

Welcome to Planet Blitcon

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Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie and Ian McEwan dominate British literature - and they're convinced that Islam threatens civilisation as we know it



The names of the most famous contemporary writers have become international brands. When they speak, the world listens. And increasingly, they speak not just through their fiction, but also via newspaper opinion pages, influential magazines, television chat shows and literary festivals. Novelists are no longer just novelists - they are also global pundits shaping our opinions on everything from art, life and politics to civilisation as we know it.

What we want from them is clear: insight into the human condition. From the most favourable conditions in human history, we have generated terror, war and a proliferation of tensions grounded in mutual fear and hatred. Humanity is unquestionably in need of help. But is it amenable to literary soundbites? Do literary pundits provide us with the best insight into our conundrums or serve as useful guides to the future?

The British literary landscape is dominated by three writers: Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie and Ian McEwan. All three have considered the central dilemma of our time: terror. Indeed, Amis has issued something of a manifesto on the subject he terms "horrorism". In their different styles, their approach and opinions define a coherent position. They are the vanguard of British literary neoconservatives, or, if you like, the "Blitcons".

Blitcons come with a ready-made nostrum for the human condition. They use their celebrity status to advance a clear global political agenda. For all their concern with the plight of the post-9/11 century, they do not offer a radical new outlook on the world. Their writing stands within a tradition, upholding ideas with deep roots in European consciousness and literature. They are by no means the first to realise that fiction can have political clout; but they are the first to appreciate the true global power of contemporary fiction, its ability to persuade us to focus our attention in a specific direction. How conscious Blitcons are of their traditionalism may be in question. But it is a question that must be put to them. Where are you coming from? And where do you want to take us?

The Blitcon project is based on three one-dimensional conceits. The first is the absolute supremacy of American culture. Blitcon fiction is orientalism for the 21st century, shifting the emphasis from the supremacy of the west in general to the supremacy of American ideas of freedom. This shift can be traced back to Allan Bloom, the influential academic and author of *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), who argued that American culture was the best in this best of all possible worlds. Bloom was a close friend of the novelist Saul Bellow, who promoted Bloom's ideas in his fiction: his 1970 novel about a "western-civ" thinker, *Mr Sammler's Planet*, is a good example. By the time Bellow wrote his last novel, *Ravelstein*, in 2000, his views had become more overtly aligned with the political establishment - it includes lightly fictionalised and highly sympathetic portraits of both Bloom and Paul Wolfowitz, the former Bush administration apparatchik, now head of the World Bank.

Bellow is the godfather of the Blitcon movement, and his influence on the thought and writing of Amis, Rushdie and McEwan is obvious. Like Bellow, Amis is obsessed with the preservation of the canon. *The War Against Cliché* (2001) insists that "there is only one type of writing - that of talent". But who are the talented ones? Only those who are part of the western canon, which happens to be "wall-to-wall white men": writers such as John Updike, Anthony Burgess, Gore Vidal and Vladimir Nabokov. Women (apart from Jane Austen) and non-western writers (apart from the Islam-hating V S Naipaul) need not apply.

If we are to read McEwan's beliefs and intentions through his fiction, the western canon is the very essence of humanity. His novel *Saturday* (2005) is set on 15 February 2003, when almost two million people marched in London to protest against the imminent invasion of Iraq. Its neurosurgeon protagonist, Perowne, is a "professional

reductionist" who cannot appreciate great literature. In order to cure him, his daughter, Daisy, spoonfeeds him Flaubert, Tolstoy and other "Great Writers". We are supposed to see this as a joke. But the joke evaporates as soon as we realise that *Saturday* really assigns a mystical dimension to western literature: the poetry of Matthew Arnold not only serves as an antidote to brutish violence, but literally saves the day at the end of the novel. As a corollary, we are forced to conclude, those who have never read *War and Peace*, for example, are not fully human.

The second Blitcon conceit is that Islam is the greatest threat to this idea of civilisation. Rushdie's suspicion of and distaste for Islam is obvious in his novels *Midnight's Children* (1981), *Shame* (1983) and *The Satanic Verses* (1988). References to Islam in *Midnight's Children* can be read as deliberately insulting: even the most basic Islamic term, "Allah" (linguistically the monotheistic One God), comes in for a specious hammering: "Al-Lah has been named after a carved idol in a pagan shrine built round a giant meteorite." In *Shame*, Rushdie describes Islam as a mythology that cannot survive close examination, but in *The Satanic Verses* it becomes an abomination. The novel imagines a rival life of the Prophet Muhammad, complete with historical details and every orientalist stereotype imaginable. As the product of the paranoid delusions of a violent, sexually perverted businessman, *The Satanic Verses* suggests, Islam runs contrary to every decent value known to man. The message is reinforced in *Shalimar the Clown* (2005). The protagonist of the novel, Shalimar, turns from a loveable clown and tightrope walker into a fuming terrorist. But what motivates his fury? The sexual betrayal of his wife and the fanatical zeal of an "Iron Mullah" who forces people to build mosques and shroud their women in burqas. In Rushdie's world, a humane interpretation of Islam is a total impossibility.

The idea that the religion and culture of Islam are a threat to civilisation as we know it is also the basis of Amis's "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta", a story first published in the *New Yorker* in April 2006. On his way to the twin towers, Muhammad Atta thinks of paradise: "Ah, yes, the virgins: six dozen of them - half a gross. He had read in a news magazine that 'virgins', in the holy book, was a mistranslation from the Aramaic. It should be 'raisins'. He idly wondered whether the quibble might have something to do with 'sultana', which meant (a) a small seedless raisin, and (b) the wife or a concubine of a sultan. Abdul-aziz, Marwan, Ziad, and the others: they would not be best pleased, on their arrival in the Garden, to find a little red packet of Sun-Maid Sultanas (Average Contents 72)."

The suggestion that a ridiculous mistranslation has become the substance of a sacred text is a superannuated joke. Its purpose is to portray the Koran as absurd - so absurd it does not even motivate Atta, the man who has decided to sacrifice his life and murder so many others. But why would he hate America? Is it because of a sense of injustice? Portraying this would require a serious feat of imagination. Instead, Amis suggests that Atta became a jihadi simply because it was "the most charismatic idea of his generation". But this jihadi is motivated by the characteristic flaw inculcated by Islam: hatred of women. In particular, a woman he once saw on a plane: a "swinishly luxurious" air hostess. The only thing Atta wants to do to this woman is to "hurt it". Just as, for Rushdie, Islam is so flawed that it cannot be interpreted humanely, Amis can't engage with it on any level other than that of a (bad) joke.

The third Blitcon conceit is that American ideas of freedom and democracy are not only right, but should be imposed on the rest of the world. The extent to which this conviction has become central to these writers' thought can be traced by Rushdie's surprising progression, over the past 20 years, from political left to centre right. Rushdie's fiction is more nuanced than that of Amis or McEwan, and he was an outspoken champion of multiculturalism during the 1980s. All that, however, changed when Ayatollah Khomeini, enraged at *The Satanic Verses*, issued a fatwa sentencing him to death in 1989. During that period, Rushdie divided the world into "the darkness of religion" and "the light of secularism". When he moved to New York in the 1990s, the US became an embodiment, for him, of ideal secularism. In his columns for the *New York Times*, collected in *Step Across This Line* (2002), he denounced criticism of America as "appalling rubbish" and "sanctimonious moral relativism".

The main two-part essay in *Step Across This Line* argues that the US is a frontier civilisation. But at the beginning of the 21st century, the frontier has become the whole world and America can legitimately lay claim to any part of the globe. The irony that the disparity of power now permits the US to do to the world what it did to the Native Americans is totally lost. In the defence of American liberties, Rushdie declares, "we must send our shadow warriors against their shadow warriors".

As the frontier becomes global, the cosmic battle shifts from old evils to new, constructed evils. For Rushdie, the main adversary of a humane and enlightened American empire is the evil of the Taliban, "the cruellest regime on earth". He described the invasion of Afghanistan as "the cleansing of those stables by the United States". Cruel they certainly are, but are we to believe that the Taliban would ever bring down a western civilisation led by the only hyperpower that possesses more firepower than all the empires of history put together?

McEwan does not see the world in such Manichaeian terms. *Saturday* is subtle enough to give a dual warning against both interventionist and isolationist politics. But that doesn't stop McEwan from taking sides: to argue for peace, he declares, is to side with torture. The iPod generation, he suggests, has no idea about genocide and torture, mass graves, and the totalitarian states created by the Islamists. In the final analysis, the "religious nazis" are going to bring

western civilisation crashing down.

Amis is much more direct. For him, pure evil is embodied by Hamas and Hezbollah, the representatives of "Islamism", which, he told the *Jewish Chronicle*, is "vile and poisonous", a cult "so virulent, so irrational and so exterminatory" that it can only be compared to the Third Reich. No attempt is made to understand why our age has produced the likes of Hamas and Hezbollah: their emergence has nothing to do with Israeli or American policies, or the politics and warfare of the past five decades. The trick is to present them as inexplicable, irrational cults divorced from geopolitics and reality. This is what Amis does in "The Age of Horrorism" (2006). Complete with quotes from the American neoconservative ideologues Paul Berman and Bernard Lewis, this essay suggests that the religiously motivated murderous intent of suicide bombers is unique to Islam - a "maximum malevolence". The connection, for Amis, is self-evident. Global history does not need to be consulted, while America's infractions are glossed in a sentence: "extraordinary rendition, coercive psychological procedures, enhanced interrogation techniques, Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, Haditha, Mahmudiya, two wars, and tens of thousands of dead bodies". This is nothing compared to the Islamic ideology of "an abattoir within a madhouse".

Another exercise is beyond the reach of any of the Blitcons. There are exotic creatures they cannot imagine in their fictions and diatribes: the generality of Muslims, people who believe in something other than the Blitcons' understanding of Islam, people who live humdrum lives on the streets of Bradford, Karachi or Jakarta, people far removed from the festering imagination of the Blitcon. Amis has never even met an ordinary Muslim in his life.

But I lie. He has met one. In "The Age of Horrorism", Amis tells us that in Jerusalem he came face to face with the "maximum malevolence" of an Islamist, the gatekeeper at the Dome of the Rock. Amis writes that he wanted to enter the mosque in contravention of some "calendric prohibition" - there are none, actually - which led to a transformation in the gatekeeper: "His expression, previously cordial and cold, became a mask; and the mask was saying that killing me, my wife, and my children was something for which he now had warrant." By the simple observation of facial expression, Amis was able to divine the entire plot. But might it not be that the humble gatekeeper had never encountered such an obnoxious, arrogant and ignorant tourist?

Presumably, facial expressions explain Amis's claim that only one thing does not fit in multicultural Britain: Islam. How does this fit with the lives of the doctors, teachers, policemen, businessmen, entrepreneurs, bankers, solicitors, academics, scientists and even other writers and novelists as well as postmen, bakers and candlestick makers who are British Muslims living ordinary lives and making their contributions to British society? Perhaps they should change their facial expressions, acquire a new set of teeth and smile a bit more in the face of the avalanche of Islamophobia they have to endure.

It is not only Muslims who cannot dissent from Blitcons' grand fictions. In *Saturday*, McEwan describes everything in the most minute, interminable and intrusive detail. Nothing escapes his notice, from meticulous research into the techniques and terminology of brain surgery to the choice of clothes in which to play a Saturday game of squash - except, that is, the political and social motivations that brought a cross-section of British society together to demonstrate against the war in Iraq, the *raison d'être* of his novel. The demonstration is there only as a menacing backdrop.

The real world is not a fiction. The ideology of mass murder has a history and a context in all its perversity and evil. But the wild imaginings of the Blitcons are not an appropriate guide to the eradication of this horror. Turned to this end, the manipulative power of literary imagination is nothing but spin. And such spin is simply hatred answering, mirroring and matching hatred. Like minds reach across intervening swaths of the world and, in their hatred, embrace each other. That is all Blitcons tell us. But it is hardly enlightening for those of us desperate to find a sustainable path from destruction and slaughter.

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