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The jihadi threat at home and abroad

IT would seem that we are closer to identifying the Londoner known as “Jihadi John” who murdered US journalist James Foley in Syria on behalf of the Islamic State (IS). The authorities’ pursuit of him may serve as a useful signal to young men tempted to join the jihadists that they may well be brought to account for their actions. But the Government has to deal with the problem at home too. Lord Carlile, the former reviewer of terror legislation, has exhorted ministers to revive the option of control orders, which effectively ban terror suspects from travelling. Ministers need to keep an open mind but control orders are a relatively blunt instrument for dealing with returning or potential terrorists – and they could not cope with the sort of numbers involved here. But we may need to harden our approach: we should be in no doubt about these men’s ruthlessness, as the email from IS to Mr Foley’s parents that we print today chillingly confirms.

The main front against IS is, however, in Iraq and Syria, its theatre of operations. Top US general Martin Dempsey has stated the obvious in saying that it will be impossible to tackle IS in Iraq alone. Yet the reality is that the boots on the ground against IS in Syria are those of forces supporting its dictator, President Assad. There can be no formal alliance with such a man, even though General Lord Dannatt, former head of the British Army, has today called for talks. IS has been a useful tool for the Assad regime, enabling it to brand the whole opposition as Islamist fanatics. But without Assad’s co-operation, any extension of operations into Syria will be difficult.

President Obama’s preference is to use US airstrikes in support of local troops rather than committing US ground troops. This is a rational strategy in north-east Iraq, where Kurdish forces are outgunned. The Kurds can be far more effective with Western arms and air support. But so too could the Iraqi army, which proved so inept in countering the IS advance. Given robust direction and air support – it already possesses US weaponry – its operations could be transformed. There is already reportedly support in parts of the Pentagon for extending US airstrikes in this way. We cannot rule out a situation in which the US and Britain might be obliged to commit troops. But we must exploit every other option first.

Mansion tax fears

THE Liberal Democrats and Labour back a so-called mansion tax: a levy on properties worth £2 million or more. But is it a vote-winner in London? Many Londoners think they could be liable to it, as suggested by our poll today: as many as one in seven Londoners fear that they could be worse off, despite the fact that it would affect just two per cent of London homes. If Labour is serious about the measure, it needs to do a better job of reassuring London voters who worry, with rising property prices, that they may be taxed on their one asset. But all parties should be taking seriously the fact that council tax on the richest homes does not properly reflect their value. That must change, whichever party does it.

Taming the traffic

TRANSPORT for London’s plans for a radical cycle-friendly redesign of the main Elephant & Castle roundabout are welcome. The site is a notorious accident black spot: despite some criticism from cyclists that the plans do not go far enough, they are a big improvement. Here and at other intimidating junctions such as Vauxhall, TfL is at last showing a real willingness to design roads for cyclists and pedestrians as well as motor vehicles.

IN 1949, the German critic Theodor Adorno made a famous pronouncement that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”. Later Adorno modified this extreme ruling, conceding that “perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream”. Nobody now thinks the subject cannot be addressed.

Yet most of those who have written imaginatively about the Holocaust have done so only with great hesitation and care. The American Jewish novelist Cynthia Ozick, whose seven-page story *The Shawl* is a classic of the literature, has often expressed her feeling that she should not be writing in this creative way about the Holocaust. “I want the documents to be enough; I don’t want to tamper or invent or imagine. And yet I have done it. I can’t not do it. It comes, it invades,” she has said.

And then there is Martin Amis. Next week Amis publishes a new novel set in Auschwitz, *The Zone of Interest*. He has written about Auschwitz before, in his time-running-backwards novella, *Time’s Arrow*, of 1991. Enough, perhaps? But in the lengthy afterword to the new book, in which he effortfully cites all his historical sources, Amis claims that the Nazi genocide remains central to our self-understanding, adducing WG Sebald’s “dry aside to the effect that no serious person ever thinks about anything else”, a mantra Amis has already repeated in interview, repetition being his thing.

What Sebald, a great writer whose style was oblique and doubtful, may have been implying was that even when the Holocaust is not being addressed, it is always a presence, that it need not be directly described, therefore. But Amis is not so subtle. He has pitched right in.

The *Zone of Interest* has been called a love story and an office comedy which happens to be set in the Auschwitz of 1942. There are several narrators. The first is Obersturmführer Thomsen, the comparatively sympathetic lothario nephew of Martin Bormann, tall and good-looking. He has a lustful crush on Hannah, the strapping wife of the Auschwitz commandant, Paul Doll, our second narrator.

Doll is closely modelled on Rudolf Höss, the real commandant of Auschwitz, who was executed in 1947. When, during his trial, Höss was accused of murdering three-and-a-half million people, he replied: “No. Only two-and-one-half million – the rest died from disease and starvation.” His self-justifying memoirs were published posthumously. Primo Levi judged that Höss didn’t realise “how slimy his self-portrait as a good functionalary, father and husband actually is”.

Amis has spiffing fun with Doll, whom he has made into one of his low-life comedy butts, another Keith Talent or Lionel Asbo, blind to his own awfulness. Doll is stupid, drunk, petty-minded, number-obsessed and sexually snubbed by his own wife. Amis finds it hilarious to couch his droolings about women partly in German: “She’s short in the Unterschenkel, Alisz, but she has a glorious Hinterteil. As for the other stuff, the Busen and such, it’s hard to say – but there’s certainly no argument about the Sitzfläche.”

Amis combines this knockabout merriment with passages in which we are invited to spot Doll’s moral obtuseness and hypocrisy, as when he contemplates the Sonderkommandos of Auschwitz, the prisoners recruited to help run the crematoria, and says:



Serial significance: Martin Amis has previously written about nuclear war, communism and 9/11

Writing like this on the Holocaust is just in bad taste

Martin Amis’s new novel tries to bring some spiffing comedy to Auschwitz. It doesn’t work and it’s wrong

David Sexton
Literary Editor



“Ach, I can hardly bring myself to set it down. You know. I never cease to marvel at the abyss of moral destitution to which certain human beings are willing to descend...”

Doll gets an awful lot wrong, you see: “All hail our ineluctable victory in the Battle of Stalingrad!”, for example. We and Amis have the benefit of hindsight on that, don’t we? Towards the end he dramatically confesses: “I’ve come to believe that it was all a tragic mistake.” Eventually you realise he means not the Holocaust but “marrying such a large woman”. Laugh or cry? Just clasp your head in despair perhaps.

For what Amis has done here is not find a style appropriate to his subject matter, if that could possibly be done in this case, but simply to relocate yet another Martin Amis novel to a setting that he hopes will guarantee it greater seriousness than, say, his last outing, the broad farce *Lionel Asbo: State of England*.

Amis’s natural vein is comic disgust delivered with mock-heroic hauteur, but he has never been content to think himself suited to such low subject matter. (As a young man he confided to an interviewer that he wanted people to be talking in a hundred years of Dante, Shakespeare and Amis.)

Instead he has had a long career of

appropriating the biggest possible themes, as though they would necessarily also raise his writing to the highest level. He’s a serial significance opportunist. Once it was the threat of nuclear war (Einstein’s *Monsters*). Then it was planetary collapse (*London Fields*). Then it was Nazism and the Holocaust the first time around. Then it was cosmic terror (*Night Train*). Then it was Stalin and Communism (*Koba the Dread and House of Meetings*). Then it was 9/11 and Islamism (*The Second Plane*). Then it was the sexual revolution (*The Pregnant Widow*)...

Amis has a remarkable capacity to persuade himself that, never mind what he said before (when he discovered the nuclear threat he decided he’d been writing “not nuke novels but nuked novels” all along, subconsciously), his latest big theme is *The One*. It’s part of his own distinctive equipment as a writer, you might say, and look upon it indulgently.

But not this time. *The Zone of Interest* is not just a book in bad taste, it is truly depressing to read – not because of what it tells you about Auschwitz, Nazism and the Holocaust (nothing, if you have read the standard texts he depends upon) but because it is so exploitative of such overwhelmingly important subject matter. It is a moral disaster zone of its own. You wish you had not read it. You wish Amis would stop now. And then you turn back to Primo Levi to restore your faith in the value of literature again.

■ *The Zone of Interest* by Martin Amis is published on Thursday (Cape, £18.99)

Amis has had a long career of using the biggest possible themes, as though they would necessarily also raise his writing to the highest level

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