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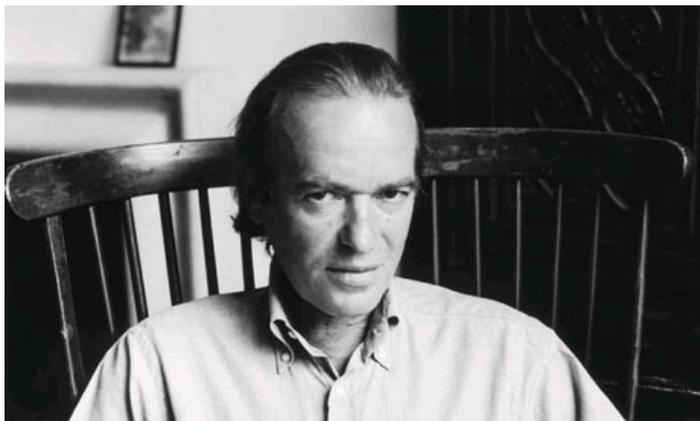
with John Mullan

Time's Arrow by Martin Amis

Week one: reverse chronology



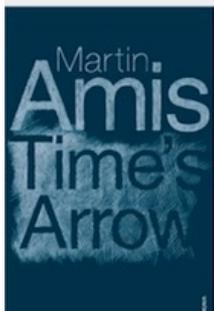
John Mullan
The Guardian, Saturday 9 January 2010
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Martin Amis. Photograph: Jane Bown

Time's Arrow is not the first novel with a reverse chronology, but no other novel has reversed time so conscientiously. Most narratives that run backwards do so in substantial sections of forward narrative. Sarah Waters's *The Night Watch*, for instance, is composed of three sections labelled, in turn, "1947", "1944" and "1941". The breaks between these sections jolt us back in time to see the causes of consequences we have already observed. Similarly, the six main sections of Don DeLillo's *Underworld* take us back in steps from 1992 to 1951, while Harold Pinter's play *Betrayal* is a study of adultery whose succeeding scenes take us back over the course of some nine years.

Time's Arrow
by Martin Amis



In all these cases, the separate episodes run forwards. *Time's Arrow*, however, truly reverses chronology. The protagonist gets younger, the universe contracts. Action is like a film being run backwards. In an Afterword Amis acknowledges his debt to "a certain paragraph – a famous one – by Kurt Vonnegut". This is the passage in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* where the hero, Billy Pilgrim, watches a backwards-run film of American bombing of Germany in the second world war. As cities rebuild themselves, the planes retrieve their bombs by "a miraculous magnetism". "When



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the bombers got back to their base, the steel cylinders were taken from the racks and shipped back to the United States of America, where factories were operating night and day, dismantling the cylinders, separating the dangerous contents into minerals".

We have all seen film rewind, and so can visualise the details in *Time's Arrow*. A letter in the fire "unbuckles, turning from black to even

white in the heat and delivering itself into our outstretched hand".

Destruction and creation take each other's place, which is appropriate enough: the novel's protagonist, good American doctor Tod Friendly, was once Nazi Dr Odilo Unverdorben. In the early chapters, with time running backwards, the American medic is conscientiously helping "demolish the human body" in some New England hospital: stitches are removed, knives and glass fragments reinserted, mangled bodies sent back to the streets. This is a penance, in reverse. In later chapters, he is returning Jews from ash to flesh to emaciated life, and then reuniting them with their loved ones. Narrative forces him back to what he has fled, but tricks the evil out of it.

Narrative technique is strictly applied. Amis permits his narrator, a soul-like observer imprisoned in Tod's body, one latitude. Sucked back from "the blackest sleep" into old age and smalltown America, he first hears speech backwards. "Aid ut oo y'rrah?" goes the phatic greeting. But he can "translate this human warble", and for the rest of the novel he does so. Speech is still being sucked backwards: late in the book he comments on how "pushy" German sounds, "beginning every sentence with a verb like that". But dialogue in the novel consists of sentences that move in the usual direction. Only the order of those sentences is reversed. Strangely, dialogue sometimes makes good sense backwards. Particularly, as our narrator himself observes, some of the "man-woman stuff". When Tod, a dedicated if misfiring womaniser, talks to his latest inamorata, the exchanges have no sensible direction: "you could run them any way you liked – and still get no further forward". "You're very special to me." "Like hell." "But I love you." "I can't look you in the eye." "Please. You can sleep over." "This is goodbye, Tod." "Is this forwards, or backwards? Later in the novel (earlier in time) a conversation between Odilo and the fascist-sympathising priest who is helping him escape justice replays the circling habit of the untouched reassurer. "I understand." "In a situation like that certain acts suggested themselves." "I understand, my son." "The situation was mad and impossible." "There's no need to say."

Reverse chronology mocks what we know. New York cabs finally make sense. "They're always there when you need them. . . . They always know where you're going. No wonder we stand there, for hours on end, waving goodbye, or saluting – saluting this fine service". You can at last see the point of a chess game as, via "episodes of contortion and crosspurpose", the players finally, agonisingly work it out. "One final tug on the white pawn, and perfect order is restored." The plain-speaking narrator observes how, in his reversed chronology, "the gibbering hippies and spaced-out fatsoes" who go to Vietnam "come back all clean and sane and fine, after a spell in the war".

Some have objected to the filmic jokiness, given where this narrative is – "unpreventably" – heading, back to the protagonist's black heyday as a camp doctor at Auschwitz. But the jokes are strictly necessary. They encourage the reader to turn disorientation into logic. Unverdorben's boss "Uncle Pepi" (Josef Mengele) parodied kindness as he selected the victims for his unspeakable experiments, and the weird narrative trick of reversal suddenly enables it all to make sense. Life is being restored. The novel's technical audacity shifts it away from presumption – from purporting to describe the horrors we infer. Instead the reader, whose imagination history has stocked with images enough, has to keep working out what has really happened.

John Mullan is professor of English at University College London. Join him and [Martin Amis](#) for a discussion on Monday 25 January at 7pm, Hall One, Kings Place, 90 York Way, London N1 9AG. Tickets are £9.50 online (www.kingsplace.co.uk) or £11.50 from the box office: 020 7520 1490.

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