

Terror that bores

What used to be unthinkable is now considered normal

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THE SECOND PLANE

September 11:

Terror and Boredom

BY MARTIN AMIS

Knopf Canada, 224 pages

(\$29.95)

Over the din of time marching on, history has a way of making itself heard, sometimes in the most unlikely of arenas. It happened this week at Vancouver's GM Place when Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band played "The Rising," the singer's empathic response to the horrors of September 11, 2001. Under the tent of rock 'n' roll, it managed to replace the terror of the last several years with a dusty but sturdy optimism that life would go on.



CREDIT: Sean Adair, Reuters Files

Hijacked United Airlines Flight 175, the second plane, flies toward the World Trade Center the morning of Sept. 11, 2001.

The song's narrative is told from the perspective of a New York City firefighter climbing the stairs inside one of the towers of the World Trade Center after the hijacked commercial airplanes had hit them. Like the best of Springsteen's songwriting, "The Rising" is a personal story with a universal voice. The crowd sang along as if words alone could banish the darkness that has enveloped us since that frightful day.

Of course, they didn't and they won't, but it felt good to be so deceived for just a few minutes.

I wish I could say otherwise, but you'll get a far greater sense of deception if you pick up Martin Amis's latest essay collection, *The Second Plane - September 11: Terror and Boredom*. You'll be deceived into believing that "we will eventually prevail in the war against terror." You might also be deceived into believing there is a depth to the two short stories and 12 essays and reviews here, which include a travelogue with Tony Blair during his last days as British prime minister in 2007.

Sad to say, there isn't, and once you realize that, you can't help but feel ripped off. For all of Amis's dexterity with language, the primary motivation of this unexpectedly trite book must have been more to help pay off a looming tax bill than to pound the drum about the dangers of extremism.

In past collections, such as *The War Against Cliché*, he played in that band. All he has done here is add more notes, not more melody, to his tune.

As a fiction writer, Martin Amis is a scathingly sharp chronicler of the absurdity of much of modern life. He has had a long prophetic streak, for he is relentless in chasing the dim light at the ends of dangerous tunnels.

However, he has never hit much of a stride, for me, as an essayist. The front-loading of *The Second Plane* puts the slim volume's wisest words at the very beginning. In an author's note where he does a bit of literary housekeeping, he laments that "our understanding of September 11 is incremental and can never hope to be intact and entire."

After that precision, there is a noticeable flabbiness to the prose and, hence, the argument of *The Second Plane*.

Yes, perhaps one of the pitfalls of liberal democracy is that, in our tolerance of diversity, we foster the very resentment that later seeks to destroy us. Yet what are we going to do about it? How will our response change us and what will be the consequences all round?

These are some of the questions that need to be raised, but they're only heard in Amis's silence.

As much as our era's egotism would have us think otherwise, terrorism has been a fact of geopolitical life for centuries. It set off such historic tidal waves as the First World War and, through the Ku Klux Klan's tactics in the American South in the post-Civil War years, the demise of the dream of Reconstruction. In recent decades, zealots have regularly strapped bombs on to the stupid, the old, the sick and the very young and sent them into schools, markets, hospitals, planes and places of worship.

This is the true boredom that Amis only nibbles at. It's not "the global confrontation with the dependent mind" of enemies who rarely stop to consider what they are doing, but rather our normalization of such a state of affairs. It's the contemporary banality of evil that periodically grips Israel, Russia, Ireland, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Spain, Colombia and other places as one more score is settled in conflicts as current as tomorrow and as old as the Council of Clermont.

Here in Canada, separatist cells spent the early 1970s kidnapping diplomats, murdering a provincial cabinet minister and blowing up the Rolling Stones' equipment in Montreal to advance their cause. In America, the precursors of 9/11 tried to blow up the WTC in 1993. Going on 13 years ago, beady-eyed Gulf War veteran Tim McVeigh filled a rental van with toxified fertilizer and blew up the federal building in Oklahoma City, killing 168, including 19 small children.

Against those realities, there is more merit in Ernest Hemingway's famous words (in *A Farewell to Arms*) that the world "kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially" than you'll find in most of *The Second Plane*.

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