



Martin Amis' Gulag: Accurate, Harrowing, Not Quite Plausible

House of Meetings, by Martin Amis. Alfred A. Knopf, 241 pages, \$23.

By: Adam Begley

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Page: 1

Five years ago, Martin Amis published a peculiar little book about Stalin called *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million*. Part memoir, part polemic, part history lesson, it seemed a misuse of the novelist's considerable talents (one eminent historian complained of "basic factual errors on almost every other page"). Why couldn't clever Mr. Amis, who took on the Holocaust with wit and daring in *Time's Arrow* (1991)—and "The Last Days of Mohamed Atta" in a recent short story—shoehorn the horrors of Stalin's Soviet experiment into some kind of engaging fiction?

Be careful what you ask for: *House of Meetings* is the novelized version of Mr. Amis' enduring fascination with the worst of 20th-century Russia. For some 250 pages, the author chooses to impersonate an unnamed octogenarian survivor of the Gulag. Our anonymous narrator is also a veteran of what we would call the Eastern front ("in the first three months of 1945, I raped my way across what would soon be East Germany"); a TV repairman turned weapons scientist; a bookish Anglophile who quotes Chaucer, Marvell, Auden—and keeps a volume of Coleridge's poems handy; and a defector who has lived for two decades in Chicago and calls his 24-year-old African-American stepdaughter "kid." To top it all off, the old man is blessed with Martin Amis' famously flashy prose style ("Having been silent for so long, I'm now like a very much rowdier version of the Ancient Mariner")—an ongoing difficulty for a reader who's eager to suspend disbelief and actually enter imaginatively into the love story this unlikely narrator promises to tell.

The layers of wrapping around the story itself present a further difficulty. First there's a cover letter from our narrator to Venus, his stepdaughter—throat-clearing and some instructions on what to do with his memoir. Next there's his account, again aimed at Venus, of his nostalgic tourist expedition in September 2004 to Norlag, a labor camp above the Arctic Circle where for 10 years, starting in 1946, he was imprisoned. The Siberian travelogue gets us used to the narrator's impressive verbal dexterity and his fits of cantankerousness; it also summons up a

horrific contemporary instance of “Russian heavy-handedness”: The Beslan siege is unfolding on TV screens and radio.

Finally, the heart of the matter: Our narrator and his younger brother Lev were both in love with the same woman—Zoya, who became Lev’s wife—and both were sent to the same slave-labor camp (for political “crimes”). How the sibling rivals survived the Gulag, what gave them the strength, and what happened to their love for Zoya, during and after—that’s the burden of the narrative proper. (It, too, is punctuated with passages addressed directly to Venus. We never meet her, but we learn about the “burnish” of her skin, her chin stud and her “mild ideology”—“mildness is its one idea.” Her voice is heard fleetingly in several footnotes.)

If Mr. Amis’ principal aim is to make the slave archipelago and its human toll real to those of us, like Venus, who were born after the Gulag was dissolved—if his aim is to show us the atrocities of Soviet communism in action—then his novel is a failure, in part because of the repeated intrusion of the octogenarian lecturing his stepdaughter, but mostly because the love triangle that’s meant to give dramatic impetus to the story is neither credible nor compelling.

There’s no attempt to disguise the fact that the ridiculously voluptuous Zoya is a puerile male fantasy: “[H]er figure was a platitude—tall and ample and also wasp-waisted.” According to Lev, she was “a big woman who weighed about half a kilo in bed. She was also very inventive, preternaturally unqueamish, and quite incredibly long-haul.”

Lev, her husband, the younger brother, a would-be poet and a committed pacifist, is at first too good to be true (he endures the slave camp with something close to dignity), and then too pathetic to be of much interest—except that one is mildly curious to learn what flipped the switch. (The change takes hold after a conjugal visit from Zoya in the camp’s eponymous House of Meetings.)

As for our narrator, his love for Zoya—“fulminant” in 1946—survives the Gulag intact. Though it seemed to me all along indistinguishable from lust, his passion, his *pervverted* passion, is still powerful enough in 1982—when he’s in his 60’s and she’s in her mid-50’s—to drive him to an act of shameful violence.

I found that if I filtered out the love story and pretended I was reading about a brutal and resentful older brother determined to keep a dreamy younger brother alive in atrocious prison conditions, a large chunk of *House of Meetings*—the fourscore pages specifically devoted to the “[w]ildly directed violence [and] drastic degradation” of the camp—worked well.

Mr. Amis gets the detail right. Here’s our narrator avidly checking Lev’s progress: “His color was better now But his lips and nails were blue, from hunger, not cold, and he had the brownish pigmentation round the mouth, deeper than any suntan. We all had that too, the great-ape muzzle.” And alongside the detail, there’s the notorious Amis weakness for aphorism: “Young men, after their arrival, would talk about sex and even sports for a couple of weeks, then about sex and food, then about food and sex, then about food.” It all adds up to a lifelike tableau of gruesome inhumanity.

But on the whole, I think it's time Martin Amis left Russia to the Russians.

Adam Begley is books editor of The Observer.

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