

SCOTLAND ON SUNDAY

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## His master's voice still talking dirty

### BOOK REVIEW

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#### House Of Meetings

Martin Amis

Jonathan Cape, £15.99

I HAVE a friend who says that Martin Amis has a dirty mind. I've always assumed this to be an overstatement based on the exploits of John Self in *Money*, but looking back over Amis's novels and memoirs, I'm starting to see what she means.

The first point is that we like sex in novels to be sexy, when in Amis it rarely is. The second point is that sex is probably Amis's most common theme, even if it's more abusive than we would like.

It's sex and nothing but. It's not erotica and it's certainly not "romance", as the jacket blurb for *House Of Meetings* claims. It's sex, low-rent and inevitable; and always as crumbly as the other indignities of bodily life, like toilet habits, spots and smells.

Recall Clint Smoker and his "cashew" penis in *Yellow Dog*. Then think of Amis's Californian porn star and victim of child abuse, Karla White. In *Other People*, there was Mary Lamb, both sexual victim and victimiser; and the list goes on with one commonality: not only is sex beset with personal disaster, but any sense of equilibrium, even in joy, is utterly unsustainable.

None of this would be relevant had *House Of Meetings* avoided sex altogether. It does not. It's where the novel places this sex that is of interest; in Stalin's gulag, where the indignities of bodily life were legion. The *House of Meetings* of the title refers to the location of the camps' conjugal visits, although the connubial bliss itself plays a minor part in what is presented as a memoir covering more than 40 years. The conjugal visit is further complicated by the fact that two men (half-brothers) are in love with the same woman, although only the husband is permitted to see her.

There is a strained prurience to the sex during the book's central love scene, despite several charmingly typical descriptions en route to the main event: "half-clothed fumbblings, messy intercrural compromises, and snuffling aftermaths."

The labour camp experience of sex is, however, illustrated by Amis, using an effect he perfected in *Money*, when John Self thinks of his bank balance while making love. The gulag equivalent in *House Of Meetings* has Lev thinking about food when he meets his wife after an eight-year stint in the camps. "As I made love, I wasn't thinking about my wife. I was thinking about my dinner."

It is a sad moment and not just a sombre instant of rotten sex; it's also unimaginative and state-sanctioned sex.

The sex in *House Of Meetings* is actually Amis playing to his strengths, and is the *pièce de résistance* in what is also an expert chronicle of the miseries of Soviet everyday life, both in and out



of the camps. Readers won't be disappointed with the description of the gulag, which feels as accurate as if Amis had done 10 years himself. The characters and cruelties of the camps exist in miniature, along with the pointlessness and boredom of prison life, which Amis cobbles together beautifully.

His coinage for this is the "frequency of the total": "Total states, with your sufferings selected, as if off a menu, by your sworn enemy." The book's most notable success is the seriousness with which it passes through history, describing Russian life under "cadaver millionaire" Stalin through governmental agony and economic chaos to Putin. This is a mighty achievement in a short novel, and takes its ageing narrator away from the USSR and through the sickening freedoms of America, before he's dumped once again in a Russia where he can click on SEND to dispatch his memoir back to the States.

IN SPANNING the decades, Amis passes comment on a few select events, such as the hostage siege at Beslan. Some of these passages work, while others - like the one on Columbine - shove the narrator aside and Amis takes over as only he can: "Columbine. Yes I know. Columbine was not political but purely recreational, and was over in minutes. Only the briefest visit, on that occasion, to the parallel universe where murdering the young is accounted witty."

It's doubtful whether time-served Amis readers will accept the accuracy of this narrator, who is supposed to be an octogenarian Russian and former gulag inmate.

This is because Amis can't suppress that for which he is best loved, his wordplay and deadpan delivery; and I'm not sure if it can be considered a fault. Amis's capacity to herd his words has always pleased his readers, and is even acknowledged by his greatest detractors. Amis's talents are not those of his narrators however, and by the end of the book, both brothers have had a chance to speak, and both are as clever, arch and dry as their writer.

It is a kind of conflation of wish-fulfilment on the part of author and character, and is strikingly obvious with a writer as good as Amis. Many lesser authors give their narrators conversational tics, so that readers don't feel they're listening to the writer on every page. Some of Amis's more cutting narratorial asides are saved for commentary on today's youth, such as when his ex-prisoner narrator visits a clinic for anorexics: "I saw a hundred of you through the wire around the car park, [and] it was impossible not to think of another iconic twentieth-century scene."

This is the same voice that allows him to make deadly serious moral points, and most will be surprised how well Martin Amis, the evangelist of urban scat, takes to the ignominy of camp life, offering great side descriptions of wild dogs and what it was like to be a rapist during the Hitler war. "Oppression lays down bloodlust," he writes of the system of informers and politicals. "It lays it down like wine."

What *House Of Meetings* may prove is that there is another Amis style. If *Yellow Dog* was more than the self-respecting reader should endure, then here is a more generous novel that still travels in macabre directions, but does so with a conscience. It doesn't herald a new development in Amis's work, but does manage to make his talent for shock count by locating it in an already brutish environment.

Judging Amis on his early work is no longer appropriate, especially since he's in his third decade of writing. Moreover, he's a different writer from the young man who gave us *The Rachel Papers*. In that book, Charles Highway appears to speak for Amis when he says: "Surely, nice things are dull, and nasty things are funny. The nastier a thing is, the funnier it gets."

As a rule of thumb, that's applied to virtually every word of fiction he has written. It doesn't however apply to Amis on the Stalinist regime, which is for once an attempt not to laugh at calamity, even if it is through the awfulness of sex.

Martin Amis is appearing at a special Edinburgh Book Festival event on Wednesday October 4, 8.00pm, Queen's Hall, (£8/£6); 0845 373 5888 or 0131 668 2019; [www.edbookfest.co.uk](http://www.edbookfest.co.uk)

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