

Sarfraz Manzoor: on Amis

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Dangerous things, thought experiments. It was, after all, during a thought experiment that Martin Amis' unreined mind ventured into territory that led to accusations that the author was guilty of racism. 'There is a definite urge- don't you have it?- to say that the Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order' Amis told an interviewer. 'What sort of suffering? Not let them travel. Deportation - further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they're from the Middle East or from Pakistan...discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children.' Amis protested that he was not advocating such measures, only conducting a 'thought experiment' but not everyone was persuaded of the distinction. The author was denounced by Terry Eagleton who likened his comments to the 'ramblings of a BNP thug', he was accused by the columnist Yasmin Alibai Brown for 'being with.. the Muslim baiters and haters' and he was attacked by the novelist Ronan Bennett for 'as odious an outburst of racist sentiment as any public figure has made in this country for a very long time'. So, dangerous things, thought experiments. It is impossible then to read Martin Amis' newly published collection of essays, fiction and reviews about September 11 and its consequences, without acknowledging the toxic fallout from Amis' radioactive musings. 'The Second Plane' does not land on our desks from a clear and blue sky; it arrives from a sky fuggy with ugly accusations and denials. How one feels about the book rather depends on how one feels about Martin Amis and how one feels about Martin Amis partly depends on whether one thinks he is a racist. When Amis says that he is not a racist, I believe him. That is, I believe that he believes he is not a racist. But while Amis may not be a bigot, he does appear, on the evidence of his writings in 'The Second Plane' to view the world through binary lenses. 'Weirdly, the world suddenly feels bipolar' he notes in the first piece in the book, written only a week after the attacks on New York and Washington. This bipolarity- between religion and reason, terror and boredom- suits Amis the novelist as it provides him with a subject almost grand enough to withstand his glinting prose. Indeed, as I mentioned recently on Newsnight Review, Amis treats September 11 as if it were primarily a literary challenge, as if the duty of this supremely gifted author was to find and if necessary create words equal to the task of conveying the magnitude of the event. And so there is much elaborate phrase making in 'The Second Plane'; September 11 was, we learn, 'the worldflash of the coming future', elsewhere we meet 'molten mullahs', a 'cake in the rain' handsome Ian Paisley and Amis describes sensing a 'new vibration or frequency from a planetary shimmer.' September 11 may have provided him with a fresh subject towards which to direct his formidable talent but it also exposed the two sides of Martin Amis. As Johann Hari noted in his excellent interview with the author there is one Martin Amis who is 'the nuclear-disarming multiracialist who remembers his Muslim girlfriends with a sweet smile'. This is the author who can tell Hari that 'I am protective of our multi-racial society..look at London, this amazing multiracial city, but there's a few miserable bastards, who through an absolutely vile brew of dreams of impotence, or omnipotence, and sadism, and the love of blood and sadism and horror, are going to ruin it for us.' I like this Amis, I think we would get on. This Amis told the Independent last year that 'a

Pakistani immigrant, in Boston, can say "I am an American", and all he is doing is stating the obvious. Can his equivalent, in Bradford, say the equivalent thing in the equivalent way? Britain needs to become what America has always been - an immigrant society.' And I can agree and applaud every word. But there is another nastier Amis, and he appears to have written most of 'The Second Plane'; this Amis wants airport security officials to 'stick to young men who look like they're from the Middle East'. (I have news for you Martin- I have spent enough time in secondary inspection in a room that is filled with dreary predictability with dark skinned men to know that they usually do exactly that.) The nasty Marty claims that 'religious belief is without reason and without dignity, and its record is near-universally dreadful' but as David Sexton pointed out in his Evening Standard review 'this prevents him from discriminating properly between people of faith, between moderate Muslims and extreme Islamists.' Parviz Khan, who is accused of plotting to behead a British Muslim soldier clearly represents one version of British Islam. It has been his scowling face that has been plastered across the newspapers. But the young soldier who he was planning to execute, he too was a Muslim and his version of Islam led him to join the British army. Who is the truer Muslim? For Amis faith is inherently inferior to rationality. Intellectually one could argue that facts do indeed trump superstition. But I am less convinced that a lack of religious faith makes one less partial to violence, I am not sure history bears this out. Religion may be irrational but, as Jim Al-Khalili argued recently, it can also be progressive. Religion is often the excuse for why individuals are willing to commit atrocity but it is also provided the moral foundation for why millions choose to do good. Amis is keen to remind us that it is not Islam he despises but Islamism but this would be more persuasive if he had more to say on moderate Islam, or indeed believed such a thing existed. He is happy to share his fears about the demographic implications of an increasing Muslim population, and he has claimed that 'the impulse towards rational inquiry is by now very weak in the rank and file of the Muslim male'. But how does he know this? One searches in vain in the pages of 'The Second Plane' for any clues that Amis has spent any time talking to Muslims at all; he liberally quotes Lord Rochester, Larkin and FR Leavis but none of these esteemed gentlemen were renowned for their knowledge of the mindset of young Muslims. In a novel such a lack of research has only literary consequences- in the case of John Updike's novel 'Terrorist' the consequence is that the book reeks of inauthenticity- but in a work of non-fiction when the author is aspiring to say important things this failure is more serious and highlights the final bipolarity in Martin Amis- between the literary author and the political analyst. The author can thrive and survive on style but a political analyst must have substance; contrast Amis' efforts with Jason Burke's recent piece in the Observer- the first is attention seeking phrase-making, the second heavily researched reportage. The author can employ complicated words but the analyst must offer complex thinking. As a political analyst Amis is disappointing: in an early piece he argues for the development of what he calls 'species consciousness' but this appears simply to be a long winded way of saying can't we all just get along. If only this 'species consciousness' could apply more liberally to non jihadist Muslims; time and time again as I read 'The Second Plane' with its reference to 'us' and 'we' I wondered whether Amis could imagine a Muslim in his 'us'. Although the reviewers have given 'The Second Plane' a critical kicking I do not believe Martin Amis is a lost cause and in some important ways he is right. He is right in arguing, as he did in his Newsnight Review that the ideology of

multiculturalism had had some damaging consequences and he is surely right in warning of the dangers of Islamism. But in the midst of a war as well as identifying the enemy it is useful to be able to recognise one's allies. And so when he conflates Islam with the oppression of women, telling the Daily Mail last October that 'the Koran recommends the beating of women' or when his friend Christopher Hitchens, in a letter defending Amis, fails to recognise that honour killings and forced marriages are not sanctioned by the Koran but rather are the result of male-biased cultural misinterpretations, it's hard to not feel that 'The Second Plane' constitutes a missed opportunity. For me the saddest aspect to reading his book was Amis' failure to comprehend that amongst those who abhor jihadism, who detest its 'irrationalist, misogynist, homophobic, inquisitorial, totalitarian and imperialist' tendencies are many Muslims. Some of them even look like they're from the Middle East. 'Religion, viewed from a sociological angle, is whatever people make of it. Parts of the Old Testament are full of blood and fire, but they're not most of Judaism. The New Testament was sometimes imposed on the point of an imperialist sword, but this story isn't most of Christianity...Islam too...is what its practitioners make of it.' How encouraging it would have been to reveal that those words were from 'The Second Plane' but they are not: they are from an under-reported but thoughtful speech to the New Culture Forum by the Conservative Shadow Minister for Communities and Cohesion Paul Goodman in which he explored what the Government could do to persuade young British Muslims to reject terror. His analysis was rooted in the real world, whereas Amis' appears second hand. In a letter to the Independent columnist Yasmin Alibai Brown Amis wrote that we (that word again) must 'build all the bridges we can between ourselves and the Muslim majority, which we know to be moderate. Moderate, and mute.' To which I can only respond by saying that they are appeared mute Martin because you were too busy reading books to spend any time listening to them. Tempting things, thought experiments. Whilst reading 'The Second Plane' I found myself conducting my own thought experiment. What would Martin Amis make if he was to spend any evening with me and some of my Muslim friends? He claimed in an interview with The Times two years ago that 'moderate Islam is always deceptively well-represented on the level of the op-ed page and the public debate; elsewhere it is supine and inaudible.' How would he feel to see the faces of moderate Islam, loud and proud, sitting around him at the dinner table as he ate with my mother and the rest of my family? How would he process the actuality of the time spent? Would he dismiss us as not real Muslims because we do not fanatically cite Koranic verses and are not furiously plotting for the restoration of the Caliphate? I would hope it might persuade Martin Amis that, in the end, the only bipolarities that matter are not between reason and religion but between the reasonable and the unreasonable, the moderates and extremists. Muslims can be reasonable moderates and, sadly, sometimes acclaimed authors can resemble unreasonable extremists.