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## THE BOOK REVIEW

# Amisérable

**Come on, Martin Amis, you can do worse than this.**

By Sam Anderson



Courtesy of Random House)

**M**artin Amis is the undisputed Grand Wizard of Schadenfreude—he dramatizes it in his novels, dispenses it in his essays, and seems to inspire it personally in everyone within a 3,000-mile radius. As he once told an interviewer, “People doing each other down, competing, their savagery—that’s my patch.” It’s no surprise, then, that over the past 35 years insulting Amis has become a competitive sport among book reviewers. He’s been maligned by his father (“I can’t get to the end of a paragraph”), his hero (Updike called one of his plots “unmentionable”), his friend (Christopher Hitchens accused him of “mushy secondhand observations”), and his fellow novelists (A.S. Byatt: “male turkey cocking”; Anita Brookner: “an assault on the reader’s good faith”). He seems to have generated a feedback loop of intercontinental bitterness. At the height of his fame in the mid-nineties, the media feasted on him for weeks after he left his wife, fired his agent, and spent a chunk of an exorbitant book advance repairing his exorbitant teeth; things got so bad that Salman Rushdie, who had his own problems at the time, accused the media of

attempting to “murder” Amis. (Amis’s own response to the scandal seemed calculated only to metastasize the nastiness: “Envy never comes to the ball dressed as envy, it comes dressed as high moral standards or distaste for materialism.”) Recently, improbably, things have only got worse. As Amis nears 60, he has started to hemorrhage his old powers—a great loss to literature, but an incalculable gain for the art of sniping—and the critics have attacked with special verve, like matadors whipping out their fanciest moves at the end of a bullfight. Michiko Kakutani wrote that his last novel, *Yellow Dog*, was “like a sendup of a Martin Amis novel written by someone intent on sabotaging his reputation,” and the novelist Tibor Fischer famously dismissed it as “not-knowing-where-to-look bad ... like your favourite uncle being caught in a school playground, masturbating.”

The immediate question raised by Amis’s newest novel, *House of Meetings*, then—the mystery that will keep everyone riveted until its final page—is: How terrible is it? Can we unleash the hatchet sentences we’ve all been mentally sharpening for three years? (I’m eager to use mine: “Martin Amis’s new novel is so kidney-rupturingly nauseating that the human race should annihilate itself via nuclear warfare purely out of the shame of sharing a genetic code with him.”) Despite some improbably glowing early reviews—many of which have the flavor of apology for the *Yellow Dog* business (cf. Kakutani)—the book is, unfortunately, disappointing on a couple of levels. It’s not nearly as good as we want it to be, but it’s also—heartbreakingly—not nearly as bad.

*House of Meetings* is, like every Amis novel, thoroughly miserable. The novel tells the story of two half-brothers thrown into a Russian labor camp after World War II, where they suffer the usual Gulag miseries: Ears are vividly boxed (“he had two worms of bloody phlegm coiling out of his head”), hands are lost to hypothermia, and the camp’s various prisoner subspecies (which are referred to in *Clockwork Orange*–style slang) engage in constant senseless violence:

*In the space of three minutes we saw a bitch sprinting flat-out after a brute with a bloody mattock in his hand, a pig methodically clubbing a fascist to the ground, a workshy snake slicing off the remaining fingers of his left hand, a team of locusts twirling an old shiteater into the compost heap, and, finally, a leech who, with his teeth sticking out from his gums at right-angles (scurvy), was nonetheless making a serious attempt to eat his shoe.*

At one point a pregnant dog is gratuitously run over by a bus. It’s like Solzhenitsyn, except 3,000 pages shorter and drowned in stylish Amis irony: “I reach into my shirt for a handful of lice,” says one brother. “And if they’re only little ones I think fuck it and put them back.”

The brothers are classic Amis opposites. The elder, the book’s narrator, is a war-hardened murderer and rapist (“I lost my virginity to a Silesian housewife, in a roadside ditch, after a ten-minute chase”); the younger is a poet, pacifist, and—in yet another of Amis’s awkward brushes with misogyny—husband to the most magical soul-healing sex-kitten in all of Russia, a “miracle of womanliness” whose ability to make love for 72 hours (“with breaks for naps and snacks”) pretty much drives the entire plot. After the brothers’ release, the book tracks the ugly psychological fallout of their prison experience over the next 50 years. There’s more than enough here to fill a genuine old-fashioned 800-page Russian novel—marriages, wars, affairs, tragic deaths, a dying pilgrimage to Siberia, and a mysterious unread letter. Sadly, however, the novel comes to us pre-abridged—it’s written in the form of the elderly narrator’s memoir—and Amis, as usual, seems less concerned with fleshing out complex human drama than he does with being memorably pithy. It’s like notes for a great novel to be written by someone else.

Amis remains, for my money, the world’s best writer of vivid, zippy prose-bursts. His natural unit of thought seems to be the comic riff, an approach that lends itself to some genres better than others. His career-spanning collection of book reviews, *The War Against Cliché*, is a masterpiece, and probably his most satisfying single book. But his talent translates less easily to the novel, where he tends to look like a sprinter running a marathon, trying to compensate for muscle fibers and long-term racing strategies he doesn’t actually have. It feels like he’s trying to write entire books out of first sentences. It doesn’t help that he takes a defiantly narrow, self-handicapping view of the genre. He has called plot a “secondary” concern, along with (incredibly) “characters, psychological insight, and form.” He’s obsessed, above all, with style: The gamble at the heart of every Amis novel is that the prose itself will be so orgasmically dazzling you’ll forgive the fact that he’s omitted 80 percent of what makes fiction actually work. This leads to certain obvious deficiencies—most seriously, that his characters are all just Amis himself with a fake mustache or boobs; like him, they tend to quote Auden three times a page and speak in fluent Nabokovian sentences. (Amis is king of the Nabokov knockoffs.) He’s so devoted to Voice he doesn’t care about the nuances of actual voices. In *House of Meetings*, the narrator writing his memoir sounds exactly like his brother speaking aloud, who sounds exactly like his wife, who sounds exactly like the narrator’s American stepdaughter adding footnotes to his memoir after his death. You might say that Amis doesn’t actually write novels at all, he writes brilliantly stylish essays about fictional situations. His phrases are his real characters; his sentences are his plots. Reading even the best Amis novel is like watching a highlight reel: It’s breathtaking, but soon you start to miss the mundane drama of the actual game.

Even mediocre Amis, however, is better than most writers, and *House of Meetings* has plenty of great moments. His metaphors are still dazzling: A primitive Soviet TV looks “like an especially disgraceful deep-sea fish,” a disgusting handshake is “like holding a greased rubber glove half full of tepid water,” and the narrator’s aging brother develops “a bald patch, perfectly circular, resembling a beanie of pink suede.” There are several convincing stat-filled mini-essays about the decline of Russia—plunging life spans, climbing syphilis rates—and he powerfully distills the ironies of totalitarianism: “Something strange was happening in the Soviet Union, after the war against fascism: fascism.” But, tragically, even style is beginning to desert him. It often feels like he’s working from an Amis template: And there was *x*, with its *y* and its *z*, its *q*, its *r*, and its *s*. “And there we were, Lev and me, with our books and our thick periodicals, our basic German, English, French, our heavy chess pieces, our maps and charts.” He strains to jerry-rig profundity out of gimmicks: italics, ellipses, and

*faux*-poetic repetition. (“I too had crossed over into the other half of my life: the better half. He crossed over and I crossed over. We crossed.”) Two thirds of the way through *House of Meetings*, the narrator warns his reader to “keep an ear out for my clucks of satisfaction—the little snorts and gurglings of near-perfect felicity.” We didn’t need the heads-up. At this point, the music of Amis’s prose is almost entirely drowned out by self-satisfied snorts and gurgles.

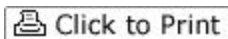
“By the time you have perfected any style of writing,” George Orwell wrote, “you have always outgrown it.” By this standard, Martin Amis outgrew his style at the age of 22, when he emerged as a literary prodigy out of Oxford. Unfortunately, he’s still writing that way 35 years later. *House of Meetings* is an average little weird disposable novel—not terrible, not great—and Amis has taught us to expect more from him: if not the huge victory, then at least the stunning collapse. Decent writing, or even merely good writing, is by his standards a total failure.

**House of Meetings**

By Martin Amis. Knopf. 256 pages. \$23.

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