

April 8, 2008

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

Novelist's Crash Course on Terror

By [MICHIKO KAKUTANI](#)

In one of these chuckleheaded essays about the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, [Martin Amis](#) complains about the use of the shorthand 9/11: "My principal objection to the numbers is that they are numbers," he writes in "The Second Plane."

"The solecism, that is to say, is not grammatical but moral-aesthetic — an offense against decorum; and decorum means 'seemliness,' which comes from soemr, 'fitting,' and soema, 'to honor.' 9/11, 7/7: who or what decided that

particular acts of slaughter, particular whirlwinds of plasma and body parts, in which a random sample of the innocent is killed, maimed, or otherwise crippled in body and mind, deserve a numerical shorthand? Whom does this 'honor'? What makes this 'fitting'?"

This pretentious, formalistic argument underscores Mr. Amis's efforts to deal with a vast historic tragedy with preening, self-consciously literary musings — the same sort of musings that made parts of his 2002 book on Stalin, "Koba the Dread," so enraging to read. Instead of grappling with the event itself — or its political, cultural and existential fallout — Mr. Amis, ever the *littérateur*, prattles on about the appropriateness of the abbreviation "9/11" and how this formulation makes little sense in Britain, where the habit of noting the day first and the month second would make this "11/9." He narcissistically complains about how the events of that day threw him and other fiction writers off stride.

And for all his talk about "seemliness" and "honor," he repeatedly draws a nonsensical analogy between terrorism and boredom, trying in vain to argue that they are flip sides of the same coin. Boredom? Try telling the families who lost loved ones at the World Trade Center or the Pentagon or on United Flight 93 that their relatives and friends died in the opening chapter of the "age of boredom" or "the global confrontation with the dependent mind."

Equally offensive are the eruptions of anti-Islamic vituperation in "The Second Plane," remarks that, while somewhat less explicit, remind the reader of the incendiary interview Mr. Amis gave in 2006 (shortly after British authorities had thwarted an alleged terrorist plot to blow up trans-Atlantic airliners) to The Times of London in which he said: "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."

In this book Mr. Amis says that, going through airport security with his daughters, he wants to say

THE SECOND PLANE

September 11: Terror and Boredom

By Martin Amis.

211 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. \$24.

something like: “Even Islamists have not yet started to blow up their own families on airplanes. So please desist until they do. Oh yeah: and stick, for now, to young men who look like they’re from the Middle East.”

Reviewing Mark Steyn’s controversial book, “America Alone” — which forecasts a dark future in which Old Europe falls under the influence of Islamic fundamentalism — Mr. Amis writes that “not a single Western European country is procreating at the ‘replacement rate’ of 2.1 births per woman,” adding: “A depopulated and simplified Europe might be tenable in a world without enmity and predation. And that is not our world. The birth rate is 6.76 in Somalia, 6.69 in Afghanistan and 6.58 in Yemen.”

Mr. Amis writes of an Islamist “death-hunger,” comparable “outside Africa” only to what existed in Nazi Germany and Stalinite Kampuchea. He suggests that the Islamist war on the West is “a kind of thwarted narcissism,” rooted in sexual frustration and anger at Islam’s impotence on the world stage (completely ignoring the experts like Michael Scheuer, the former [C.I.A.](#) officer and Qaeda specialist, who argue that [Osama bin Laden](#)’s declaration of war is a reaction to specific United States foreign policies like support for Israel and an American presence in Muslim lands). And while he writes that “we respect Muhammad” (just not “Muhammad Atta”), he makes gross generalizations about the “extreme incuriosity of Islamic culture” and the differences between Sunnis and Shias (“The Sunni are more legalistic. The Shia are dreamier and more poetic and emotional.”)

As for civil war between the Shia and the Sunni, Mr. Amis glibly declares: “We can say, with the facetiousness of despair, that it’s just as well to get this out of the way; and let us hope it is merely a Thirty Years’ War, and not a Hundred Years’ War.”

A similarly cavalier attitude infects Mr. Amis’s efforts to write 9/11-inspired fiction. “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” describes that hijacker as being horribly constipated, having “not moved his bowels since May.” “In the Palace of the End” describes in blackly comic terms the travails of doubles hired to impersonate one of [Saddam Hussein](#)’s murderous sons. And an abandoned novella (not included in this volume, but described at length in one of the essays) imagines “a diminutive Islamist terrorist” named Ayed, who comes up with the idea of scouring “all the prisons and madhouses for every compulsive rapist in the country” and unleashing them on the town of Greeley, Colo., where, in real life, [Sayyid Qutb](#), the intellectual father of the Islamist movement, once briefly lived.

Many of the arguments in this book are deeply indebted to other writers. On Islam, Mr. Amis leans heavily on the works of [Bernard Lewis](#), the Middle East scholar who influenced the thinking of some members of the Bush administration. And on the irrationality of religion, he leans heavily on the work of [Christopher Hitchens](#) and [Sam Harris](#). Mr. Amis adds nothing illuminating to these writers’ thinking, while blindly accepting some of their more debatable assertions.

And his own reasoning in these pages tends to be specious or skewed. He sets up ridiculous paper tigers to knock down easily: For instance, he suggests that Western liberals acted as if “suicide-mass murder” committed by Islamic terrorists was “reasonable, indeed logical and even admirable.” And he makes sweeping statements without supplying any facts to back them up: “With Iran, too, we have a population that is strongly if ambivalently pro-American. To the youth of Iran (a large majority), America is the Mahdi — the redeemer, the Lord of Time.”

Indeed “The Second Plane” is such a weak, risible and often objectionable volume that the reader finishes it convinced that Mr. Amis should stick to writing fiction and literary criticism, as he’s thoroughly discredited himself with these essays as any sort of political or social commentator.

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