

# Reports from the gulag

by Tom Chatfield

*Martin Amis's new novel is brilliant and insightful, but offers little news to those versed in the 20th century's first-hand accounts of atrocity*

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House of Meetings by Martin Amis

(Jonathan Cape, £15.99)

In 2002, Martin Amis gave us *Koba the Dread*, a non-fictional account of Stalin's Russia which was slated by, among others, Orlando Figes and Christopher Hitchens for its strategy of personalisation: Amis's insistent relation of the Soviet experiment and its horrors to his own life. "I find myself embarrassed almost every day," Hitchens commented, "at the thought of an actual gulag survivor reading this... and finding his or her experience reduced to a sub-Leavisite boys' tiff." Four years later, in *House of Meetings*, Amis has gone one step further and himself created that gulag survivor. This is late Amis, his tenth novel, and it is a work at war on every page with Leavisite cosiness.

*House of Meetings* is a posthumous address, narrated by a nameless 86-year-old Russian to his African-American stepdaughter. It is 2004 and, as the Beslan school siege and massacre unfolds elsewhere, our narrator is taking "the gulag tour" (it "never quite caught on," the purser remarks) up the Yenisei river into Siberia for a final glimpse of his past. Once finished, he will commit (assisted) suicide. Age speaks to youth--the 20th century to the 21st--but not in decorous tones. This is a wicked, wild old man, "huge and shaggy," raging against his failing powers, goading his audience into judgement. His story begins with his return from the second world war to Moscow at the age of 25: a handsome, decorated war hero fresh from raping his way across the ruins of Germany. Soon, both our narrator and his squat, stammering half-brother Lev have fallen in love with Zoya, a beautiful Jewess, anomalous in Soviet Moscow both for her race and her free-spiritedness. The brothers are soon arrested as "intelligents" and sent to a vast labour camp at Norlag, but it is Lev who has won Zoya's heart, and who has secretly married her before his arrest. Then there is the meat of the novel: their decade of hard labour, punctuated in 1956 by the titular event--the visit to the "House of Meetings," a shack in the camp reserved for conjugal visits in which Lev sees his wife for the first time since their marriage. In 1957, the brothers are released, and thereafter their lives follow diverging trajectories. Our narrator, the violent survivor, gradually achieves wealth and influence; Lev slides deeper and deeper into squalor and poverty until, in 1962, Zoya leaves him. The last section of the novel then traces their fates as Lev's life ends in tragedy and our narrator's infatuation with Zoya comes to its brutal climax.

In *House of Meetings*, the present is all aftermath. "My country is dying... Russia is dying" we are told at its beginning and end, and in between we have the anatomy of a terminal sickness which, Amis would have us believe, is moral in nature: "the conscience is a vital organ, and not an extra like the tonsils or the adenoids." The form this sickness takes is nothing less than a refusal of life--a birth rate that is in 2004 only two thirds the death rate, producing what is termed "the Russian cross . . . two crinkly lines intersecting, one pink, one blue." Like the claustrophobic geometry of our narrator's and Lev's relationship, in which the one brother silently wishes death on his rival, this is a retreat from love and life into a preordained doom of the kind that has long dominated Amis novels. Mirroring the fate of his nation, Lev's love is hollowed out by slavery and imprisonment, while his brother lives out the violence that began in him with the war.

*House of Meetings* is also a tirade against what its narrator calls "westernism," something he identifies in his stepdaughter as a reflexive ideology of mildness and relativism: "your crowd, they're so terror-stricken by generalisations that they can't even manage a declarative sentence." This is an old Amis rant (his collected essays, *The War Against Cliché*, begins with an assault on the vacuity of "emotional egalitarianism"), but in the context of his recent writings it has an especially hard edge--the implication that to be overcautious is to be complicit in the evils of fanaticism and intolerance. Addressing his stepdaughter, our narrator demands that she develop a more active position on his deeds than mere empathy: "My ghost expects censure. But make it personal, Venus; make it your own and not the censure of your group and your ideology." Similarly, Amis's prose goads his readers towards reaction, holding past horrors up for inspection with the insistence that these are actively related to the world's ongoing terrors. "It is not given to many--the chance to shoot children in the back as they swerve in their underwear past rotting corpses," we are dryly told of the world in 2004. Neutrality is not an option.

Of all the conflicts within Martin Amis's recent work, perhaps the most telling is the paradox inherent in his dogmatic, absolutist accounts of the evils of dogmatism and absolutism. Like DH Lawrence's praise of the novel as "incapable of the absolute," to which much of Amis's criticism is indebted, the "ideology of no ideology" that has been Amis's recent credo is a distinctly mobile standard. There is much in *House of Meetings* to admire, especially in contrast to the less successful recent stories "In the Palace of the End" and "The Last Days of Mohamed Atta," but there is also something self-cancelling about its simultaneous insistence on the adequacy (as confessor and awakener) and the irrelevance of literary art. The 21st century is glimpsed only obliquely, but what we see of it suggests that our narrator's "pedagogic mantle" conceals as much anger and despair as it does wisdom. It is perhaps the novel's greatest strength that, unlike its author's recent non-fictional diatribes against Islamism, it asks for "censure" as much as for assent; but the muddy weight of the past it dredges has little news to offer those versed in the last century's innumerable first-hand accounts of atrocity.

*House of Meetings* ends with an envoy, and a nod to Chaucer, as our narrator terminates his life and returns us to the figure of his stepdaughter: young, American and burnished with everything western democracy can give its youth in the way of liberty and security--"good diet, lavish health insurance, two degrees, foreign travel and languages, orthodonture, psychotherapy, property, and capital." There is hope and heartfelt praise in this. Both the novel and its author, however, seem doubtful on the question of whether even such bounty can be enough. Russia is dying under the weight of its past, but also under the weight of what this past tells us about ourselves. Much as in *Koba the Dread*, Martin Amis is at both his most powerful and most compromised in confronting these facts. *House of Meetings* contains verbal brilliance, inspiration and insight, but it also suffers from an intellectual and moral paralysis--a writerly faith in the efficacy of confession and atonement that does not survive its author's horror at the apocalyptic mess of recent history.

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