furious when his little daughter and her fluffy duck were searched at the airport, and wanted to snap: "Stick to young men who look like they're from the Middle East."

Do you advocate racial profiling then, Martin? "I'm not... I've never advocated it," he says. But you sound like you might, I say. "I would certainly... Well, some people say it's ineffective, which is very

counterintuitive, I would have thought. If you make a list of all the people who have committed terroristic acts and see what their provenance is, and if they turn out to be white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, search them. It's not a moral question. It's expediency, and something you hate to do, but if this increases, if this goes up a magnitude, these are questions we will face."

Yet he is clearly shaken by the accusation of racism: he spits out lines from the critical articles by Eagleton, Ronan Bennett and others verbatim. At one moment, it looks like his hand is shaking. He insists: "I don't think anyone sided with Eagleton... It's a self-evident absurdity to think that I'm sitting here hating at least a billion people. I don't have the capacity for that. It's always said that being a snob is very tiring because you can't come off duty. It's a real 18-hour-a-day job. Being a racist must knacker you to your last atom every half an hour."

Yes. But imagine that at the time of the 2006 Lebanon war, also unfolding that summer, a prominent novelist had adumbrated harassing and deporting Jews until they got "their" house in order. What would you have said, Martin? "It's completely meaningless," he replies. "Jews aren't blowing themselves up in London." But Muslims en masse aren't blowing themselves up either; a handful of individual Muslims are. The point of the "thought experiment" is that both scenarios – yours and mine – punish innocent people who have nothing to do with the crime, and no power over it.

He rides over this, talking instead about Israel. "I know it's a great tradition of the British left to support Palestine, but when you come up against this question, you can feel the intelligence and balance leaving the hall with a shriek, and people getting into this endocrinal state about Israel. I just don't understand it. The Jews have a much, much worse history than the Palestinians, and in living memory. But there's just no impulse of sympathy for that... I know we're supposed to be grown up about it and not fling around accusations of anti-Semitism, but I don't see any other explanation. It's a secularised anti-Semitism. Do you want another drink yet?"

Slightly thrown, I say no. And with that, he vanishes from the room, leaving clouds of black smoke in the air.

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Martin Amis's critics claim he is devolving into his father, the scowling, spitting misanthrope who somehow distilled the spirit of the 1950s into his novel *Lucky Jim*. Kingsley was, towards the end of his life, a militant defender of the Vietnam War and a harrumphing foe of feminism, and said of apartheid South Africa: "You should shoot as many blacks as possible."

I don't think this analysis of Martin is right – but when he returns clutching a beer, I ask him how Kingsley would have responded to September 11. He responds by unwittingly describing an image of himself in his own mind. "I think he would have been very staunch," he says. "I think he would have seen it as threatening everything he cared about, which it clearly does. I don't think he would have been racist." He lights another roll-up. "I don't think much is required of you to see that this is a manifestation of evil that we ought to be quite good at recognising – and which we're not."

Yet there are other descriptions of Kingsley that keep flickering past my mind as possible explanations for Martin's metamorphosis. Kingsley's closest friend, Philip Larkin, suspected that Kingsley "felt nothing deeply". One of Larkin's girlfriends said: "Kingsley wasn't just making faces all the time, he was actually trying them on. He didn't know who he was."

This seems like a working hypothesis, at least: that Martin has always been a great prose writer with nothing to say, casting around for a transcendent cause. He has flicked through the moral Rolodex of the concentration camps (with his novel *Time's Arrow*), environmental destruction (*London Fields*), nuclear weapons (*Einstein's Monsters*) and the Gulags (*House of Meetings*), and now alighted on the rubble of the World Trade Centre. Could it be this numbness that draws him time after time to apocalyptic scenarios? Is the global jihad just the latest apocalypse to lend gravity to his burning but hollow prose?

One more line about Kingsley comes to me. His second wife Jane said of him: "The truth was, I think, that he wasn't a political animal. It was more that he enjoyed the chappish company of people for whom politics was the social peg upon which they hung their conviviality."

Is this true of the son? I'm not sure. He does at times seem uncertain with his source material. In *The Second Plane*, he gets a quote from the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, seriously wrong, claiming that he justified the 7 July London suicide-murders, when he did no such thing. At times, he has seemed to misunderstand the nature of Shia Islam. He has not been to meet any Islamists to test his theories, even though you can find plenty in Finsbury Park, a few Tube stops away.

Martin has waded deepest into Kingsley territory when he chooses to promote the writings of a Canadian former disc jockey called Mark Steyn, whose recent book *America Alone* is a guidebook to a continent called Eurabia in the year 2020. Its old European shell looks familiar; "most of" the old cathedrals and boulevards "still stand" in Rome and London and Paris. But the Islamic National Republican Coalition has just won the French elections – only the latest nation-sized domino to fall to the Islamists. Alcohol is banned in the Netherlands and Denmark. The continent's women are veiled. The gay clubs are long since shuttered, "relocated to San Francisco". In Steyn's book, "mass evacuations" of white people began five years earlier as the "supposedly Greater France" began "remorselessly evolving month by month into Greater Bosnia". America is alone, the last country to resist being "reprimitivised".

Amis says Steyn is "a great sayer of the unsayable". Muslims are indeed reproducing at a faster rate than the rest of us, he says, and they will eventually outbreed us and become a majority: "One of the mathematical beauties of democracy is that you can look at the figures and be pretty sure how it's going to fall out. It's not PC. It's so saturated in revulsions that people can't go near it. [But] we should go near it... Just because there have been horrible abuses based on this [way of thinking] doesn't mean that it's not worth considering, or that it's so radioactive that you don't dare go near it. That is the defeat of reason."

I grimace. I loathe and detest Islamic fundamentalists just as much as Amis does – but this is going way beyond criticism of Islamic fundamentalism. It presents each new Muslim child as a problem. Amis concedes readily that Steyn "writes like a nutter" and is "a very unstable kind of mind", but quickly adds: "You've got to be able to talk about race... The hair-trigger sensitisation of this question is not rational, not healthy, not anything. It's a fetish. You know, he [Steyn] quotes Muslims as saying Europe will be an Islamic continent."

Well, sort of, I say. Steyn quotes two Muslims saying this: a random nutcase preacher from Sweden, and that renowned demographer Colonel Gaddafi. But his argument is filled with more holes than that, I add. The demographics are nothing like Steyn describes them – today, about 3 per cent of Europeans are Muslims, so it takes absurd arithmetic acrobatics to make them a majority this side of 2100, by which time it is far more likely that Muslims will have assimilated to European birth-patterns.

But Steyn's thesis presumes that virtually every Muslim – including women and gays – wants to live under a vicious theocracy, and that the (fantastical) moment they reach 50 per cent, they would vote as a block to turn Europe into the Ayatollah's Iran. "Well, that's an imponderable," Amis says. "Once they're a majority, you don't know, things change, the proportion that wants Sharia law is subject to expansion or contraction, but it's not stable. But [you can get] this sort of triumphalism that is common to all social groups and is strong in Islam. Bernard Lewis has said many times it is the nature of Islam to dominate, and how are you going to dominate if you are a majority? By impressing your culture on the surrounding culture."

Then he adds: "What are the figures about wanting Sharia law? I actually have a print-off somewhere of a quite thorough poll on questions like homophobia... They're certainly homophobic, [and] it says

in the Koran [you should] strike a woman on suspicion of disobedience. You can imagine a kind of creeping Sharia. I'm not saying that this would be an inevitable consequence, I'm saying that the situation is dynamic."

Could you really read Steyn's book, I ask, without finding it overtly racist? He talks about "the Yellow Peril" and "gooks". He notes nostalgically that "in the old days, the white man settled the Indian [sic] territory" whereas now the savages are settling us. He describes as "correct" a friend who talks about "beturbanned prophet-monkeys". Of course, Steyn denies this is connected to race, writing: "To agitate about what proportion of the population is 'white' is grotesque and inappropriate. But it's not about race; it's about culture." Yet it quickly becomes clear that, for him, "culture" is merely a thinly veiled mask for "race" – and then the mask slips entirely.

I quote Amis a sentence where Steyn appears to be gloating about more white babies being born. It reads: "Those who pooh-pooh the United States' comparatively robust demographics say they reflect nothing more than the fecundity of Hispanic immigration... In fact, white women in America still breed at a greater rate – 1.85 or so – than white women in Europe or Canada." Amis waves his hand through the air dismissively in response: "Aren't you being a little legalistic here in an attempt to... you're being over-vigilant. I don't think that's clinching at all," he says.

He then drags Steyn's arguments into a whole other swamp of reaction. "He doesn't even dare say it actually," he says, "but his thesis is that when you allow women to choose [through contraception and abortion], you will face demographic disaster, because they won't choose to have the necessary amount of children. The reason that America is the only First World country with a non-declining birth rate is because of all those things we hate about it, you know – [it's] patriarchal, church-going. I'm going to take this up because I think it's such an enormous question – has feminism cost us Europe?"

I pause. So are you saying we need to restore those misogynist values in Europe, to fend off a Muslim demographic tide? "My, that's an appalling idea," he says, smiling. "But I do think it is amazing, of the unsuspected weakness of the desire to reproduce, women don't want to have children. They may want one, but they don't want two or more. Who would have thought that? We thought that was an absolute basic human fact. It isn't."

Another cigarette is lit, and he says: "You only have to look at these demographic figures to know what you're going to get, and you've got it in Iraq... I mean, it's a gangplank to theocracy. What are they going to vote for? Iraq is a controlled experiment of what happens when you bring democracy to a country that isn't ready for it."

Again, he seems to be subconsciously seeing Muslims as a homogenous mass. I ask if he really views third-generation European Muslims as on a par with Iraqis emerging from the rubble of Saddamism and sanctions. "I don't know," he says. "I don't buy anyone's thesis on anything. It's not unreasonable to suppose a majority is going to assert itself. How thoroughly, in what form, how fundamentalistically, we won't know... But it has to be discussed. You mustn't start getting in a tizzy about white supremacism when you read these figures."

I feel the air freezing up with tension and stale smoke, so I decide to try a different tactic. I want to trace the moments where he has publicly changed his mind – always a brave act. It seems hard to remember it now, but in his immediate response to the September 11 massacres, he said that American foreign policy itself had played a role in smelting jihadism.

"It will be horribly difficult and painful for Americans to absorb the fact that they are hated, and hated intelligibly," he said, in a piece reprinted in full in *The Second Plane*. "How many of them know, for example, that their government has destroyed at least 5 per cent of the Iraqi population [through sanctions]?" He said the US population suffered from "a deficit of empathy for the sufferings of people far away", and would have to go through "a revolution in consciousness [and] adaptation of national

character: the work, perhaps, of a generation."

But today, he mocks people who offer these arguments, dubbing it "rationalist naivety". He says: "Contemplating intense violence, you very rationally ask yourself, 'What are the reasons for this?' It is time to move on. We are not dealing in reasons because we are not dealing in reason." For him now, jihadism is an irrational psychosis emerging in the void, an emanation of our most base instincts and nothing more. "It's pathological, it's always there – the subterranean world, where fantasies and violent urges, every now and again come to the surface disguised as ideas."

When I ask him about this initial response, he says brusquely: "Oh, by the end of the month I was finished with all that. But some people seem stuck there, in that rationalist response."

I have skidded into a conversational dead-end, where I am simply banging my head against his sentences – so I decide to offer praise instead. It was brave that you admitted last year to having some residual racist impulses, as we all inevitably do. "It's delusive to say that you are some kind of pious post-historical automaton [for whom] five million years of tribalism have just evaporated," you said, before adding: "I think I'm pretty free of racism, but I get little impulses, urges and atavisms now and then." What are they? Can you give an example? He looks irritated; my tactic has failed. "I must say I think you're slightly snark-hunting, because the racist impulse isn't there. I've never advocated anything of this kind, and I think the cynicism of Eagleton and Bennett is that they know I haven't done that."

"Can I just say something?" he says. "One of the reasons I reacted the way I did [in August 2006] is because I am protective of our multiracial society. I thought – they're going to fuck it up. Look at London, this amazing multiracial city, but there's a few miserable bastards, who through an absolutely vile brew of dreams of impotence, or omnipotence, and sadism, and the love of blood and sadism and horror, are going to ruin it for us. It wasn't just about protecting white people. A multiracial society is very vulnerable to that kind of thing." If he has racist impulses, then the anti-racist antibodies soon flood in after them.

Amis's cognitive dissonance seems to squat in the room, like a physical presence. With the right lobe of his brain, Amis tells me he loves our multiracial society, and he says it with vigour and rigour. I don't for a second think he's lying. But then, with the left lobe he passionately praises a writer who seems to me to be an outright racist, one who damns virtually all Muslims as secret Sharia-carriers and brags that the "white" birth-rate is still higher in the US. It is as though Amis has been fractured by the kerosene blast of September 11 into two people – and they aren't talking.

They continue to gabble over each other. Just a few minutes after wondering if feminism has drained women's will to reproduce and "lost us Europe", he tells me that his forthcoming novel – *The Pregnant Widow* – is a celebration of the sexual revolution and feminism. "I am a gynocrat," he says. "I think the world would be better if women ruled it." Feminism today is only in "its second trimester", he adds, and when it reaches delivery it will make the world an even better place.

And beneath the sound of ideologies clashing inside him, I can still trace remnants of Amis's left-wing late youth. He continues to advocate nuclear disarmament, saying that the existing nuclear powers should immediately begin working towards "the zero option". He is proud to have opposed the Iraq War, where he says "we have created a fresh kind of Hell".

As I stumble out into the Primrose Hill drizzle, I feel like I have been watching a boxing match in Amis's brain. He waves goodbye and shuts the door. I stand at the gate, wondering if the Steyn-hugging round-'em-up impulses will deliver a knock-out blow to the other Martin: the nuclear-disarming multiracialist who remembers his Muslim girlfriends with a sweet smile. I hope not. If the fantasies prevail, one of our best novelists will disappear, raving, into the long Eurabian night.

The Second Plane by Martin Amis is published on Thursday (Jonathan Cape, £12.99). To order a copy

for the special price of £11.99 (free P&P) call Independent Books Direct on 0870 079 8897 or visit www.independentbooksdirect.co.uk. Martin Amis will be at the Vanbrugh Theatre, Rada, Malet Street, London WC1 on 27 February at 7pm (0845 456 9876).

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