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Martin Amis expects upset with autobiographical novel

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By Mike Collett-White

LONDON (Reuters Life!) - British author Martin Amis is back in the critics' good books with his latest novel "House of Meetings" set in the slave labor camps of Stalinist Russia.

It is Amis' second book about Russia following his non-fiction "Koba the Dread" in 2002.

Amis spoke to Reuters about his next project, an autobiographical novel that the 57-year-old literary star expects will upset plenty of people who will be recognizable in it.

Q: What are you writing next after "House of Meetings?"

A: "I'm repulsively far advanced with another novel. I'm almost 100,000 words into another. What happened was I had a kind of crisis, I suppose I can say now in retrospect. But I spent a year on this autobiographical novel.

I think it's best to state the difficulty in the novel, because then it ceases to be a secret and you don't feel this terrible threat of exposure and suddenly it becomes a part of the argument. So I just typed in this sentence that said: 'Truth does not lend itself to fiction.'

Having said that I suddenly felt completely free and it got going at a good pace. It's not that far from being finished, so it's long-ish and very autobiographical and very indiscreet and it will be much hated, and I will be, again."

Q: Will you be naming people who will be instantly recognizable?

A: "There are very recognizable people in it. It's a sort of celebrity novel but high-brow.

Mostly what it is is women ... you know, how it went with women. It's very much about a period of history I lived through, which is the entire sex revolution starting in the 60s coming up to now. The title is 'The Pregnant Widow'. It's a Russian-inspired title.

Writing about revolution (Russian writer and thinker Alexander Herzen) said normally one should be pleased when one order gives way to another, but it's not a child you're left with after a revolution, you're left with a pregnant widow, and there will be much terror and tribulation before that child is born. The father is dead, the child is not yet born. I think that is what has happened to feminism. It's only now in its second trimester. The baby isn't there yet. Dad is dead - patriarchy has gone, but the baby isn't there yet."

Q: How do you explain your fascination with Russia? Have you ever been there?

A: "I've never been there. I think it starts, as always, with the novels. You always come to them quite early because they are pressed on you and once you get going they are completely addictive. So it starts with Tolstoy, it starts with 'Anna Karenina', that's the first one you're given. You do nothing else for four days until you've finished it then suddenly you are in this other world."

Q: How would you describe Russia today?

A: "I suppose you'd say that (President Vladimir) Putin was authoritarian, far right, but amazingly yet again not caring about the people. They've got all this money, but nothing for health, nothing for education, just this head down heading toward becoming a great power again ... There is never a time of normalcy. It's always a struggle."

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