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### THE CRITICS

#### BOOKS

#### PRISONERS

by JOAN ACOCELLA

Russian terrors old and new.

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Martin Amis's recent book "Koba the Dread" (2002), a denunciation of Stalin's regime, was itself denounced by some critics. Why, they asked, had it taken Amis so long, until he was in his fifties, to realize that Stalin's Soviet Union was not a nice place? Books on the subject had been around for more than a half century. And why, given that fact, did Amis seem to think he was bringing us the news? Why his tone of indignation, as if everyone else were sitting around comfortably, indifferent to Stalin's crimes, and he alone remembered? Solzhenitsyn might bear a grudge, but Amis?

Such complaints did not put him off the subject. His new book, "House of Meetings" (Knopf; \$23), is also about the Soviet Union under Stalin. It is a novel, however, and fiction, because it is so firmly anchored in the particular—this character, this story—has a way of stifling authorial self-regard. Amis requires such chastening, for, as "Koba" showed, self-regard comes naturally to him. Fortunately, so does fiction. In "House of Meetings" he has returned to it, and much of the book is wonderful.

It is the story—told as a flashback—of two Russians, the narrator (never named) and his half brother, Lev, who end up in the same Siberian labor camp, as political prisoners, after the Second World War. The narrator is a practical man. Lev is the opposite: a poet, a pacifist. When he arrives at the camp, he is assigned to sleep on the floor of his barracks, where all the germs, not to speak of the scorn, will rain down on him. The narrator is scandalized by Lev's acceptance of this. Why doesn't he beat up the man in the nearest bunk and take his bed? "By what right?" Lev asks. "The right to life," the narrator replies. "To me, by now, violence was a neutral instrument," he says. "It was currency, like tobacco, like bread." But Lev wants no part of it, and so, for the ten years that they spend together in the camp, the narrator uses his own fists to protect Lev. Lev is grateful. The two men love each other. But Lev knows that his brother also wishes him dead, because Lev married the woman, Zoya, whom the narrator wanted.

Though Amis, in his previous novels, has been something of a meta-fictioneer, the shining virtue of "House of Meetings" is its old-fashioned psychological realism. Amis, like Primo Levi, his great predecessor in prison-camp memorialization, is able to calculate *degrees* of anguish. Lev can stand the infestation of lice—"I reach into my shirt," he says, "and if they're only little ones I think fuck it and put them back"—but eventually he cannot bear his dirtiness, the fact that his clothes are stiff, barklike, from his body's excrescences. This makes him weep. On the other hand, when, in the camp, his soul receives the blow from which it will never recover, he does not cry. His eyes, the narrator says, were "swiveled inward, where they were doing the work of decrease." The work of decrease—how modest this is, how final. Throughout the book we get such nuances: the counter-currents, the backflow, of suffering.

The suffering is further complicated by Amis's habit of relating it to sex. "House of Meetings" is one of the few major novels I know of that take rape as a central topic. The narrator introduces himself to us as a "decorated rapist." He served in the Second World War, and, like many others in the Red Army, he raped his way across Germany in 1945. Later, his culminating crime is to take a woman by force. But sex is everywhere in this book. Midway through, we meet that staple of the camp narrative, the truly sadistic officer, in this case the well-named Uglik. He clouts Lev on the ears so hard that his hearing is

permanently damaged. Uglik's punishment is worse, however. That night, he collapses, drunk, in the snow and spends five hours in the Arctic cold, with the result that both his hands have to be amputated. A few days later, the men in the barracks watch him as, sitting on the porch of the infirmary, he tries to extract a cigarette from his pack without calling for help: "He cuffed the packet onto the floor and kicked it about; he knelt, trying to use his stumped forearms as levers and pincers; then he lay flat on his stomach, and, like a man trying to possess the wooden floor, trying to enter it, trying to kiss it, writhed and rutted about until he snuffled one up with his questing lips." This sight, both disgusting and piteous, of Uglik humping the porch, is the book's central image. Years later, it still haunts Lev in his dreams. In "House of Meetings," sex is a lost paradise. The two brothers have a private joke in which they call Zoya, the book's sexual standard-bearer, "the Americas." This is the Americas in the Age of Discovery sense: palm trees, mangoes, Eden. As the book goes on, Amis extends the metaphor. The "great shaft" of Zoya's throat, the narrator says, "was like an aquarium of shifting blues and crimsons." She is a whole coral reef: color, warmth, cleanness. And she cannot be enjoyed. After their release from the camp, both brothers go to bed with her, and are dead to the experience. That is Amis's symbol for the harm that the Russian state has done to its people.

It is interesting, in the face of such burning beauties and griefs—so uncontrived, it seems—to consider the number of old, gear-grinding narrative ploys that Amis uses to move his novel forward. Already in Chapter 1, the narrator tells us that for twenty-two years he has had in his possession a letter that he has never opened. Later, he tells us about Lev's great crisis in the camp, the time when he began the "work of decrease." The narrator knows that this was triggered by a "conjugal visit" that Lev had from Zoya, but he doesn't know what happened between them. As Amis keeps dropping hints, we realize that the answer is in the unopened letter, which is from Lev to the narrator. At this point, if we have read other novels by Amis we may suspect that he is laying a trap—that in the end he will withhold the answer and laugh at us for our childish wish to solve a mystery. But that's not what he does. The letter is printed in full in the second-to-last chapter, and it solves the mystery.

That letter is not the only loaded gun. The book itself is a letter, from the narrator to a stepdaughter whom he acquired late in his life. From page to page, he warns her about what's coming. Soon I will shock you, he says. Soon there will be a "thunderclap." This blatant suspense-building may be a species of postmodernism. If so, it is that late-in-the-day postmodernism in which the embrace of the timeworn, the corny, comes to seem not ironic but heartfelt. But I would guess that the intent was never ironic. At least in the prison-camp episodes, Amis seems to have been so impressed with the gravity of his material that, in deference, he withheld his habitual knowingness. Compared with his average product, "House of Meetings" is short and clear. We actually know what's happening, and that is a blessing.

The book opens in 2004. The narrator, an old man now and an American citizen (he defected), is on a return trip to Siberia. The story of his and Lev's camp years is thus interleaved with scenes of the new Russia. The surprise is that he finds today's Russia as appalling as the old one. Many of the events in the novel are keyed to upheavals in Russian history, and the narrator's return to Siberia is made to coincide with the Beslan massacre of September, 2004, in which Chechen terrorists took over a school in North Ossetia. The narrator's day-to-day summaries of the news reports on this crisis are more horrifying than anything else in the book. Inside the gymnasium, the sweltering children are drinking their own urine. Outside, the bodies of people killed on the first day are decomposing. Finally, on the third day, "the bomb falls from the basketball hoop and the roof of the gym comes down. And if you were a killer, then this was your time. It is not given to many—the chance to shoot children in the back as they swerve in their underwear past rotting corpses." In the end, a hundred and eighty-six children were killed. "And now there is a doctor, on the television, who says that some of the surviving children 'have no eyes.'" The narrator tells us that every Russian he talks to believes that this was the work not of Chechens but of the Russian government, looking to raise public support for its war in Chechnya.

As the horrors accumulate, Amis finally unleashes his accustomed phantasmagoria, the witches' Sabbath that we have encountered so often in his novels. Modern Siberia swarms with Russians in tracksuits, flocking to work in the factories there and destined to die early from industrial pollution. In a public square, the narrator finds kiosks selling anti-Semitic paperbacks, together with *spirt*, or surgical alcohol, at thirty cents a bottle. Numbed by *spirt*, the people collapse in "blood-colored puddles infested with iron oxide, used syringes, used condoms." Starving dogs prowl the streets, and cars aim for them. At one point, a bus speeds up to run over a pregnant dog, and the passengers cheer as they hear the "sodden thud." Another dog circles back to her and mounts her. Rape again, this time of a dead body.

"This isn't the Second World any more," the narrator says. "It is not even the Third World. It is the Fourth. It is what happens *after*." Nor can any plea be entered for what happened before. Many people consider the crimes of Soviet Russia more forgivable than those of Nazi Germany, on the ground that the Communists began with a humanitarian purpose: they wanted the best, but everything went wrong. In "House of Meetings," the narrator brings up this argument and tells us that he can't find a single Russian who agrees with it. The Communist bosses didn't want the best, people tell him; "They wanted what they got. They wanted the worst." And so, the book seems to say, do Russia's current leaders.

In its material—the camps, the misery, the engulfing sense of sin, the positing of Russia not as a country but as an emblem of human fate—"House of Meetings" reminds us of Dostoyevsky. In its portrayal of a family where two men are in love with the same woman, and in its lining up of brothers who seem to represent segments of the Russian soul, it specifically recalls "The Brothers Karamazov." (Lev and the narrator have a third brother, who is a monster, like Smerdyakov.) The ending of "The Brothers Karamazov," where Alyosha asks us just to love one another, has sometimes been criticized as a throwing up of hands in response to the great question of human evil which the book raises. Amis, addressing the same question, likewise has no answer. In place of Dostoyevsky's orthodox Christianity, he gives us Manichaeism. Russia, the narrator says, is the "nightmare country": "No power, no freedom, no responsibility, ever, in all our history." But Lev, in his letter—from which, after the long drum roll, we expect an explanation—does not take this line, or any one line. He still deplores violence, but he says that he admires his brother for being able to inflict it: "In the last months of the war, the cannonades in Moscow whenever a major city fell—with every boom I felt your power." That, as the narrator has repeatedly told us, was when he was having his rape-fest in Germany. At the same time, he was fighting the Nazis, and we approve of that, right? Lev seems to.

If Amis does no swaggering in his material about the camp, he makes up for it elsewhere. The narrator's addresses to his stepdaughter have an archness that sounds like bad Nabokov. There is also a great deal of linguistic fanciness. At one point, as the narrator is speaking of embracing a woman, he tells us about "the pendency beneath one armpit, the pendency under the other." It takes a minute to figure out that he's talking about breasts (which, to my knowledge, are not situated under the armpits). Then, there are the jokes that don't work. The narrator says that it's time for Russia to apologize for its crimes, as Germany has done: "Say sorry, someone. Someone tell me they're sorry. Go on. Cry me the Volga." Since these problems of tone are to be found only in the post-Gulag material, you might say that they are part of the work of characterization—that Amis put them there to show us the damage that the camp inflicted on this man. I wouldn't say that, though. Misjudged playfulness, go-to-the-dictionary vocabulary: these are staples of Amis's work. Fiction may have reined in his narcissism, but it certainly hasn't eliminated it.

I find these traits of his annoying, but they are part of something larger, which I cherish: his sheer courage as a writer. Consider his metaphors. When the narrator describes Zoya's throat as an aquarium, or when he speaks of those sent to the Gulag as "flung out over the shoulder of the world," he is telling you his story as much as when he is telling you his story. Recalling the harm he has done to others, he looks down at his hands, "the size of cheeseboards, no, cheeses, whole cheeses, with their pocks and ripples, their spread, their verdigris." This is not a metaphor in the sense of " $x$  is  $y$ ." It is a metaphor in the sense of the

Symbolist poets: a hallucination. We don't just see the cheese; we smell it, and think, with recoil, about eating it. In the process, a whole dome of meanings, a specific emotional world—hunger, desire, disgust, rottenness—rises around us. That, together with people and a story, is all a novelist owes the reader. ✦