



Book of the week

## Decline and fall

There is romance in the gulag, but it is the 'slum family' of Russia that lies at the heart of Martin Amis's *House of Meetings*, says M John Harrison

**M John Harrison**

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### **House of Meetings**

by Martin Amis

198pp, Jonathan Cape, £15.99

"There were conjugal visits in the slave camps of the USSR," begins the jacket copy of Martin Amis's 11th novel. Valiant women travelled "continental distances" to spend a night with their particular enemy of the people. "House of Meetings," it promises, "is about one such liaison", the triangular romance of two brothers and the Jewess they love. In fact, that's only a fraction of the story, and *House of Meetings* is actually an attempt to compress the past 60 years of Russian history into 200 pages, delivered as the monologue of someone whose name we're never told; an ambitious plan, held together by the sound of a voice.

It's 2004. He's an old man now. He has a great fear of rust. He defected to the west in 1983, "category A" because he was in armaments. A single patent - on "a mechanism that significantly improves the 'give' of prosthetic extremities" - has made him rich. Being rich has made him a psychotic over-tipper. His hands are the size of whole cheeses. "I have hurt many men and women," he warns us, "with these hands." He's on his last journey, a tourist trip to the site of the labour camp in which he spent 10 years of his life. He can barely stop talking. "Having been silent for so long, I'm now like a very much rowdier version of the Ancient Mariner." Telling his story in English - "and in old style English English, what's more" - feels euphemistic to him. It would be worse in Russian: it would earn its gutturals.

How he says what he says, of course, opens us into the central irony of most Amis novels, in which the issue of storytelling is always the issue of character, of self-interest and nuanced self-deception - narrative as the filthy Nabokovian stream from which the reader, like a shit-eater at the bottom of the labour camp food chain, must filter moral sustenance. One of the first things he tells us is how, as a young soldier in the first three months of 1945, he raped his way "across what was soon to become East Germany". We need to know this about him. His odyssey of the "weaponised penis" altered his attitude to women. "When a man conclusively exalts one woman, and one woman only, 'above all others'," he tells us, "you can be pretty sure you're dealing with a misogynist. It frees him up for thinking the rest are shit."

The story the jacket copy would like him to tell begins in the south-east district of Moscow, in the famine winter of 1946. He and his brother Lev, the one a soldier and rapist, the other a worker and poet, fall for the same young Jewess. Her name is Zoya. She has l'esprit fort, she is a woman "like an act of civil disobedience"; her figure, besides, is a message no man can ignore. The narrator, mysteriously unable to bring himself to rape her, is captured forever by his own sexual sentimentality; Zoya dislikes the taste of his lips, and chooses Lev. Within two years, both men have been arrested and dispatched to the slave archipelago.

They endure cold, starvation and gang war; live through the shifts of policy consequent on the death of Stalin, and survive the 1953 Norlag rebellion. When they emerge, in late 1956, Zoya, still "a rebuke to the prevailing conditions", still the problem between them, awaits. Their nickname for her is "The Americas". It captures the Brazilian backside, the Californian breasts, the tiny Panamanian waist; but it converts her into a metaphor, too.

Once that is understood, we cease to be able to convince ourselves that House of Meetings does what it says on the tin, and give up hope of that labour camp love-triangle. What we get instead is a lecture, sometimes dissimulated, mostly not.

Russia is too big, Amis thinks, to be "a country of nuance". The "Russian totality" - of political theory, political praxis - is not the result of trying to hold together something too sprawling to govern, but of trying to imagine it in the first place. "The mass of the land, of the country, the size of the stake in the planet: it is this that haunts us, and it is this that overthrows the sanity of the state ... " All states are constructions, but you can construct the state of Russia only through the broadest gestures, the simplest, most brutal and reductive acts of imagination. By the time the brothers are ejected from the gulag into parlous freedom, the state has begun to learn how to tell a new story about itself.

The narrator moves with his times. He gets work as a TV repairman, then moves sideways, into cold war electronics. He has a gift for it, and for making money. "When I went away, I was twenty-six. I was getting on for forty when I came back. Gluttony and sloth, as worldly goals, were quietly usurped by avarice and lust ... I mixed with the black-economy crowd, and my girlfriends were of a type." As acts of the imagination go, capitalism will do as well as Stalinism. He's still drawn to Zoya, but, conceiving himself as perhaps the last thing he is, a clever predator, keeps his distance; while Lev, mysteriously weakened by whatever passed between him and Zoya in the House of Meetings, becomes depressed, withdrawn, as unable to connect with his own life as with the new Russian project.

Everything is presented with Amis's customary élan and intelligence. He will go the long way round to avoid a cliché, sometimes he will coagulate from trying too hard and sometimes he will be a pedant - all this is to be expected. But the result is often a prose packed, dense, full of felicities. The camp soap smells "as if some sacred physical law had been demeaned in its creation". Contemporary Russia, in which "all the money has been divided up between the felons and the state", is described as a "slum family" which must now fend for itself. In Norlag "the day itself, the dark dawn ... looked like the work of a team of labourers". These are surfaces - but they rip and tangle, mimicking the braids and back-eddies of guilt and denial beneath, pulling us down into the various layers of metaphor and allegory, always warning us that nothing can be taken for granted, the book isn't really what it seems.

This can be wearing. Worse, it can check or defuse the reader's sympathy. Amis shirks none of the squalor of the slave archipelago. Before 30 pages have passed, we've seen a man trying to eat his shoe; scurvy has "resettled his teeth at right angles to the gums". Such events detain us even as we try to look away, they have a nasty glitter: at the same time they're distanced by the very care and cleverness of the prose. Weaponised into evidence, tuned to a rhetorical purpose with which readers of *Koba the Dread* will already be familiar, they lack existential qualities and their description seems deferred or suspended even as they occur. As a result you may find yourself turning to the histories mentioned in Amis's acknowledgments section, in the hope of finding out what it was actually like to be in a labour camp above the 69th parallel in the Stalin era.

If *House of Meetings* is only superficially the history of a love-triangle, and yet too novelised to be quite the history of a state, what is it? The clues are embedded in almost every line, every evasion, of that Nabokovian delivery. It is a book about ageing, rusting, rotting away. What seemed to be a novel about the decline of Russia is seen to be a novel about decline. The narrator is less terrorised than terrified. In his desperation he folds one kind of fear into a disguise for another, and in doing so produces only an origami of a pun - the idea of "state terror" stands in for his state of terror. By the end of the novel he has revealed himself to be what you expected from the beginning. When he first assembles the facts, he says: "I found myself staring at a shapeless little heap of degradation and horror." Like John Self from *Money* or Odilo Unverdorben from *Time's Arrow*, he's concerned to convince the reader of some petty truth about himself; but it's much more important that he convinces himself.

· M John Harrison's most recent novel is *Light* (Gollancz)