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Book of the week

Beware the nut-rissole artists

Does Martin Amis's *The Second Plane* have anything useful to tell us about 9/11, wonders Christopher Tayler

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The Second Plane: September 11, 2001-2007

by Martin Amis

224pp, Jonathan Cape, £12.99

Newspaper readers have been starved of reports on the current state of Martin Amis's political consciousness for nearly 10 weeks. But here come his collected writings on September 11, 2001. *The Second Plane* begins with a piece he published in the *Guardian* a week after the attacks. His "utopian" suggestion: the people of Afghanistan "should not be bombarded with cruise missiles; they should be bombarded with consignments of food, firmly marked LENDLEASE USA". Five years later, he was telling an interviewer from the *Times* that "they" - he was referring to "the Islamists" but clearly meant Muslims in general - are "gaining on us demographically at a huge rate ... We're just going to be outnumbered". There was, he said, "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 letting them travel. Deportation - further down the road ... Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children." What happened?

Amis's own answer comes in several parts. In a rather creepily mock-flirtatious open letter to Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, a columnist for the *Independent*, he explained that his remarks on collective punishment were "a thought experiment, or a mood experiment". ("My mood, I admit, was bleak - how I longed, Yasmin, for your soothing hand on my brow!") He had "merely adumbrated", rather than advocated, ideas he'd nursed "for a day or two" in "the immediate aftermath" of the security clampdown over an alleged plot to blow up transatlantic flights. More generally, having spent a couple of years in Uruguay reading up on such figures as Sayyid Qutb, an influential thinker in extremist Sunni circles, he has reached various conclusions about political Islam. "Reluctant to see what it is they confront", left-liberal types, he feels, have got things wrong. "The middle ground," he sensed on returning to the UK, "was not where it used to be."

Since he had also been reading Paul Berman, a liberal hawk who argues that both Islamism and secular Arab tyrannies such as Saddam's can usefully be compared to Nazism and Stalinism, this sounds as though Amis has decided that invading Iraq was a sensible move. But on the evidence of the essays, reviews and two short stories gathered here, his quarrel with the average "relativist" turns out to be much more specialised. The Iraq war, he thinks, was a bad idea from the start, leaving its architects with an "enfeebled hold on the high ground of morality and reason". Bush is "unscrupulous", his religiosity disquieting. And while he's quick to detect anti-semitism in criticism of Israel, Amis is still happy to go into print calling for "the

dismantling of the illegal settlements" in the occupied territories.

So what part of the liberal consensus has he broken with? It turns out that he's gunning for what he sees as the pro-al-Qaida left, a constellation of opinion he finds worryingly influential. "Given the choice between George Bush and Osama bin Laden, the liberal relativist, it seems, is obliged to plump for the Saudi" - and Amis won't stand for that. "Those vast pluralities all over the west" that wish to see "a Fertile Crescent bridle-deep in gore" in order to enjoy Bush's humiliation - these attract his disdain. So do those who give credence to the apparently "thriving" notion that the London suicide bombings were arranged by the government "in order to 'distract' the 'public' from its other 'crimes'". In the course of an appearance on Question Time, Amis saw an audience member winning applause with a flakily anti-American rant. "This was not equivalence; this was hemispherical abjection."

Reading these tirades, it's hard not to get the feeling that Amis is responding to a writerly need for a steady supply of foolishness to scourge rather than any urgent political threat. When Christopher Hitchens sets out to emulate Orwell's bashings of second world war-era pacifists by chastising the left for not supporting the Iraq war, he's grappling with a sizeable constituency. Amis is taking aim at conspiracy theorists and people who think that the Arab world's grievances not only help create support for terrorism but make it a good thing: a fairly marginal view. As for what his targets are "reluctant to see" about the true nature of suicide terrorism, it's not much of an exaggeration to say that his cardinal insight into "lethal self-bespatterment", as he calls it, is that suicide bombers are "abnormally interested in violence and death". The London bombers, he maintains, were murderous cultists rather than righteous avengers. Again, his embattled tone on this point seems unnecessary.

How did Amis - who has written some good novels and used to be a sharp and funny critic - end up throwing so much effort into arguing that suicide bombers are interested in death? It's not easy to say, but his sense of himself as a novelist seems to be part of the problem, and not only because it often makes him address September 11 from the perspective of "the writer", with digressions on FR Leavis and so on. "All of us are excited by what we most deplore," he once wrote in a review of a book by Joan Didion, "especially," as Miss Didion says in another context, "if we are writers'." This is certainly true of Amis, who has steeped himself in the literature of September 11, though part of him seems to disapprove of its appeal. (Hence, maybe, his otherwise mysterious emphasis on "boredom" as a key by-product of terrorism: to a Nabokovian aesthete, this is powerful dispraise.)

Judging from the stories reprinted in *The Second Plane*, and the pages from his abandoned novella in the newest issue of *Granta*, terrorism isn't a workable subject for Amis's brand of fiction. In his op-eds, on the other hand, he seems more like a novelist than a political writer, inhabiting ideas like characters, trying to bring them to life and dramatise opposing viewpoints. The arguments that stimulate his imagination aren't automatically good ones: it's less boring to picture your nine-year-old daughter's forced marriage under a global Islamist caliphate than it is to lay out a series of judicious qualifiers. It's also more novelistic to personalise things, to embody abstract arguments in resonant details, and for Amis this usually comes down to the details of radical Islam's version of "the male idea". *Outb*, for example, would have been less puritanical, the novelist suggests bathetically, had he not lacked the wherewithal to get laid.

His arguments draw on various sources, with Berman exerting the strongest influence. Hitchens and Sam Harris beef up the muscular secularism, and Bernard Lewis helps with the Islamic background. But the most depressing piece in the book opens with the following sentence: "Mark Steyn is an oddity: his thoughts and themes are sane and serious - but he writes like a maniac." Steyn, a jocose Canadian columnist, is the author of a US bestseller detailing the Islamofascist takeover of Europe that's being brought about, he says, by a low non-Muslim birth rate resulting from social liberalism and profligate welfare states.

Amis's claims about "the Islamists" in the Times interview - "A quarter of humanity now and by 2025 they'll be a third" - were presumably inspired by Steyn's work. On the page, he distinguishes more carefully between Muslims and extremists, though unexamined nativist assumptions creep in from time to time. (In the US, "with some Hispanic assistance", he writes, the birth rate is much healthier.) Whoever "we" are - and when he's feeling sage-like Amis uses "we" nearly as often as Macaulay - we probably aren't Muslims or immigrants, assimilated or not. And the more outrageous a group's nominal spokesmen are, the more that group can be the object of wide-angle generalisations. "Mystical, volatile, and masochistic, and so violent that a protest about bus fares can leave thirty dead, Iranians, one might respectfully suggest, are not yet ready for" ... nuclear weapons? But that wouldn't be a sufficiently ingenious way of putting it. Iranians, Amis writes, are not yet ready for "the force that drives the sun".

"If September 11 had to happen," he says in the introduction to *The Second Plane*, "then I am not at all sorry that it happened in my lifetime." His fans might not feel the same way. To some extent, the heavily self-parodic aspects of the enterprise - at one point he reports on treating Tony Blair to a disquisition on the Shia, whom he compared to "nut-rissole artists" - make the crazy-uncle outbursts less alarming. As he says elsewhere, though, it's "as if September 11 brought about a net increase in suggestibility". And not all of the voices he's been listening to come from "the high ground of morality and reason". Amis might say that no one hears only from there: look at Dickens's revenge fantasies during the Indian Mutiny. Even so, the writings collected here add nothing to his reputation.

• This article was amended on Tuesday January 29 2008.

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