

**books****The Amis Papers**

Where is Martin Amis headed next?

By Keith Gessen

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Martin Amis' beloved Nabokov once made a distinction between Tolstoy the writer and Tolstoy the preacher. The first Tolstoy noted the way Anna's hair fell on her neck; the second Tolstoy went on and on about the virtues of the Russian peasant. Unfortunately, as Nabokov knew, there was no separating the two: Tolstoy might not have written a single word about Anna if he didn't think it would make a nice occasion for discoursing on the peasants. Even Tolstoy's first novel, *The Cossacks*, a small masterpiece about love, was extremely moralistic. Writers are strange people, in other words, and there is no way to manufacture a perfect one.

In our own time, no writer has been so obviously, so publicly confused by his warring impulses—to observe what he sees on the one hand and to moralize on it on the other—as Martin Amis. He has written works of corrosive satire almost breathtaking (and breathtakingly funny) in their nihilism (*Money* and *The Information*), but he has also, especially of late, written works of a weirdly moralistic bent, denouncing such people as Stalin, Mohamed Atta, and male chauvinists who write abusively about women for the porno-tabloid press. It was as if the rich material he had been handed by life—the world of the high-British, high-Postmodern, Baby Boomer elite—was too flimsy, and he needed sterner stuff. Perhaps it is just the perceived weightlessness, these days, of being British—in the best post-imperial novels of Martin's father, Kingsley, being British consisted primarily in getting scrupulously drunk. (Martin's innovation, in *his* best novels, was to get his characters drunk and send them to America.) The political critique of the son's refusal to take his own people seriously would be that it implicitly ignored the damage they were doing to the world—even in America, after all, their intellectual support of the Iraq war (including in these Internet pages) was not without effect.

Amis' new novel, *House of Meetings*, would seem to fall squarely into the moralizing category of his books, and it has been greeted accordingly. The middlebrow liberal press, which never held much brief for Mean Amis, has [welcomed](#) the book for its [seriousness](#) about a serious matter, the Gulag, and its lack of those things that impede seriousness (Postmodern gamesmanship). Meanwhile the higher-brow [conservative](#) and leftist ([Daniel Soar in the London Review of Books](#)) press, much more partial to Amis' earlier work, has excoriated the book for turning the Gulag into an excuse for fancy writing and for flailing at Islamofascism in the guise of Stalinism.

These are old categories, for newspapers, but then Martin Amis seems to be writing about old things. The novel, though set in the present, mostly describes the years spent by two brothers in a Siberian labor camp after the Second World War—when, despite a victory over the Germans and the widespread expectation that the state would ease up after victory had been achieved, Stalin began imprisoning people at an astonishing rate. Many of these, like the narrator of *House of Meetings*, were actually Red Army soldiers returning from the war—where, as he tells us, "I raped my way across what would soon be East Germany."

The narrator's younger brother Lev eventually joins him in the camp and introduces the plot's point of tension: Lev has married the beautiful Zoya, the envy of the entire neighborhood. The result is that his brother wants him dead. Or not exactly dead: He wants Lev to survive the camp, he wants his marriage to Zoya to fail, and then he wants to take his place at Zoya's side. The central event of the book is a conjugal visit that Zoya pays to Lev in the camp's "house of meetings," after which Lev emerges profoundly shaken but won't say why. As

for the narrator, he becomes a leader of the camp rebellion and then, after his release, a wealthy businessman of sorts. He keeps his eye on Zoya and eventually emigrates to Chicago, where, despite being nearly 65, he develops a prose style a lot like Nabokov's. The narrative is written, on the occasion of his return to Siberia in 2004, as a record of his experiences for his 24-year-old American stepdaughter, who knows nothing of such things as Gulag, Stalin, and the rape of Berlin.

It does sound a little silly when you write it out like that. The immediate thought is that Amis' liberal anti-Communism has just gone too far; even *Koba the Dread*, after all, was written from a Western point of view. But the surprise upon finishing *House of Meetings* is how little about the Gulag it really is. Amis might have adopted, as several reviewers have noted, some annoying Nabokovian tics, but the master's pedantry does not interest him; he does not pretend to be translating Russian into English, for example, when transcribing Russian speech, and for that matter he does not even pretend that Russian is his narrator's native tongue—of the old Russian distance marker *verst*, he writes that "given Russian distances, and the general arduousness of Russian life, you'd expect a verst to be the equivalent of—I don't know—thirty-nine miles. In fact it's barely more than a kilometer." This is funny, but it's not the sort of joke you'd make if you cared very much for your reader to think your character was real.

In fact, the person our purportedly Russian narrator most resembles is not any Russian or any character from Russian fiction but the rambunctious, drunken advertising executive John Self—Amis' greatest creation—who took readers on an extended, delirious tour of his own private hell in *Money*. "I am a vile-tempered and foul-mouthed old man," says the Self-like narrator of *House of Meetings*. Life has made him, naturally enough, a misanthrope: "Oh, and just to get this out of the way. It's not the USSR I don't like. What I don't like is the northern Eurasian plain." It is not impossible for a Western writer to create a work whose very verisimilitude is part of its power: Ken Kalfus' excellent short story collection [Pu-239](#), for example, is remarkable for having the eyes of a Russian writer and the sensibility of a comic American Postmodern Jewish one. Amis is not that kind of writer, and he never has been.

I submit the following: That those of us (myself included) who've written about Amis' recent, unquestionably annoying moralizing by pining for the Mean Amis of old have done so a little disingenuously. Because even in *Money* one felt, I think, that Amis was being disapproving—in a way that wasn't convincingly disapproving. I mean that he lacked a point of view, a moral center, with which to anchor his anger. Even Celine, who is often held up as the quintessential 20<sup>th</sup>-century amoralist, was actually—and explicitly, in *Journey to the End of the Night*—a doctor who was horrified by the wanton killing he had witnessed in the First World War. Amis has diagnosed a problem with his writing, and he's been working on it. He should take his lumps for it, but we should admit that this is what he's up to.

Reading *House of Meetings*, one begins to think that the biggest trouble with Amis' recent work may have been that he was attacking his subjects too directly. *Yellow Dog*, his last novel, was, after all, a social satire; it's just that his targets were so obvious that they were effectively outside the proper range of satire. This time, Amis approaches his subject obliquely; he circles toward it. He may begin in the Gulag, but gradually you see him feeling his way toward contemporaneity—a comment here on Western teenage piercing habits, a thought there for contemporary Russian politics. During the narrator's trip, he catches news bulletins of the horrible situation in the town of Beslan, where Chechen terrorists have captured a school, and Russian forces are poised to start bombarding it. In *House of Meetings*, Amis returns again and again to the demographic cataclysm now engulfing Russia—its strangely low life expectancy for men—and in one passage, two of his great interests fuse:

In America, with divorce achieved, the midlifer can expect to be more recreational, more discretionary. He can almost design the sort of crisis he is going to have: motorbike, teenage girlfriend, vegetarianism, jogging, sports car, mature boyfriend, cocaine, crash diet, powerboat, new baby, religion, hair transplant.

Over here, now, there's no angling around for your male midlife crisis. It is brought to you and it is always the same thing. It is death.

Amis is right. *Longevity*, rather than new sexual mores or technological practices, may be the most significant social fact of modern Western life—and if this is the case, if the mere lack of longevity is the prime distinguishing feature of a more "serious" place like Russia, then a lot of those things Amis has worried about during *his* midlife crisis as a novelist (Is he a profound enough writer? Is this topic sufficiently weighty?) seem to fall away. And so this book comes to seem less like Amis looking for gravitas among the bones of Soviet Russia than like an author who had lost his sense of the world slowly working back toward it by learning some basic things. One is that all stories everywhere are the same, whether in Russia in the 1930s or London in the 1990s or now, in New York. Another of those basic things, if you're Amis, is that there is no escaping yourself: Amis now knows that he can write a book about the Gulag and still come out sounding pretty much the same, with the same inflections and the same concerns: breasts, erections (presence and lack of them), and writing. So, maybe that means those are the great concerns, and he's going to have to live with them.

Because one of the things you can't escape if you're Martin Amis, son of Kingsley Amis, friend to the Hitch, former friend to Julian Barnes, and so on, is writers and writing. It's what interests you most about the world; your obsession with it led to one of your best novels, that horroristic satire *The Information*. At the end of *House of Meetings*, we are introduced to a character worse even than the narrator, a writer who sold his talent in exchange for a comfortable life during the dark days of Stalinism. All he had to do was praise the system. The equivalent of such a writer in our own time would have to be someone who simply avoided all contemporary themes, or pretended that the makers of the world had not in fact made it, that life and history were elsewhere. Amis has told *Poets & Writers* that his next novel will be more autobiographical; that "everyone will hate me again."

I hope so. Amis' five-year excursion through Russian history during the global war on terror seems to have shorn him of some of his old liberal attitudes, which he seems, in retrospect, never really to have held. If his recent pronouncements on terrorism (or "horrorism," as he calls it) are any guide, he has adopted a politics that I, personally, find wrong and dangerous—it's the politics that lumps Stalin (or Saddam) in with Mohamed Atta and lands us in Iraq. But if this is now to become the core of Amis' work, we might find that he'll return to what he knows how to do—and return to it, for the first time, fully himself. We might not like it, and it won't be perfect, but it could genuinely be something to behold.

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