

Highly absorbing

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Published: 2 December 2011

Jarett Kobek ATTA 199pp. Semiotext(e). Paperback, £9.95.

978 1 58435 106 1 It is perhaps unsurprising that of all the 9/11 hijackers it is Mohamed Atta who has stuck in the public consciousness the most. It is not just that he was the boss, or that his name was easier for Westerners to remember than most of the

others. It was also the fact that his face was so compelling: his large, unkind eyes, his strong Semitic brow, his implacable nose. In the aftermath of an event which was strangely abstract in its enormity, when agonized people falling to their death were rendered as minuscule, downward-drifting specks, and almost no human remains were left behind to bury and mourn, to be confronted by an actual, incarnate enemy's gaze was almost a comfort, even if the enemy in question had been atomized along with his victims. As to the source of that enmity, we are still somewhat in the dark. The West never quite understood the rhetorical tropes of the Islamists before 9/11, and still doesn't: specific objections to American policy (its support for Israel, its military presence in Saudi Arabia) are one thing; militant puritanism, pedantic invocations of ancient battles and calls for a restored Caliphate and forced conversion of all the world's unbelievers are another. It's hard to tell what is for real and what is just windbagery.

In Jarett Kobek's novella, we follow Atta through two interwoven narratives, one in the third person as his team make their final preparations for the hijack, one in the first covering his studies in Germany, a visit to Syria, an intense, immersive experience on the haj and his impressions of America. Some of this works well: a persuasive moment of sexual convulsion as Atta meets, then flees from, a woman in Syria; his meditations on architecture and urban planning; a bizarre fascination with Disney World. In all this, we get a sense of a disordered and distressed consciousness, and a convincing narrative in which Islam provides Atta with a sense of identity and belonging (literally, in his absorption into the huge crowds on the haj).

Collected in the same book is a shorter piece about Saddam Hussein, hiding out on a farm near his birthplace in northern Iraq, waiting for the Americans to arrive. This is slightly more resolved, less jittery than Atta. Neither piece could really be said to be overly sympathetic to its subject, unless you feel that writing about such men at all is intrinsically an act of sympathy; both smell of the lamp a little, with lots of phrases in Arabic and tales from the court of Haroun al Rashid. As to what Saddam's connection to the 9/11 hijackers might be - well, let's just say they shared an enemy.