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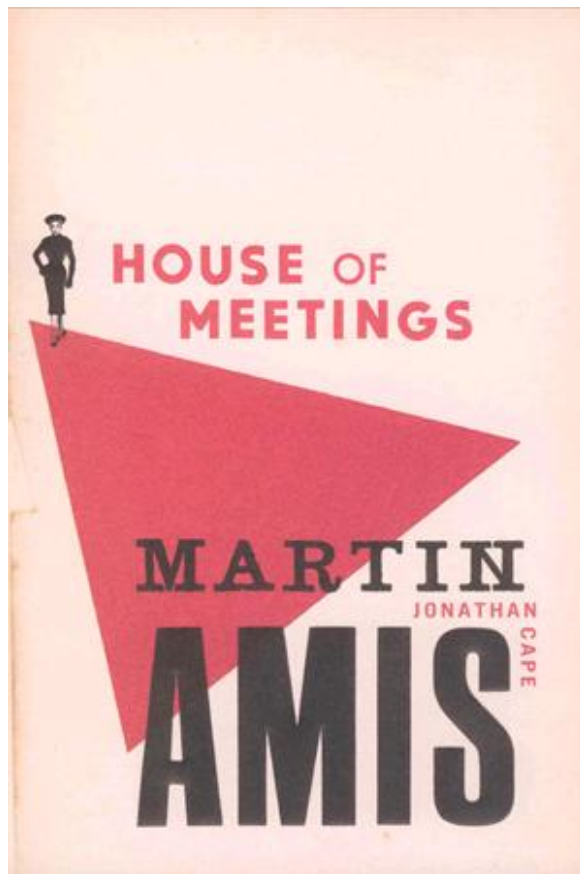
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House of Meetings
Martin Amis
Jonathan Cape

Reviewed by Steve Finbow

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In *House of Meetings*, Amis's mucky diamond stylistics are as good as ever — “furry whispers”, “yoghurty unguent”, “holster-shaped mouth”. But does he take on too much in such a short novel? Political allegory, an examination of the body and state corrupted, the musings of a sexual tyrant and rapist — Martin Amis does Nabokov, does Dostoevsky, does history. Mart wants to be American. He wants to be Russian. He wants to be Jewish. Martin Amis, a genius of comic prose, is desperate for heft. He does not want to write a *Saturday* or a *Satanic Verses*. He wants to write a *Pale Fire* or a *Herzog*.

I am a huge Amis fan. Receiving this book through the post was like going on a first date — I trembled as I opened the covers. I read it. I put the book down and stared into space. I noticed I had written four pages of notes. I read them. I saw “brilliant”, “genius” and an Amisesque “very good”. I looked again at my notes and saw the pages littered with “?????” — as if I were back in school learning to draw bishop's crosiers and shepherd's crooks. The honed luxuriance of Amis's writing sometimes overwhelms story, undermines plot. On page 173, he writes, “I worked through them, I was asking myself what it all amounted to.” I finished *House of Meetings* and asked myself the same question. I had to read it again. The novella started to singe my synapses, broil my brain, cauterise my consciousness. Rather than struggle through the 198 pages, as I had the first time, I wanted it to have a Tolstoyan magnitude, a Dostoevskian grim grandeur, to be a *Dead Souls* for the 21st century. I wanted it to be 891 pages long.

The nominal subject of the novella is a tripartite love story involving the innominate narrator, his brother Lev and a Jewess named Zoya. The love story acts as a trope upon which to hang a post-WWII history of the USSR and Russia. And the history — sometimes encumbered by the weight of Amis's research, but mostly enthralling and intelligent — is a means by which Amis parses humankind's scrofulous attributes. The gulag is our world — a world in which some become rich, some have scurvy and some eat their shoes. Humanity is in a permanent “state of terror,” as reified by Amis in the form of the labor camp Norlag. Men are rapists, poets and more. Women are whores, immaculate icons and much more.

“When a man conclusively exalts one woman, and one woman only, ‘above all others’, you can be pretty sure you are dealing with a misogynist.”

This is Amis getting his retaliation in first. The book, addressed to the narrator's daughter, sees Amis assuming man's guilt, using the novel as an apologia to womankind. (I am quite sure he is aware that ‘misogynist’ is a synonym for ‘satirist’.)

Amis takes us through WWII, Stalin's gulags, the reigns of Khrushchev and Brezhnev, Glasnost, through to the new Russian plutocracy of multi-billionaires; along the way we encounter the horrors (still) of Afghanistan, and the massacre of schoolchildren, teachers and parents by Chechnya-based Muslim terrorists in Beslan, North Ossetia. Although the effort to squeeze sixty years of Russian history into fewer than two hundred pages is like trying to cram a bear into a vodka shot glass, Amis pulls it off with insight, humor and intelligence. The labor camp scenes in particular are compelling in their imaginative brutishness, their sumptuous and tasty squalor.

“And the smell, the smell... As the dark-age Mongol horde approached your city, it hurt the ears when it was still some distance from the walls. More terrifying than the noise was the



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smell, expressly cultivated — the militarisation of dirt, of heads of hair, armpits, docks, feet. And the breath: the breath, further enriched by the Mongol diet of fermented mare's milk, horse blood and other Mongols. So it was in camp, too. The smell was penal, weaponised. The floor of the barracks was where it gathered — all the breath of the zona.”

Egotistically precocious or eruditely perspicacious? After the second reading, I would say the latter. *House of Meetings* returns Martin Amis to the forefront of world literature. The gritty iciness of his prose, the non-flashy comprehension of his subject matter, and the cliché-free brilliance of his sentences, combine to make *House of Meetings* an unshirkably pertinent and timely novel, not gimmicky or inflamed but diverse and inspirational. It asks what it is like to live and love in and through an age of terror, an age in which states and individuals are at war with one another. Martin Amis has pitched himself against Orwell and Solzhenitsyn, Bellow and Nabokov; he even has the hubris to tackle Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. The novella is self-aware — only Martin Amis could have written it:

“Once as he inhaled with his customary vehemence, I had a thought that made my armpits come alive. The thought was this: mad teeth... They no longer stood to attention; they leaned and slumped, they crisscrossed. And you do sometimes see this taken much further by the very mad, the teeth tugged and bent by tectonic forces deep beneath the crust.”

Early publication reports indicated that the edition would include the titular novella, plus two short stories: “In the Palace of the End” — *The New Yorker*, March 15, 2004 — a Nabokovian tale of doubles, torture and sex during the reign of Saddam Hussein, and “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” — *The New Yorker*, April 24, 2006 — a DeLilloesque investigation into the cause and effect of terror in the lead-up to 9/11. This, sadly, isn't the case here. If we read *House of Meetings* as an extension of Amis's fictional analyses of men and violence (*Money* — the violence of greed and consumption; *London Fields* — of child abuse and sexual power; *Yellow Dog* — the violence of the individual and society), then *House of Meetings* draws on the historical violence of the state and its trickle-down effect on the individual, somewhat similar to the concerns of *Time's Arrow*. The incorporation of the short stories into this volume, along with “Age of Horrorism” — a 12,000-word essay on militant Islam, 9/11 and contemporary politics, published in *The Observer*, 10 September 2006 — as a preface or afterword, would have given this volume a sedulous bulk; as it is, on first reading, it at times reads like an exercise in need.

Writing a criticism of a Martin Amis book is self-defeating. In *The War against Cliché*, Amis writes about the tools a book reviewer has at his/her disposal — namely language. Art critics do not paint pictures to criticise artists; music critics do not whip out their violins to appraise composers; and dance critics do not dust off their ballet shoes in response to poor choreography. In his early book reviews, Amis confronted his precursors — Ballard, Burroughs, Mailer, Roth, Updike, et al — with coruscating bravado. Authors who review other authors' books do so with an Oedipal dread. Amis's writing reflects Harold Bloom's six stages of the “anxiety of influence”. Clinamen is evident in *The Rachel Papers*, *Dead Babies* and *Success*; all are a swerve away from the influence of Greene, Waugh and Kingsley Amis. *Other People* and *Time's Arrow* are forms of Tessera or completion of the work of Kafka and Ballard — here we see Amis's ambition and scope. *Money* and *London Fields* present Daemonization in which Amis draws from and “improves” the source texts of *Humboldt's Gift* and Updike's *Rabbit* novels. Amis reaches Askesis in the purgative solipsism

of *Experience* and *Koba the Dread*. And, finally, with *House of Meetings*, the closure of Apophrades, in which Amis bears witness to his influences — notably Bellow and Nabokov — and surpasses them. The book reviewer is in a constant state of Clinamen and all reviews are creative misreadings of the core text. And so, my first visit to the *House of Meetings* was unsuccessful for the house was full of ghosts and mirrors; but on my second sojourn, the *House*, now one of life, laughter and inevitable decay, held me in its infinite confinement.

Alfred A. Knopf will publish a Stateside edition of House of Meetings in January 2007

Steve Finbow contributed his final Pond Scum column on 28 September for the now terminally dormant magazine Me Three. Since then, as if to prove there is no corner of the world that he won't ensconce himself to avoid paying alimony, Finbow has recently relocated from London to Tokyo, from which he continues to offer his unique world perspective in the form of Seppuku My Heart.



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