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Amis, Islam and the writer's duty

Why shouldn't British writers deal with big issues such as Islamic terrorism, asks ANDREW ANTHONY

It's a common criticism that English writers shirk the big subjects; our national literary stock-in-trade is the domestic felicities and infidelities of the cosmopolitan bourgeoisie. Yet whenever Martin Amis takes on something grander in scope, he is accused of vaingloriously chasing the 'important'.

It happened when he wrote about nuclear weapons (*Einstein's Monsters*) and the Holocaust (*Time's Arrow*). It happened with his very fine and snobbishly underrated book on Stalin's gulags, *Koba The Dread*. And now it's taking place once again with *The Second Plane*, his absorbing collection of essays and short stories about Islamism and the post-9/11 world.

How dare he write about global events, sneers fashionable opinion. We loved him when he mocked darts players, but what right does he have to make fun of a suicide bomber? The answer is the right of the novelist, a right, of course, against which Islamism launched a murderous international



THEBIGBOOK
THE SECOND PLANE
 by Martin Amis
 Jonathan Cape
 £12.99

campaign over *The Satanic Verses*.

The critical theorist Terry Eagleton recently suggested that there was no more reason to listen to novelists on such matters than window cleaners. As Eagleton is a Marxist, we can take it as read that he wouldn't listen to window cleaners. What prompted this judgement was a melodramatically stupid comment Amis made in an interview 18 months ago. The day after another alleged mass homicidal conspiracy came to light, he said there was an 'urge' he felt to see Muslims punished. He's since apologised and withdrawn his remarks.

Not, apparently, good enough. For now Amis is fair game. A whole career devoted to humour and humanism can be discarded, and his words retrospectively parsed for evidence of racism. Meantime, what about the misogyny, superstition, indiscriminate murder and global ambitions of a zealous death cult? Well, we can forget all that and return to the discreet indiscretions and comforting familiarity of the English drawing room.

Give me Amis, any time.

Synopsis of Martin Amis's The Second Plane

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