

House of Meetings

Anthony Macris, reviewer
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In trying to be too clever, Martin Amis dilutes the horror of Stalin's camps.

Author

Martin Amis

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Fiction

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Martin Amis is best known as a satirist of social mores laced with near-toxic levels of irony, but he has always maintained a healthy sideline in the horrors of history.

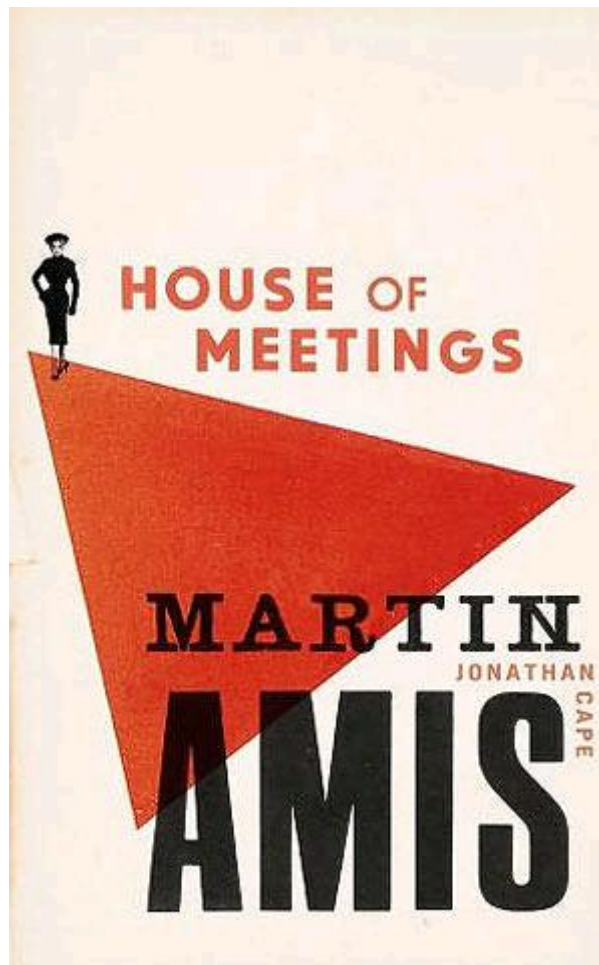
For more than 30 years he has mapped out his own version of Western culture's not-so-divine comedy. He's the celebrity author of novels such as *Money*, *Success* and *The Information*, ferocious urban satires that mock late-20th century excess. He's a master ironist in his book reviews and essays, lampooning everything from the hairy-chested men's movement of the 1980s, to Margaret Thatcher's sexual allure.

But hiding behind these explorations of the hubris of power and fame is a much darker writer, with much darker concerns: the Martin Amis who bears witness to atrocity.

And not just any atrocity. For Amis, only the biggest will do. First, it was the Holocaust, which he explored in 1991's *Time's Arrow*, his only book to have been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Then, it was the murderous rule of Joseph Stalin, depicted in 2002's *Koba the Dread*, a foray into history that included an account of the Soviet Gulag, and which was savaged by critics. And it is to the Gulag that he returns in his 13th book of fiction, *House of Meetings*.

Irony is a kind of addiction, so it comes as no surprise that the Russian hero of *House of Meetings* is as wry, if somewhat less overtly comic, as any Amis protagonist. We initially meet him in 2004 on a cruiser somewhere near the Arctic Circle, a wealthy, "vile-tempered and foul-mouthed" octogenarian who tips waiters so exorbitantly they circle him like flies.

The novel is framed by letters he writes on the cruise, and the memoir that emerges describes the formative years of both his own life and that of the Soviet Union.



The Meeting House: it's no easy task to be both wise one and wisecracker.

First, he's a victorious young soldier during The Great Patriotic War (what we call World War II). Then, having fallen foul of the authorities, he's banished to a forced labour camp, Norlag, situated deep within the frozen wastes of the Arctic, where he is interned with his younger brother, Lev. Finally, he reinvents himself as an entrepreneur, amassing a fortune in Putin's corrupt capitalist Russia.

These grotesque reversals of fate clearly fascinate Amis, and with grim relish he depicts the convolutions that strangled to death the biggest and meanest of mammoth states, the Soviet Union.

Humanising this historical panorama is, in the great epic tradition, a love story. A love triangle, to be exact, involving, you guessed it, big brother narrator, little brother Lev, and Zoya, the Jewish beauty who sets the heart of every Slavic male afire.

The character of Lev gives Amis the opportunity to revisit one of his major preoccupations, the near-tribal intensities of emotions between men, and he provides a compelling portrayal of the passions aroused when two similarly aged brothers covet the same woman. With Zoya, however, Amis is as far from creating a convincing female character as he has ever been: when it comes to depicting the opposite sex, the only roundedness he seems capable of is in the depiction of the flesh, not the soul.

This dramatic scenario may seem overfamiliar, but setting the bulk of the love story in an Arctic Gulag does add some novelty. In Norlag, it's seriously cold, and Amis is at pains to make us feel it. "Even in June your breath hung in the air as if you were smoking an enormous and fiery cigar. They went out six feet and curled back around you, these scarves of breath."

Amis's writing is as inventive as ever, yet also more disciplined. In his previous novel, 2004's widely drubbed *Yellow Dog*, he seemed to have entered a terminally decadent period, his sentences often unable to break free from a thicket of stylistic curlicues. Here we see a leaner language, yet one still full of the verve we expect from Amis.

It's not only viciously cold in Norlag, it's vicious, full-stop. In a reprise of one of his favourite themes - the human struggle against the inhumanly brutal - Amis tots up the chances of coming out of the Gulag alive. "In 'hungry' '33 one out of seven died, in 1943 one out of five, in 1942 one out of four. By 1948 it had gone back down again, system-wide ... By 1948, flies had stopped dying like people, and people had gone back to dying like flies."

First the horror, then the witticism. It's no easy task to be both Olympian historical consciousness and king of the ironists, both wise one and wise-cracker. Nabokov, Amis's greatest hero, tried, and largely failed: in his political satire the moralising upstages the comedy, and it ends up feeling strident. Kundera, too, tried, but he maintained a balance, and thus largely succeeded. In *House of Meetings*, Amis, like Nabokov, misses the mark, although for very different reasons.

The novel doesn't entirely work, and not because it isn't at times profound, or because its humour falters. Quite the contrary: it's full of pathos, and often very funny. It's just not funny in a way that quite gels with the horror of a Soviet forced labour camp.

Also, for veteran Amis readers, the relentless, self-conscious cleverness of *House of Meetings*' narrator is somewhat familiar, and at times he comes across as a Slavic version of the protagonists from Amis's other novels.

Did Amis really think he could simply dress up one of his middle-class English bad boys in a series of Russian costumes, and pass him off as authentic?

If you want your wartime atrocities gift-wrapped in poignant (if mannered) ironies, read Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*. If you want your atrocity in all its raw, unplugged glory, read Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. And if you need true comic tastelessness, get out a DVD of *The Producers*.

But if you want the view of a high-brow wag with a taste for the dark side, read *House of Meetings*. It's a brave attempt, brimming with dark wit, even if it doesn't quite convince us of the horror that was the Soviet Gulag.

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