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The Second Plane by Martin Amis

Reviewed by [David Aaronovitch](#)

Kingsley Amis's son has always had plenty of people to hate him. His imagined patrimony, his early success, his implausible virtuosity and his fearlessness have ensured that many who weren't actually offended by him were envious.

It was probably inevitable that Martin Amis would attract the bitter dislike of the more ideologically policed section of the liberal-left intelligentsia. In the past couple of years there has been a slow excommunication from the broad church - with good reviews turned into bad in the *London Review of Books* - and then last year, the full auto-da-fé - conducted principally in *The Guardian*, with members of the round-robinocracy, led by Terry Eagleton, waiting their turn to add a faggot to the flames.

Amis's apostasy was not, as it was with others, over the Iraq War. This collection of writings mostly from newspapers on events since September 11, 2001, reminds readers that he always opposed the invasion. In March 2003, he gave warning that the "intellectually null" George Bush, "a tax-cutting dry drunk from West Texas" was leading his country into a disastrous trap, ineluctably provoking, *inter alia*, "an additional generation of terror from militant Islam". If Amis is open to any criticism over Iraq, it is that he explores Saddam Hussein's science-fiction bloodiness - as he does in the short story *In the Palace of the End* - without the slightest realistic notion of how it might be brought to a conclusion.

The proximate cause of Amis's being run out of Lib-town was an interview that he had given to Ginny Dougary of this newspaper. In it he examined his own emotional and political reaction to the London bombings and confessed to a punitive urge - "don't you feel it?" - to somehow force the Muslim community to get its house in order. These were the sentiments described by Eagleton as being appropriate to a "British National Party thug".

But the actual cause was different again. It was fairly obvious that Amis wasn't advocating discriminatory action against Muslims, and that his views on responsibility were far more nuanced than the "urge" he described. As Eagleton refined his argument, his objection was to "Amis's panic-stricken reaction to 9/11", especially given that Amis was with his (unspecified) political allies, "champion of a civilisation that for centuries has wreaked untold carnage throughout the world".

The comedian Chris Morris described Amis as "the new Abu Hamza", the Northern Ireland novelist Ronan Bennett expressed "shame" at Amis's views, which were "symptomatic of a much wider and deeper hostility to Islam". And the Indian writer Pankaj Mishra inevitably accused Amis of combining a "patchy knowledge of world history" (as opposed, presumably to Mishra's own complete understanding) with "a primordial anxiety about cultural otherness".

What Amis had really done, as the chronologically ordered pieces in this collection demonstrate, was to go on a political journey. This started, as for many of us, in the uncomprehending fug of ash, dust and speculation rising from Ground Zero. "Terrorism," Amis wrote immediately afterwards, "is political communication by other means. The message of September 11 ran as follows: America, it is time you learned how implacably you are hated." In other words, however bad the act, it was rational, somehow provoked and subject to the usual rules of politics.

But Amis, unlike many other writers, couldn't leave it at that. He began to look at the people who had carried out the attack, and, crucially, at the ideology that motivated them - in other words, at what they said and wrote.

What he discovered was not a group of misguided liberators, but of young men in love with the idea of death and violence, given justification by an implacable and totalitarian ideology. Amis went back to the mid-20th-century writings of the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, men such as the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb - as someone might have returned to Mein Kampf in the early 1930s - and examined what was being taught. It is doubtful whether Eagleton - unlike Amis and tens of thousands of Islamists - has read a single word of Qutb's writings.

Through Qutb and others Amis came to the realisation, chronicled in *The Second Plane*, that Islamism itself was a problem, since what it loathed about the West was, as Amis puts it, not our active seductiveness, but our passive attraction. "We should understand," he writes, "that Islamists' hatred of America is as much abstract as historical, and irrationally abstract too; none of the usual things can be expected to appease it." Amis connects this existential envy to the political failure of Islam and attributes this in turn to the suppression of women in many Muslim countries.

Amis's conclusion that an ideological struggle must be waged, in which the proper values of the West are championed, is what brings him into such a collision with the Eagletons. This is, after all, a period in which part of the Left has - remarkably - thrown in its lot with the less apocalyptic wing of Islamism, as well as the isolationist right, in a sort of anti-imperialist alliance. Many of the rest - "liberal relativists" - have settled, in Amis's words, for a kind of "dissonant evasion" of the truth. This was bound to bring all of them into conflict with the man who is possibly the most fully engaged writer of our age.

The Second Plane by Martin Amis

Cape, £12.99; 224pp

Extracts from The Second Plane

"If September 11 had to happen, then I am not at all sorry that it happened in my lifetime. That day and what followed from it: this is a narrative of misery and pain, and also of desperate fascination. 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?" **Author's Note, 2007**

"Bin Laden's contribution is his image and nothing more: omnicidal nullity under a halo of ascetic beatitude. Nobody traumatised bin Laden... he was not internally rewired by the whips and electric cables. Almost alone among a shifting crew of mono-eyed mullahs, tin-legged zealots, blind sheikhs, and paralysed clerics, bin Laden did at least have the wit to stay in one piece."

September 2006

"Suicide-mass murder is astonishingly alien, so alien, in fact, that Western opinion has been unable to formulate a rational response to it. A rational response would be something like an unvarying factory siren of unanimous disgust. But we haven't managed that. What we have managed, on the whole, is a murmur of dissonant evasion." **September 2006**

"The American politician whom Mahmoud Ahmadinejad most closely resembles is Ronald Reagan. General similarities are hard to spot. But what they have in common is this: both men are denizens of that stormlit plain where end-time theology meets nuclear weapons." **June 2006**

"The champions of militant Islam are misogynists, women-haters; they are also misologists - haters of reason. Their armed doctrine is little more than a chaotic penal code underscored by impotent dreams of genocide. Like all religions, it is a massive agglutination of stock responses, of clichés, of inherited and unexamined formulations." **June 2002**

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