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## July 2008: Peer Review: Is Martin Amis Serious?

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# Peer Review: Is Martin Amis Serious?

**John G. Rodwan, Jr.**

*The Second Plane: September 11: Terror and Boredom*  
by Martin Amis  
Knopf, 2008



*In this regular feature we review the reviewers who review new books*

Critics snarl and bare their teeth at the sight of a Martin Amis work, and *The Second Plane* brought forth the familiar frothing from many a reviewer's mouth. They insist that he cannot be serious, that he cares too much about attention-grabbing style (which does generate plenty of notice). While it would seem bizarre for them to do so, multiple prominent literary critics suggest that he writes too well and that his devotion to craftsmanship is incompatible with solemnity, gravity or insight. Claiming that Amis's "preening" way of writing diminishes or undermines what he says in his essays, reviews and fiction related to September 11, 2001, many of his detractors end up revealing the extent to which he provokes competitive instincts. Seeking to show their own facility with language and artful evisceration, they try to outshine Amis's in authorial flair. They habitually look outside his work for reasons to denounce it, implicating the seriousness of their engagement with his arguments.

Amis provokes reviewers to attack the man as much as his work. Michiko Kakutani makes intense adjectival exertions in *The New York Times*: *The Second Plane*, she says, is "chuckleheaded," "pretentious," "nonsensical," "offensive" "weak, risible and often objectionable." She calls Amis narcissistic, glib and cavalier. Leon Wieseltier, also reviewing for *The New York Times*, says Amis "has a hot, heroic view of himself" and has presented his "simpleton's view of the world" in a "clumsily mixed cocktail of rhetoric and rage." Amis unfolds "obsessions and dubious conclusions," according to Jim Sleeper in *The Los Angeles Times*, and the book is "deeply, sometimes self-indulgently flawed." In *Bookforum*, Michael Tomasky says the book provides evidence that Amis has gone "potty" and now resembles "the embarrassing uncle screaming at the television." Christopher Taylor also sees avuncularity of an unfortunate sort, referring in *The Guardian* to Amis's

"crazy-uncle outbursts" and saying "the writings collected here add nothing to his reputation." In *The Times Literary Supplement*, Marjorie Perloff says "Amis's "discourse" in his "off-putting book" displays "self-absorption." She articulates the view of many of her colleagues when she declares that "despite moments of brilliant wordplay...one is hard put to take Amis's elegantly turned sentences seriously."

Reviews like these continue a tradition of unrestrained critical assaults directed at Amis. Reviewers eagerly attacked his 2005 novel *Yellow Dog* with vicious glee. Tibor Fischer in the *London Telegraph* described the novel as "not-knowing-where-to-look bad" and said reading it felt like seeing "your favourite uncle being caught in a school playground, masturbating," thereby kicking off the trend of troublesome-uncle insults other critics subsequently adapted. Although Kakutani ends her review of *The Second Plane* by suggesting "Mr. Amis should stick to writing fiction," she previously found his career as a novelist uneven at best. She said *Yellow Dog* "bears as much relation to Mr. Amis's best fiction as a bad karaoke singer does to Frank Sinatra." Scott McLemee said *Koba the Dread*, one of Amis's earlier nonfiction works, "fails on so many levels as to lend an element of grandeur to its collapse. Without the author's name on the cover, it almost certainly would not have been published."

For anyone seeking a psychological explanation, jealousy offers one possible reason for the undisciplined vigor with which critics try to shred Amis's reputation. McLemee's admission of the power and value of his name certainly hints at this possibility. Adam Kirsch, whose review of *The Second Plane* in the *New York Sun* was one of the more tempered, said Amis "has been the target of much free-floating envy, thanks to his literary pedigree, his undeniable talent, and his precocious success." He recounts the "outrage" provoked in London literary circles by Amis's decision to have extensive dental work done in the mid-1990s. "It wasn't clear whether Mr. Amis's crime was caring too much about his appearance or having the means to do something about it," Kirsch says, but the dentistry symbolized superficiality among deep-thinking gossip mongers.

In addition to his teeth, Amis's work has offered readers ample reason to question his seriousness. In *Time's Arrow*, Amis tells "the story of a man's life backward in time," as he puts it, and the elaborate technique he uses gives the novel the feel of literary gamesmanship rather than serious moral engagement with the historical moment he takes as a subject. Though *Time's Arrow* tells the tale of a Nazi doctor, it is not really about the Holocaust; rather, it simply uses the Holocaust in an artistic experiment that makes the book very stylish but also very shallow. In *Koba the Dread*, Amis objects to Communism principally for aesthetic reasons, which makes him seem very superficial indeed. After quoting Kingsley Amis explaining how no one can abandon belief in creating a just society without some "feelings of disappointment and loss," Martin wonders what his father would have had to write about in the "Just City." He suggests that, in a more perfect world, fiction writers like the Amises might not be sufficiently amused or inspired. They would lack material for their writing. Kirsch sees Amis as suffering from a "chronic inability to realize when he's coming across as a narcissist," which makes him prone to "tone-deafness" in lines like this. He and many other critics see it again in *The Second Plane* when Amis says, "if September 11 had to happen, then I am not at all sorry that it happened in my lifetime."

Regardless of whether *Yellow Dog*, *Koba the Dread*, and other of Amis's efforts deserved the howls of execration that greeted them, *The Second Plane* does not. Though reviewers repeat the same gripes that have long dogged Amis, he handles the tricky balance between aesthetic and moral concerns with greater skill in the 2008 collection than he did in the earlier works even as he stays true to his polysyllabic personal style. If elsewhere he trivialized weighty, historical topics, here his focus on how events affect him and his family is not misplaced. September 11 did happen in his lifetime, after all, and he has every reason to take it personally. In "Terror and Boredom: The Dependent Mind," where he says the age of terror can also be seen as the age of boredom, Amis explains the connection he sees between the terms of that title (which he also puts in the book's subtitle: September 11: Terror and Boredom). "When I refer to the age of boredom, I am not thinking of airport queues and subway searches. I mean the global confrontation with the dependent mind." Concerned that too many multicultural relativists make excuses for and compromises with the fundamentalist extremism he calls Islamism, he combines his philosophical objections with his concern for his family in a single, powerful paragraph:

One way of ending the war on terror would be to capitulate and convert. The transitional period would be a humorless one, no doubt, with stern work to be completed in the city squares, the town centers, and on the village greens. Nevertheless, as the Caliphate is restored in Baghdad, to much joy, the surviving neophytes would soon get used to the voluminous penal code enforced by the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Suppression of Vice. It would be a world of perfect terror and perfect boredom, and of nothing else – a world with no games, no arts, and

no women, a world where the sole entertainment is the public execution. My middle daughter, now age nine, still believes in imaginary beings (in her case Father Christmas and the Tooth Fairy); so she would have that in common with her new husband.

Several reviewers suggest that this essay, in which Amis recounts his abandonment of a novella about a terrorist, shows his self-centeredness and superficiality. He equates writing with freedom itself, but, according to Kirsch “reduces his defense of the novelist’s freedom to a mere guild concern.” Yet, as the passage above clearly shows, the freedom he cares about is not only his own, but also that of his daughter and – as should be obvious – anyone who does not want to live in the dreary prison of the dependent mind that he describes. Though Kakutani calls connecting terrorism and boredom “nonsensical,” it really is not so hard to follow Amis’s reasoning. (*Harper’s* contributing editor Wyatt Mason points out that Saul Bellow – a novelist not regularly dismissed as authoring nonsense – paired “terror” and “boredom” in *Humboldt’s Gift*.) In a review of the film, Amis (who dedicates *The Second Plane* to his children), notices something crucial: “When was the last time you boarded an airplane that had no children in it? *United 93* has no children in it. It’s hard to defend your imagination from such a reality....” He proceeds to think of what adults would tell children on a plane overtaken by murderous fanatics. In defending imagination and opposing those who would impose boredom by lethal means, Amis cannot be called trivial. Indeed, he could even be called serious.

Several of Amis’s determined critics invoke George Orwell in bids to make what they regard as an unfavorable comparison. Tomasky, citing Joshua Micah Marshall, refers to “the Orwell Temptation” of facing “a big choice on a big question.” Taylor suggests that Amis falls short in his attempt to respond. Ironically, Wieseltier sandwiches his assertion that Amis “writes about politics and history as if Orwell never lived” between complaints that “Amis’s freshness is flat” and his obliviousness to “the damage his virtuosity inflicts upon his urgency.” Yet both Orwell and Amis champion the freshness that so rankles Wieseltier. The qualities common to most bad writing that Orwell identifies in “Politics and the English Language” – “staleness of imagery” and “lack of precision” – are not ones found in Amis’s writing. Orwell admires “fresh, arresting” phrases in contrast to “ready-made” ones. He likes “phraseology” that calls up “mental pictures.” Although Wieseltier dislikes the “ostentatious” metaphor Amis uses in the opening line of the volume’s first essay, it meets Orwell’s criterion. “It was the advent of the second plane, sharking in low over the Statue of Liberty: that was the defining moment,” Amis writes, skillfully registering the hijacked airliner’s transformation into an ominous predator. Wieseltier may only be able to see the prose, but I picture the plane.



*Leon Wieseltier*

In the foreword to *The War Against Cliché*, Amis, when describing the reviewer’s reliance on the “semi-hard evidence” of quotation, writes lines that would not be out of place in Orwell’s essay: “When I dispraise, I am usually quoting clichés. When I praise, I am usually quoting the opposed qualities of freshness, energy and reverberation of voice.” Amis may not have the habit of “using the fewest and shortest words that will cover one’s meaning,” which Orwell encourages. Then again, his summary of the difficulty of formulating a response to the problem of Islamist suicide-mass murder could not be more concise: “We are not dealing in reasons because we are not dealing in reason.”

While Orwell warns against “pretentious diction,” he objects to words “used to dress up simple statements” because they result in “slovenliness and vagueness” – words not applicable to Amis’s prose. Amis describes Osama bin Laden as an “omnicidal nullity under the halo of ascetic beatitude,” and while it might be possible to use shorter words to describe an intellectually vacant person whose image represents a conviction that almost anyone can be killed for the religious views bin Laden encourages, it cannot be said that Amis uses too many words or is imprecise.

Ending a book review by saying the essayist under consideration has some talent but is no Orwell is akin to a drama critic announcing that a playwright might show some merit but is no Shakespeare. Such statements cannot be disputed – truly, Amis is not Orwell – but they reveal nothing meaningful. Nevertheless, this is precisely what Sleeper does in his *LA Times* assessment of *The Second Plane*. Orwell “remains the better guide to truth about terror” and “told truths less affectedly, in writing clear as a pane of glass,” he concludes. In “Why I Write,” the essay where he says “good prose is like a window pane,” Orwell lists four “great motives for writing,” all of which can readily be seen with Amis: sheer egotism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse and political purpose. With so many reviewers spying pronounced self-love in Amis, no more need be said regarding the first. “I could not do the work of writing a book, or even a long magazine article, if it were not also an aesthetic experience,” Orwell says of the second impulse, which Amis obviously shares. The desire to witness and record, “to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity,” also motivated the writing of the pieces in *The Second Plane*. Regarding the fourth, Orwell writes of a wish to “alter other people’s idea of the kind of society that they should strive after,” and Amis’s efforts in this area ultimately may be what so disturbs at least some of his critics.

Amis’s refusal to express immediately classifiable ideas in ready-made phrases arouses animus in those unwilling to do the mental work of closely examining his writing. This explains a misleading move almost all the critics mentioned above make when reviewing *The Second Plane*. Kakutani, Kirsch, Perloff, Tomasky and Taylor repeat or refer to the following remark, which Amis made when interviewed for a 2006 article published in *The Times of London*:

There’s a definite urge – don’t you have it? – to say, “The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.” What sort of suffering? Not letting 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.

Some reviewers quote the passage in order to put *The Second Plane* in the context of an argument between Amis and critic Terry Eagleton that received significant media attention in England around the time when the book appeared there, but others treat it like a “gotcha” moment that clearly reveals Amis to be a repugnant bigot. Kirsch and Perloff repeat it to explain comments made by Eagleton, who likened Amis to “a British National Party thug.” Eagleton also said Amis resembled his father, whom Eagleton called “a racist, anti-Semitic boor, a drink-sodden, self-hating reviler of women, gays and liberals.” While he does not apply all these labels to the younger Amis, Eagleton does say “Amis fils has certainly learnt more from [his father] than how to turn a shapely phrase.” Other critics, siding with Eagleton, rely on the *Times* interview to interpret and disparage *The Second Plane*. Kakutani cites it as indicative of the “offensive ... eruptions of anti-Islamic vituperation” she finds in the book. She does this even though a reporter writing for the same newspaper a month before her review ran put the statement in its crucial context. After reiterating the dust-up with Eagleton in a March 9, 2008, *New York Times* article, Rachael Donadio quotes Amis explaining that he spoke soon after the British government stopped terrorists plotting to blow up airplanes. Rather than “advocating” anything, he was “conversationally describing an urge – an urge that soon wore off.” Without revealing that Amis called it a “stupid” statement rather than a firmly held principle, Kakutani presents it as representative of his views. While Tomasky graciously allows that statement “fairly” does not appear in the book because it was not made in an Amis essay, he insists that it is consistent with those writings. Taylor takes it as typical of Amis’s “political consciousness” and places it in the first paragraph of his review.

However, *The Second Plane* cannot accurately be equated with a comment Amis made elsewhere. In an absurd, distorting oversimplification, Tomasky tries to portray Amis as the possessor of a “straight-forwardly right-wing point of view.” In the piece Tomasky calls “a rant elegantly turned,” Amis calls Islamism and all religion “an embrace of illusion” and worries that responses to “those who use terror” have “shown signs of mass somnambulism and self-hypnosis.” He sees this in “the Iraq misadventure” and the “neoconservative ‘dogma.’” These are hardly the views of a Bush administration ally. Writing of the impact of illusion on history, Amis writes, “It is always a heavy call on human fortitude to acknowledge that such a thing is happening before our eyes, in broad daylight and full consciousness.” He (like Orwell before him) wants to see things clearly. While he sees a

need to oppose “illusion in its rawest form: virtuous and murderous fanaticism,” nowhere in *The Second Plane* does he advocate deportation or “discriminatory stuff” as the way to combat those committed to illusion. Still, detractors find it easier to dismiss Amis’s writing by looking outside it, much as they did by obsessing on his dental work a decade before.

Falling for what could be called the Amis Temptation, Wieseltier tries and fails to out-Amis Amis. Sleeper, who repeatedly violates Orwell’s first rule for writing (“Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print”), says of Wieseltier: “Seldom has a reviewer hoisted himself on his own petard so shamelessly” by impugning Amis’s artistry while striving to demonstrate his own. Writing for *Talking Points Memo*, Sleeper says “Wieseltier’s review is ... preening and melodramatic, an *opera bouffe* of a literary attack, showing mainly that it takes one to know one.” In the *Times*, Wieseltier says Amis “is still busy with the glamorous pursuit of extraordinary sentences” and wonders what “has to happen to shake this slavery to style.” Yet Sleeper sees Wieseltier writing sentences mainly “for effect” and thus becoming “the pot [that] calls the kettle black.” He lists several examples of “grasps at faux paradoxes” and “telltale, compulsive alliteration” that Wieseltier makes as he “strains for virtuosity.” While Wieseltier says Amis “appears to believe that an insult is an analysis,” Wieseltier compiles “nearly 2,000 words of insults,” by Sleeper’s count. When constructing his contempt, Wieseltier invokes the recently deceased. He says *The Second Plane* reminds him of a remark the actor Heath Ledger, who died in early 2008, supposedly made when Philip Seymour Hoffman won an Oscar (“I thought it was for the best acting, not the most acting.”). In a more literary vein, he makes this attempt at mordancy: “Pity the writer who wants to be Bellow but is only Mailer.” Wieseltier’s review appeared in print two and a half weeks after Norman Mailer’s memorial public service. Sleeper says Wieseltier “invites us to behold his prose and not his point” in part out of envy.

Whatever their motivation, reviewers condemning Amis can become a bit too fond of their own cleverness. Intending to show critical prowess, they instead appear petty – precisely what they accuse Amis of being. They behave much like Muhammad Ali epigones who demean their opponents but fail to realize that if their challengers really do not deserve to be in the same ring with them then beating them does nothing to bolster their claims to supremacy. If the athlete the braggart is scheduled to fight lacks talent, then what would winning prove? Alternatively, how foolish does the boastful one look if he then loses? If Amis can be so easily dismissed as an intellectual lightweight, why must critics such as Perloff and Kakutani struggle so mightily to diminish him, why do they rely on insults instead of arguments to do so, and why look outside the book to find ways to condemn it? Further, who looks worse if those who try to outdo Amis in expressive verve fall flat? Critics who try to display their earnest seriousness and intellectual skills often end up like the fighter who promises an early knock out victory only to end up unconscious themselves – as clear losers. A writer has certainly made a unique accomplishment if literary critics resort to complaining that he writes too well.

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Article printed from Open Letters Monthly: An Arts and Literature Review:  
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