

## Into the head of a terrorist

October 9, 2006

**The British author Martin Amis has a particular slant on the motives behind the September 11 hijackings, writes James Button.**

It has been Martin Amis month in Britain. The writer, now living in Uruguay, is back doing the media rounds for his new novella, *House of Meetings*. He has also had published two long pieces of journalism and a short story, *The Last Hours of Mohammed Atta*.

The articles address his latest preoccupation, Islamist terrorism and Islam. The story (included in *House of Meetings*) tries, with typical Amisian ambition, to get inside the head of a hijacker on the last day of his life, September 11, 2001.

By now Amis's approach is so familiar readers can tick the boxes: sentences straining for significance, the impulse to humour even in the most serious matters, the mandatory mention of his literary mentor, Saul Bellow. As Amis's Atta buckled himself in on flight 11, I half expected him to be reading Bellow's novel *Henderson the Rain King*.

But if Amis can be overblown, he can also be acute (and very funny). At an airport this week I remembered his insight - that the age of terrorism also produces its opposite, boredom - as I queued for 10 minutes to reach a machine that X-rayed my shoes. Having for years stuck with Amis on his grand and grandiose flights, I was keen to see what he would make of the flight of Mohammed Atta.

It is 4am on September 11 and Atta wakes up in a miserable motel in Portland, Maine. He cuts himself shaving, slips in the shower, studies his face with loathing. Later he will get killer headaches, luridly described. He has not had a bowel movement since May.

May? This was troubling. The idea that Atta might express self-hatred through bodily disgust is plausible. But it is old Amis territory: many of his male characters are physically, and with horror, falling apart. And the author's weakness for obscure words was distracting: his protagonist watches an old person stick out a "marfanic thumb". Was this a story about Atta or Amis?

Two forces drive Amis's Atta. One, he is not religious. He doesn't think he'll get the 72 virgins in paradise. Nor, although he hates America, is he especially political. He joined the jihad because it was



Searching for insight ... Martin Amis's latest writings follow his preoccupation with Islam and terrorism.

Photo: Julian Andrews

"the most charismatic idea of his generation. To unite ferocity and rectitude in a single word: nothing could compete with that."

Why does rectitude matter so much to him? Here Amis has one - possibly brilliant - idea. It is about women.

His Atta, while flying on a Spanish airline in 1999, saw 15 or 16 white-robed, turbaned men suddenly crowd into the aisle and get to the floor, "humped in prayer". Over the intercom the captain ordered them to return to their seats or he would return to Dubai. A stewardess appeared - tall, long-necked, beautiful: "swinishly luxurious". The effect on Atta is electric. He watches her bellow at the prostrate men: "Vamos, arriba, c---!" Let's go, get up, she orders, cursing them with a word for female genitals. Atta "would never forget the face of the stewardess ... and how much he wanted to hurt it'."

It is an improbable scene. Is this, then, merely Amis resuming his favourite theme of shrunken masculinity? I don't think so. In his will the real Atta banned "unclean" women from attending his funeral.

One of the July 7 London bombers, Mohammed Siddique Khan, instructed his fellow terrorists in how they could look at women; on his martyr video he rants about real Muslim men (jihadis) and wimps (the rest). Before he killed the Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh, Mohammed Bouyeri tried to knife a young man he believed was having (consensual) sex with his sister. And so on.

In an article last month, "The Age of Horrorism" (it can be read on *The Guardian* website), Amis traced the sexual frustrations of the father of Islamist thought, Sayyid Qutb. While in America in 1949, Qutb became disgusted by - and obsessed with - what he saw as the lewdness of American women.

To Amis it leads to an inescapable conclusion. The suppression of women is not only breeding jihadis, it is caging Muslims in ignorance and backwardness. His answer: get girls into school, spark a women's revolution, spend some of the \$300 billion that was spent on Iraq on raising consciousness in the Islamic world.

It is an excellent thought. My problem is with the way Amis expresses it. Because, he writes, the Koran grants men sweeping powers over women and hence spares them the need to think, "no doubt the impulse towards rational inquiry is by now very weak in the rank and file of the Muslim male". It is women, then, who will save Islam. But this is surely a false duality; the sexes cannot be split so easily. Many Muslim women are also devout, as scornful of secularism as Amis is of faith.

Can Westerners find a way to talk about their differences with Muslims without being superior? This is hard: for many, the relative position of women is the conclusive evidence that shows why the West is better. But the sort of consciousness-raising Amis advocates would have to be done with humility or it would fail. To put it simply, I can't change you if I am not also open to the possibility that you have things to show me.

"It's their own past they [Muslims] are pissed off about; their great decline," Amis said in a recent interview. And: "They hate us for letting our children have sex and take drugs - well, they've got to stop their children killing people."

These generalisations have a note of contempt. It's a pity, because I reckon he's onto something

about the women.

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