

Review: The Second Plane by Martin Amis

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Sameer Rahim reviews *The Second Plane: September 2001-2007* by Martin Amis

In Martin Amis's novel *House of Meetings* (2006), a man writing to his step-daughter about his time in the Russian gulag is worried she will misunderstand his "appetite for generalisations".

How can he speak of "Russian heavy-handedness", "Russian drunkenness" and "Russian kindness"? Our narrator, however, has come to realise that making sense of Russian terror requires an understanding of an unchanging "Eastern" character. It does not require reason.

The Second Plane is a new collection of essays and short stories that tries to make sense of September 11, 2001. Arranged in chronological order, the book serves as a memoir of Amis's shifting responses to the attacks for which, he writes in his introduction, he at first sought a "morally intelligible" explanation.

This is partly true. His first piece, written on September 18, shows he was afraid ("The temperature of planetary fear has been lifted towards the feverish") and angry ("Violence must come; America must have catharsis"). But he also managed to ask a difficult question: how many Americans knew that its government "had destroyed at least five per cent of the Iraqi population"?

In June 2002 Amis was optimistic that novel writing - sharply defined as "reason at play" - could help in the current global climate; he praised Joyce's *Ulysses* for its exemplary investigation of "clichés" and "unexamined formulations".

But the war on cliché doesn't last. On the same page, the television shows him the "writhing moustaches of Pakistan, prophesying civil war"; in the same piece he writes of the "medieval agonism of Islam".

When he came to write the centrepiece of this book - a 50-page essay called "Terror and Boredom: the Dependent Mind", published in 2006 - he had, like his fictional Gulag survivor, grown wary of "rationalist naiveté".

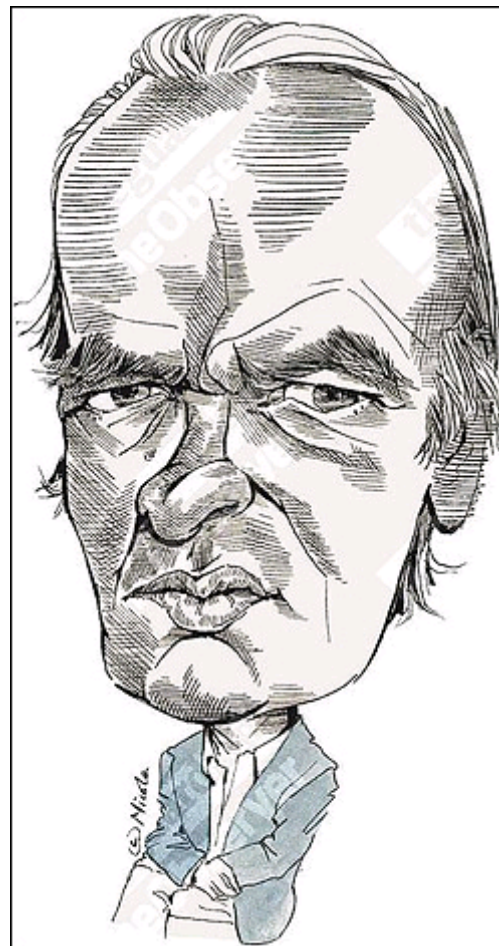
All religions, wrote Amis, are repositories of "ignorance, reaction and sentimentality". Since "we are hearing from Islam" in the form of terrorist attacks, it must be examined ahead of all others. In the Islamic East, "we acknowledge, almost every living citizen ... is intimately defined by religious belief". The "civil war" between moderate and extreme Islam "appears to be over": the extremists have won.

Another problem is Islam's attitude to women. Some internet research into one cleric's views on marriage yields a "cataract of pedantry and smut"; a news magazine shows him a Saudi newscaster beaten to a "crimson pulp" by her husband, apparently because she answered the telephone.

Amis concludes that "the impulse to rational inquiry is by now very weak in the rank and file of the Muslim male".

It is a shame that Amis has forgotten his generous words from *Koba the Dread* (2002), his study of the Soviet Union, where he wrote that Stalin's "war against religion was part of the war against human nature".

In a later piece in the new collection he castigates "those sanguinary yokels, the Taliban" but he does not mention the context for their rise: the deaths of almost two million Afghan civilians since the Russian invasion in 1979 - a fact included in *Koba the Dread*.



Amis sometimes gets the facts wrong. "We now know what happens when Islamism gets its hands on an army (Algeria)", he warns, when the two were on opposing sides.

When complaining about the looting of the Baghdad Museum after the invasion of 2003, he carefully uses the phrase "Mesopotamian heritage" as though there were no Islamic artefacts worth stealing.

Although he writes of the "extreme incuriosity of Islamic culture", his view of the Islamic world is taken from the powerful images he has seen in the media. What is missing from these pages is a sense of everyday Muslim life.

Amis might learn something of this from novelists such as Attia Hosain or Naguib Mahfouz. Muslim feminists such as Nawal El Sadaawi or Fatima Mernisi might also enlighten him.

The short stories here are pointless and unpleasant. "In the Palace of the End" is a lurid imagining of one of Saddam Hussein's torture palaces. "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" features a constipated terrorist who sounds a lot like Martin Amis. ("The themes of recurrence and prolongation, he sensed, were already beginning to associate themselves with his last day").

In an earlier novel, *Yellow Dog* (2003), Amis had fun writing a tabloid editorial on the frustrations of airport security checks: "some gimp of a granny" is searched "while the dune rat called Zui'zide al Bomba sails past ... followed by his three best friends, Hijaq, Kydnap and Drugrun."

The tabloid's publisher agrees: "Anyone who looks remotely Arab should have their lives made an absolute torment for the rest of the century." The satire has now disappeared.

In "The Unknown Known", an extract from an unfinished novel recently published in *Granta* 100, a terrorist called Ayed - named after Improvised Explosive Device (IED) - has an accomplice called Truqbom. In "Terror and Boredom" Amis feels airport security "should stick ... to young men who look like they're from the Middle East".

Fear and anger have radicalised Amis. He needs to rethink before he completely transforms into one of his own vivid stereotypes.

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