

A crisis of testosterone

Review by Lionel Barber

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The Second Plane: September 11, 2001-2007

By Martin Amis

Jonathan Cape £12.99, 224 pages

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Martin Amis has long ventured where ordinary mortals fear to tread. His latest book, a collection of previously published essays, short stories and reviews, deals with the September 11 terrorist attacks and the political aftermath. In his words, 9/11 was "a day of de-Enlightenment", an epochal event which triggered a generational struggle between a rational west and radical Islam.

Subjecting September 11 to literary treatment looks like the ultimate conceit. Amis is unapologetic: "Geopolitics may not be my natural subject but masculinity is. And have we ever seen the male idea in such outrageous garb as the robes, combat fatigues, suits and ties, jeans, tracksuits, and medics' smocks of the Islamic radical?"

So now we know. The world is witnessing not so much a clash of civilisations as a crisis of testosterone. This crisis translates into sexual frustration, humiliation and inadequacy. Manliness and male insecurity are, of course, themes amply and intimately explored in the Amis oeuvre going back to his student days at Oxford. Is this a happy coincidence or is England's one-time enfant terrible simply being frivolous when applying psycho-historical analysis to a great faith such as Islam?

In his story "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" the author's tone is deadly serious. Amis solemnly retraces the final journey of the fanatic who piloted the first plane into the Twin Towers. He reaches inside the mind of the killer, describing the final apocalyptic act in overtly sexual terms. "All your frigidities and futilities were rewritten, becoming swollen with meaning." As a means of emasculating the enemy, the literary technique is effective (though Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, published last year, is a much more convincing portrait of the journey of a radical Islamist).

Not many writers can emulate the snarling, sledgehammer prose which Amis has perfected over the years. Yet behind the endlessly inventive language he does display an intellectual rigour based on an unwavering belief in the power of reason. Amis is not an atheist but a self-styled "left agnostic" or "weak agnostic" who despises religion in all its forms. "Religious belief is without reason and without dignity," he writes, "and its record is near-universally dreadful."

Amis is at pains to distinguish between Islam and Islamism, its virulent strain – though casual readers may not always spot the difference. His own claim that he is an "Islamismophobe" rather than an "Islamophobe" may come across to some people as little more than wordplay. Indeed, Amis has already landed himself in trouble for appearing to suggest that young British Muslims should be strip-searched at airports, and for raising the threat of repatriation to Pakistan, though he denies being so explicit. This book will doubtless fuel the controversy.

Amis criticises President George W. Bush for initially talking about the War on Terror in theocratic terms such as a crusade (a term wisely dropped by the White House). But he accepts the administration's premise that the US and the west are engaged in a generational struggle akin to the cold war. However, he opposed at an early stage the invasion of Iraq, correctly asserting that Saddam Hussein would turn out to possess barely any weapons of mass destruction. Bush is dismissed with an imperious swipe: "Without his war, Bush is obviously a one-term blowhard."

Most of the writing in this book stands the test of time. The opening essay on September 11 – composed within a week of the attack – is powerful and prescient ("It was the advent of the second plane, sharking in low over the Statue of Liberty: that was the defining moment"). But the most enjoyable essay sees "Mart" accompanying "Tony" in the twilight of his premiership.

Amis captures Blair-speak, described here as a dog's breakfast of Durham, public school Edinburgh, Australia (years one to four) and estuary Essex. He also captures Blair's presidential style: the motorcades, the Rose Garden-style press conferences, the lackeys, the bodyguards and the shoulder-to-shoulder stuff with Bush. The one-on-one conversations are less revealing, though Amis does induce several buttock-clenching moments when he inquires about Blair's family and his religious views.

Overall, *The Second Plane* is a handy bedside companion rather than a literary tour de force. Amis is an Englishman who understands America, a sympathetic critic, if you like. Today, he belongs to a distinguished minority and deserves to be read as such.

Lionel Barber is the editor of the FT.