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[+ Post a Comment](#)**Breath was just another weapon****Bharat Tandon**

Martin Amis
 HOUSE OF MEETINGS
 198pp. Cape. £15.99.
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For all its incidental comic felicities, a reader could finish reading Martin Amis's *Yellow Dog* (2003) feeling that too much had been sacrificed to the jokes; it is not that Amis's distinctive gifts have ever been self-effacing ones, but there were moments in that book when the world was being just too deliberately shrunk to fit the satire's demands. Darius the "seven-foot Seventh Day Adventist" couldn't be six-foot-eleven, or indeed five-foot-six, just as Clint Smoker had to live in the geographically impractical location of Foulness – not in the interests of plot or character, but in order to feed the punchline. To move from such Technicolor knock-about to the sombre grey-scale in which *House of Meetings* lives is to encounter an almost completely different author, to negotiate a shift between moral worlds as well as palettes.

A spare, even austere performance, Amis's striking new novel marks an extension of the dark thread that surfaces in works such as *Einstein's Monsters* (1987), *Time's Arrow* (1991) and, most pertinently, the working through of personal and collective animus in *Koba the Dread* (2002); and if early works such as *The Rachel Papers* (1973) and *Dead Babies* (1975) now have a layer of unintentional historical quaintness about them, *House of Meetings* sees Amis working self-consciously in the mode of historical fiction, to powerful effect.

Pitched as a voice from beyond the grave, the posthumously edited testimony of an old Russian émigré and Gulag survivor, it offers a double-tracked narrative, in which private and public histories blur and contend, all the more strongly given the particular situation the novel recalls – one in which fiction's traditional points of focus might become dislocated:

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Yes, so far as the individual is concerned, Venus, it may very well be true that character is destiny. And the other way round. But on the larger scale character means nothing. On the larger scale, destiny is demographics; and demographics is a monster. When you look into it, when you look into the Russian case, you feel the stirrings of a massive force, a force not only blind but altogether insentient, like an earthquake or a tidal wave.

“Character is destiny” brings a distant memory, not only of Saul Bellow’s Augie March, but of Thomas Hardy’s The Mayor of Casterbridge, remembering George Eliot’s Mill on the Floss, remembering Novalis. The little borrowing that Amis lends his narrator simultaneously alerts a reader to a line of fictional folk wisdom, and hints at the obsolescence of such wisdom amid the enormities of Stalinist terror. Likewise, the central plot of House of Meetings is one of the oldest stories, a love triangle, but it is a plot which, over the length of the book, is tenderly cherished and violently sidelined by turns. When the narrator’s half-brother, Lev, arrives at the same camp in 1948, it emerges that the two have one more factor in common: Lev is now married to Zoya, the beautiful Jewish bohemian with whom the narrator was briefly involved before his arrest, and whose image sustains him not only through the camp, but through the rest of his life in America (“Each action involved the whole of her. When she walked, everything swayed. When she laughed, everything shook. When she sneezed – you felt that absolutely anything might happen”).

Much of the novel moves between the two levels of memory, as the half-brothers’ experiences with Zoya are set against the daily brutalities of the camp, with its animalistic hierarchies (pigs, snakes, leeches, locusts). Amis is especially skilful in showing how the two men gradually take on diametrically opposed demeanours and strategies, both during and after their captivity. From the first, it seems, Lev has chosen the role of passive resistance, self-abnegation, whatever the cost to him in the world of the camp (“His face, already brick-red, wore a gashed forehead and a split lip”), and in later life he still coils away into a via negativa, almost fading into his own death: “My brother lay still and silent on the raised bed, but he was also in rapid motion. He was spinning around my head. He was disappearing into a maelstrom”. In contrast, his half-brother has had to take on many of his oppressors’ methods in order to survive: from raping, alongside his fellow soldiers, during the war (“the peer group can make people do anything In the rapist army, everybody raped. Even the colonels raped. And I raped too”) to killing enemies in the camp before they can kill him, his life is as much absorbed and erased by pathological activity as Lev’s is by passivity. As the novel’s title indicates, the brothers’ relationship – or at least the narrator’s sense of it – pivots around one event: Zoya’s arrival, on July 31, 1956, at the House of Meetings, the hut used for prisoners’ conjugal visits, even though the import of this night is only revealed much later, as Lev too speaks from beyond the grave, in a letter found among his effects.

“Now, my brother. It is my suspicion that you aren’t yet done with Zoya”, reads the letter; “You’re going to wait until after I’m dead and then you’re going to try again.” So it proves, as the narrator’s desire for that one last chance leads to a conclusion that brings past and present together, in a sequence that – even by Amis’s standards – is difficult to read without flinching. In this novel’s world, those euphemisms, employed so casually by the contemporaries of the stepdaughter the narrator is addressing, are shown up in all their inadequacy (“Closure is a greasy little word which, moreover, describes a nonexistent condition. The truth, Venus, is that nobody ever gets over anything”). At the same time, it becomes clearer that our narrator has not simply been a biographer of the Gulags, but may be, at least in his memories of love, as insistent a solipsist as anyone in Nabokov, or elsewhere in Amis, his imagination of Zoya exposed as “an endless wank about the past”, a construction as subjective and possessive as Humbert’s “my Lolita”. This is one of the factors which renders House of Meetings much more than a fictional companion piece to Amis’s impassioned denunciation of Stalin in Koba the Dread. There are noticeable debts: the earlier book’s description of the urkas (“circus cut-throats devoted to gambling, plunder, mutilation and rape”) is reworked here with a nastier flourish:

Outside in the land of freedom you would glimpse them rarely, and with callow wonder, as a child glimpses the half-hidden figures in the wings at a circus or a fairground: a world of Siamese twins and mermen and bearded ladies, of monstrous tattoos and scarifications, a world of coded chaos.

However, the new novel also offers more precise embodiments of Koba the Dread’s running concern with brutalization: indeed, bodies – the way they can be

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mutilated or just knocked out of shape, the way they measure the murky borders between human and animal – receive some of Amis’s most intense scrutiny here. Take the image of the ageing Lev, with a “fold of pudge, very low slung, like a prolapsus or a modern money-belt, between navel and groin”; or that of a sadistic commandant reduced after losing his hands to grubbing on the floor for a cigarette (“like a man trying to possess the wooden floor, trying to enter it, trying to kiss it, [he] writhed and rutted about until he snuffled one up with his questing lips”); or, perhaps most strikingly, the narrator’s first kiss with Zoya: “She placed a palm on my chest, to establish a distance, but she accepted the kiss, or withstood it; and yet, as she withdrew her mouth, she retained my lower lip for a second between her teeth”. “Establish”, “accepted”, “withstood”, “withdrew”, “retained”: the formality and inappropriateness of those verbs register the physical awkwardness of the moment, as well as prefiguring the horrible travesty of this kiss which precipitates the novel’s climax. This is Amis writing at the pitch he has reached elsewhere in *Money* (1984) and, though it is underrated, *The Information* (1995), and it is all the more remarkable given the nature of one of his oldest narrative habits.

From the beginning, Amis’s language has gained some of its menacing edge from its ability to compact the violence of the outside world into its metaphors, with the result that the most ordinary activities can find themselves seeming like martial art. In *The Rachel Papers*, Charles Highway’s morning-after routine with Gloria features “an evasive cross-fire of bad breath”, traces of which linger on in *The Information* (“The breath came nearer still. The breath was just another weapon”); indeed, reading Amis’s fiction as a whole, it sometimes resembles a malodorous version of George Eliot’s, a world mapped out in conflicting wave-fronts of smell. This is all very well; but if a spot of post-coital Marmite-breath merits a term like “cross-fire”, what happens when historical events raise the stakes? In an environment moving from “terrorism” to what Amis has recently dubbed “horrorism”, might such metaphors not be stranded and embarrassed by their new-found inadequacy? After all, catastrophe has a double effect on discourse: it shames and dwarfs metaphor, even as it offers the lazy metaphorical opportunities (*The Onion’s* headline on the Titanic, “WORLD’S BIGGEST METAPHOR HITS ICE-BERG” senses this, cruelly but accurately). In *House of Meetings*, however, the period and values which Amis reimagines allow his language to stay in true with them, not least since, in the camps, smell as a weapon was barely figurative:

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 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.

There is a restraint in evidence here, that sits in contrast to much of Amis’s recent writing, and lifts it to something like its best. Not that everything in the novel works so well: notably, the figure of Venus, the stepdaughter who edits the memoir, feels imperfectly fleshed out, a collage of modern American health and fashionable piercings, relegated to the textual margins in a few small, if decisive footnotes (“the reader may want a question answered, in view of what is to come. Do I forgive him? In the end, yes, I do”). But Amis has still dared to take a step back from the easier, more ephemeral son et lumière of his recent fiction: like its narrator, *House of Meetings* deals in “more bilious colours – the browns, the greens”. The new surroundings may be uncomfortable, even forbidding, but as a result of this move, Martin Amis’s fiction has also successfully grown back up.



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