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## Why Martin Amis won't shut up about feminism

Pregnant Widow writer blames gender majority for losing its 'nerve',

Article

Published On Fri Nov 20 2009

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By **Geoff Pevere**  
 Entertainment Columnist

Martin Amis is talking about Sept. 11, 2001, by way of Franz Kafka.

Specifically, he's citing one of Kafka's stories – "Josephine the Singer," about a mouse who sings opera – as a way of explaining how the events of that morning redrew the map of his world.

"When she sings," says Amis between sips of espresso, "thousands of mice sit there in silence listening to her. And after a few minutes one mouse in the audience turns to the next mouse and says 'Sing? She can't even squeak!'"

He sets cup in saucer. "That's what the writer felt on September the 12th. Sing? We couldn't even squeak."

Amis, who is 61 years old and one of the most famous, articulate and contentious writers in the English language, was in Toronto to deliver a lecture in the Grano Speaker Series on the neither uncontroversial nor atypical subject of "Al Qaeda and Feminism."

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In Amis's mind the two concepts are uneasily but inextricably linked. Had the latter not suffered a "loss of nerve" by "demoting itself beneath multiculturalism," the former might have been erased from existence by now.

"It's pathetic that the shadow of the race question mutes everything else," says Amis, whose long-gestating new novel, *The Pregnant Widow*, allegedly takes on feminism, the sexual revolution and what he calls "Islamism." You might say the boy is asking for it.

"Let's look at Islam and Islamism on purely feminist grounds," he says. "It's self-evident that it's horrible the way they treat women. They have completely different ideas about what a woman is, the status of a woman. So why does the gender issue trump the racial one? The fact is women are not a minority. They're bigger than any nation, bigger than any religion or culture or tradition."

This is where that previously cited feminist "loss of nerve" comes in. It's also the kind of sentiment – at once provocative and thoughtful, reasonable and enraging – that has left Amis open to all manner of intemperate name-calling. He has been called a racist, a misogynist and a hate-monger. He has been accused of dilettantish dallying in politics when he should be writing novels. He has been told, perhaps in more languages than he's even been published in, to just shut up.

He sees no reason why he should. Nor does he see any meaningful distinction between his



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opinions on politics and his profession as a novelist. It's all a matter of inspiration.

"I don't think the writer has any duty whatever to respond to current events," Amis clarifies. "As Nabokov said, if you write about what's going on, by the time the book comes out your preoccupations are revealed as being 'bloated topicalities.' But I don't think this is a bloated topicality. I think it's fascinating and horrifying to see irrationality at work on such a scale. And fascinating to see apologists for it among the left."

Here's what the novelist says happened on the morning of Sept. 12, 2001. He woke up and his world had changed, and he felt compelled to understand how. But what drove him was exactly the same thing that makes him pull words from inside and put them on paper.

"I felt no duty to do it," he says. "The throb that you feel when you're thinking about a short story, the desire to write it – you have to have that to write about politics as well. And without that prompting I certainly wouldn't do it."

The throb in this case was the soul-rattling aftershock of something that wasn't supposed to happen. At least not in his time.

"I didn't expect there to be an event of that size in my lifetime," he says. "I was an absolute child of the Cold War. The nuclear race began (on Aug. 29, 1949) four days after I was born. Russia's first test. So I had those four days where I could relax and take it easy. Then I was conscripted, just like everyone else, into the Cold War."

Then, decades later, the thaw: the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, followed by the complacent quiet of a world that seemed to have finally settled into some kind of peaceful stability. Until that morning.

As shocked as Amis was by events themselves, it was the reaction among intellectuals, mostly but not exclusively on the left, that left him gobsmacked.

"Interesting timing in that it happened after a generation of relativism," he explains. "So that when the event happened there were no sort of rules to discuss it because everyone's so terror-stricken about seeming racist."

"There wouldn't be an argument at all if Al Qaeda originated in Norway or white South Africa or the deep south of America," Amis insists. "There just wouldn't be a debate. Everyone would be perfectly clear how they felt about it."

If Amis is quick to reject any suggestion that his status as a controversial commentator on global politics is motivated by anything other than sincere passion, he is unconditionally dismissive of the idea that he's a cynic.

"Even the darkest writers are in fact lovers of life," he explains. "It's an amorous business, being a writer. Updike said of Nabokov, 'His is essentially an amorous style.'"

"Put it this way. I have tremendous faith in the human as an individual. It's when they get together that things go wrong. When there's more than one of them, that's when you're in trouble.

"It only takes two to make a mob."

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