

Bringing out the dread

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Martin Amis's new book started as an essay about his father's politics and grew into a lengthy meditation on Stalin, attacking communist intellectuals who appear to excuse his atrocities - his best friend and father included. Interview by Anthony Quinn

It occurs to me only as I'm walking away from his house that Martin Amis was curiously subdued, even melancholic, in our hour and a half this summer evening. He's been unfailingly courteous and amicable as we've talked over a bottle of wine in his garden study round the corner from Regent's Park, and it's always enjoyable to listen to his rather languid, tobacco-cured drawl (he still smokes roll-ups) with its patrician vowels and lofty italics.



Martin Amis: 'I was made to feel a bit of a swine for not being sympathetic to Russia'

At 53 he still looks in pretty good nick: trim and compact, hair scraped back over a high forehead and curling over his collar in a faint echo of his younger days as the pouting, Jagger-esque brat who bounced on to the scene with *The Rachel Papers*.

The last time we met, among mutual friends one spring evening in New York last year, he seemed relaxed, even puckish, talking very amusingly about Norman Mailer's recent appearance at the New Yorker literary festival and pleased to trade gossip and jokes about his contemporaries. I wish there were half as many laughs this evening.

Well, we all have our blue days, and maybe it's no more than a seasonal blip, or a slight anxiety about moving his children to Long Island for their summer holiday tomorrow morning. His wife, Isabel Fonseca, who you suspect usually shoulders the burden of kid admin, will follow them a week later. 'This will be the first time I've spent time here on my own since we moved in,' she says, plainly relishing the prospect. 'What, the first time ever?' asks Amis. 'Yes! I've never been in this house on my own,' she insists.

Her husband looks slightly taken aback by this information. But if there does lurk a deeper weariness in him, one might find a clue on the penultimate page of his new book, [Koba the Dread, an extended meditation on Stalin](#) interleaved with personal history that registers as a small aftershock from his acclaimed memoir *Experience*, published in 2000.

In 'A Letter to My Father's Ghost', Amis relates his grief over the death of Sally, his only sister, at the age of 46: 'Remembering her, and you, and you and her, has filled me with an exhaustion that no amount of sleep can seem to reach.'

Yet the new book is hardly about Sally, in life or death; it is about the annihilation of 20 million people under Stalin's reign of terror. Amis explains the link: 'There was a feeling that death was rolling forward in the family, as well as at large - it's infinitesimally comparable, but absorbing one death makes the 20 million more proximate, I think.'

His father's ghost looms anew in this latest undertaking. 'I realised on finishing *Experience* that I hadn't done the political side of my father - his having been a communist, then becoming an anticommunist and creating a whole ideology around that. So: America was right to be in Vietnam, Mandela was a terrorist who ought to be locked up for ever, and so on. I think with your father there's always an argument going on, in your conscious and subconscious minds. The book formed around that. I thought it would be a long essay, then a pamphlet - then it grew.'

Amis has a habit of fastening on to a subject and then turning on it the full fury of his verbal firepower. Back in the Eighties it was a preoccupation with nuclear weapons, from which came *Einstein's Monsters* and *London Fields*. In a very funny letter to his friend Robert Conquest, Amis senior complains that Martin has 'gone all lefty' on the subject of nuclear escalation: 'I suppose you can't recommend some book? He's bright, you see, but a fucking fool, and the worse, far worse, for having come to it late in life, aetat nearly 37, not 17.'

Amis has come late to Stalin, too, having spent his younger years defiantly non-aligned while his pals at the *New Statesman* were 'proselytising Trotskyists' who spent their Saturdays selling copies of the *Socialist Worker*. 'I was made to feel a bit of a swine for not being sympathetic to Russia,' he recalls. 'It felt like a moral flaw to be a Red-baiter.'

Back in 1968 he didn't read Conquest's ground-breaking book, *The Great Terror*, but he's read it twice since, and it forms the cornerstone of *Koba the Dread*. Amis begins with a frank reckoning of two generations of British intellectual indulgence of communism, personified by two writers very dear to his heart: his father in the Forties, and later his best friend, Christopher Hitchens.

How did they become apologists for Stalin? 'The one excuse my father had in those days was that it was unimaginably

horrible. Outside an NKVD building no theatrical genius could have created anything more terrifying.' Yet many great thinkers and writers were taken in by the utopian lure of communism: 'Sartre, Shaw, the Webbs, HG Wells - it's quite a distinguished list. As Robert Conquest says, there were no rational reasons for believing it. All the evidence was there.'

It is evidence which Amis coolly rehearses in the book's long central section, 'Iosif the Terrible: Short Course'. For readers (like me) who had only the vaguest notion of what Stalin did to Russia it unfurls a litany of such grotesque and inconceivable barbarities one can only wonder, bleakly, how he ever got away with it.

Take Collectivisation (1929-33), during which Stalin laid waste to the countryside and starved the peasantry, piling terror on terror 'until there was nobody there to sow the next harvest'. Amid this enforced famine people were arrested for hiding bread; parents abandoned their starving children; cannibalism became rife. An estimated four million children died.

In the Ukraine, 'a vast Belsen' in Conquest's phrase, five million died. And it doesn't stop there, for next comes the Great Terror and its unceasing train of arrests, purgings, executions, a 'negative perfection' of tyranny that filled the prisons and labour camps to overflowing. The pity of it is expressed in this highly Amisian formulation: 'It is often said that not a family in the country remained unaffected by the Terror. If so, then the members of those families were also subject to sentence: as members of the family of an enemy of the people. By 1939, it is fair to say, all the people were enemies of the people.'

What is even more incredible is that Stalin didn't merely 'get away with' raping the land and annihilating its people - he was exalted for it. At the Congress of Victors in 1934, following the worst manmade catastrophe in the history of the USSR, Stalin took the podium to a standing ovation; indeed, the applause took on a hysterical aspect, because nobody dared stop.

Solzhenitsyn records a party conference where people went on applauding 'till they fell where they stood'. The first person to stop clapping was arrested the next day. The servility of the Congress delegates amounts, in Amis's words, to 'collusion in psychosis'. Stalin, his personality already 'warping and crackling in the heat of power', was being allowed to shape a parallel reality, and that reality was a state in which everybody was terrorised.

Amis says he wrote the book because he felt 'there was fascinating news about human nature in the story'. Fascinating, certainly, though it won't be news to those historians of Stalin and the Soviet experiment whose work Amis quotes on almost every page (a long bibliography is appended).

Koba the Dread is a cogent digest of Stalin studies, or, if you felt less inclined to admire, a cuttings job ('Stalinbad', as one dissenter has already styled it). Amis concedes that he didn't do a 'speck of original research' - 'but I made a few points that hadn't been made before, and got further into Stalin's membranes than I've read. It's more your emphases, really.'

Was he ever worn down by the monotonous depravity of his subject? 'Well, I've always been interested in extreme states - that you can have a Gandhi and a Stalin. I was chatting to my younger son [Jacob, from Amis's first marriage] about this, the huge human desire to be terrible, and he said, "Yeah, we have got some good points, but basically we're raring to be crap." I also wrote the book to give myself a political education. After September 11 the world is now so politicised, and it's a relief to be able to think in categories of models, a way to deal with this huge injection of murderous irrationality. History certainly makes you admire rationality. You become a fan of reason.'

The word that keeps recurring throughout the book's cumulative torments is 'zachtso?' - why? What for? For an answer Amis investigates the psychopathy of Stalin, his visceral need for confessions, for absolute subjection, for unnecessary torture. 'It occurred to me,' says Amis, 'that torture is the opposite of sex. The one is about trying to coax pleasure from the human body by intimacy and carnal knowledge - the other is the inverse. There's something in the Robert Jay Lifton book [The Nazi Doctors] about there being two ways around having to torture and kill people all day. One was numbing yourself, the other was doubling yourself. This is a story about doubling. Unlike the Nazi arrangement, everyone was terrorised, except Stalin.'

Everyone includes Stalin's family, incidentally: the second wife Nadezhda who committed suicide, the daughter Svetlana he estranged by dispatching her Jewish lover to a prison camp, and - the most poignant story of all - Yakov, the son from his first marriage, whom Stalin loathed and systematically persecuted. When Yakov failed in a suicide attempt his father jeered, 'Ha! He couldn't even shoot straight.'

After war broke out Yakov apparently fought courageously as a lieutenant in the army until his unit was captured. When the Nazis tried to negotiate an exchange, Stalin refused: 'I have no son called Yakov.' Having endured three concentration camps without cracking, he was eventually shot dead trying to escape in 1943.

What to do in the face of this exorbitant infamy? Amis, a connoisseur of 'extreme states', looks to the only other figure who could contest the position of Worst Human Being of the 20th century.

In a section entitled 'The Little Moustache and the Big Moustache' he makes a comparative study of Hitler and Stalin, in the course of which he feels 'like a psychiatric ward inspector unerringly confronted by the same two patients'. So, who was crazier? Amis considers: 'A couple of things have occurred to me since finishing the book. One is that Hitler was more fanatical. When the Nazis invaded Russia in 1941 Stalin immediately dropped Marx and Lenin, and reinvoked the Tsars and Holy Russia - any port in a storm. Whereas even when Berlin was falling, to the last day there was no relaxation of fanaticism, it was quite unflagging.'

The other involves the more contentious relationship between tyranny and sexual dysfunction. 'With Hitler and Stalin there's always this emphasis on hardness and mercilessness. I feel more and more convinced that repressed homosexuality was behind this, and that it became an enormously destructive force. All those guys - Saddam, Sharon, Arafat. Once you admit it, you're fine, but until you do...'

Yet there is a fundamental difference Amis identifies in our reaction to the crimes of Hitler and those of Stalin. In the German case, laughter became impossible after the Holocaust. But in the Soviet case, laughter 'refuses to absent itself'.

Late in the book he recalls attending a lecture by Christopher Hitchens, whose fond reference to 'many an old comrade' prompts affectionate laughter from the audience. Amis laughs too, but wonders why - after all, nobody would get a laugh by invoking 'many an old blackshirt'. It is the laughter, he argues, of fondness for the old idea of utopia. 'It is also the laughter of forgetting.

It forgets the demonic energy unconsciously embedded in that hope. It forgets the 20 million.' Searching for a 'genre' to categorise Russia 1917-1953, Amis decides it is 'a black farce, like Titus Andronicus'. This emphasis on laughter has already provoked an aggrieved response from Russian historians, who have chastised it as 'haughty' and 'unacceptable'.

Sergei Kovalyov, who spent seven years in jail under Brezhnev for anti-Soviet agitation, has said, 'It is not appropriate to compare literary styles and tragedies in real life.' Nor have the strikes come exclusively from the East. The book, published in America in July, has been dismissed in a New York Times review as 'the narcissistic musings of a spoiled, middle-class litterateur who has never known the kind of real suffering Stalin's victims did'.

The argument takes another interesting twist with Hitchens's review of Koba in the latest issue of Atlantic Monthly. Hitchens denies making light of Stalin's terror-famine during an argument some years ago. Amis insists that he did. Is there a bit of needle in the dispute between the two 'best friends'?

On the one hand, Amis seems to be handing a belated corrective to Hitchens for those die-hard allegiances; on the other, one may discern a fugitive note of envy on the novelist's part for Hitchens's reputation as a political thinker and historian. I wonder if he will thank Amis for remarking on the improvement of his prose since the collapse of communism? Amis shrugs. 'Volkogonov talks about losing your faith not as a sudden thing but as a sort of spiritual gangrene. And Christopher's never talked about that to me. There's a sort of sadness in him, I think.'

I wonder if there's a sort of sadness in Amis, too. On a career arc he is now into a middle years phase that started with *The Information* (1995), a novel of timor mortis that was almost swamped by the highly public drama of Amis's own life - a broken marriage, its effect on his two sons, an expensive dental trauma, a defection from his agent Pat Kavanagh in order to secure a £500,000 advance, and the subsequent contumely of peers and the press.

These sorrows, together with the death of his father six months later and the horrifying truth of his cousin Lucy Partington's disappearance in 1973 (she was murdered by Fred and Rosemary West) informed the confessional spirit of *Experience*, a book that contains both the best and the worst of Amis. Excellent on his youth and his relationship with Kingsley, it is evasive about his various Sunderings (from Julian Barnes, for example) or else hugely sentimental and tearful - 'A lyrical crying jag', as James Wolcott called it in *Vanity Fair*. Amis laughs when I quote this. 'I was a wreck when I wrote *Experience*,' he says, 'and a wreck when I was finishing this book, too. But death does that.

It also makes pity and self-pity the same thing, because it's your own mortality that's grieving you.'

This may be true, but it none the less gives this new book an odd, lop-sided feel. As a portrait of Stalin it is compelling and incisive; as a farewell to his sister it is thin and unsatisfactory. Compared with his expansive reminiscences of his father, Sally remains a shadowy figure (much as his first wife was in *Experience*); only in parenthesis, for example, do we learn that Sally was a convert to Catholicism.

Amis, though he admits that they weren't very close, piques our curiosity about her only to baffle it. 'She was a great kid and everyone loved her, but she was a magnet for disaster - without malice, but very self-destructive.' This seems incontrovertible. The peculiar tragedy of her life was recounted in an interview with her in the *Mail* on Sunday two years ago.

Following a marriage to a man twice her age that collapsed after six months, she became seriously unstable and spent time in a church hostel. At 24 she had a baby daughter, the result of a one-night stand, and unable to cope, gave her up for adoption three months later.

After long periods of depression and illness, she suffered a stroke which left her with a limp, and her later years were spent living on a disability benefit and looking after Kingsley up to his death in 1995 (Sally died five years later). This devotion to her father was apparently her *raison d'être* - perhaps the most pathetic detail in the report concerned a South Bank Show about him that she confessed to watching 'about 50 times a day'.

Was there a sense of guilt that her older brother Martin couldn't save her? 'Yes, certainly. But you'd have needed two lives to protect her. She was an alcoholic, though she'd been clean for a while. There was no precipitant towards her death, it just all collapsed. She was tied up with looking after my father, and once he went she was defenceless.'

Yet a silver lining glints through even this dark cloud. Anonymously present at Sally's funeral was the daughter she gave up for adoption as a baby. Catherine, now 22, contacted the Amis family through the undertaker, and a reunion was happily engineered, mirroring almost exactly an experience Amis had had some years before when a long-lost daughter of his own, Delilah Seale, reappeared in his life.

'She's a total pleasure,' says Amis of his niece. 'She fills the space left behind, and seems to have inherited all of Sally's best qualities.' I wonder if there are any more undiscovered Amises out there. He smiles wryly: 'My mother said if any more turned up she'd have to start strangling them like kittens.'

The new Martin Amis remains one of the hottest events on the literary calendar, carrying a sense of expectation unmatched by any of his contemporaries. In my experience even people who don't like him read him - you have to know what everyone else is going to be talking about.

Koba the Dread will be no exception. Is there any point in lamenting that he hasn't written a truly great book since *Money* in 1984? Indeed, while acknowledging the frisky and terrifyingly bright juvenilia of *The Rachel Papers* and the pungent two-tone

comedy of Success, it could be argued that he hasn't written a truly great book apart from Money.

As a stylist Amis is formidable, the whiplash riffs and mercurial conceits of his prose as bracing as a chilled martini. As a storyteller, on the other hand, he is hardly in the running, and his preference for caricature - the 'extreme states' he talks of - over the more complex challenge of the human being has long been a cause for dismay.

The field in which Amis really excels (though no self-respecting novelist wants to hear it) is journalism: his two collections, *The Moronic Inferno* and *Visiting Mrs Nabokov*, are an object lesson in profile writing, and his recent volume of book reviews and essays, *The War Against Cliché 1971-2000*, is an incomparable distillation of intellectual trenchancy and wit. Any aspiring writer should make a beeline for it.

His next book, it should be said, will be a novel about the monarchy - 'It will be very recognisable to people who liked the earlier novels,' he says. The novel, as far as he's concerned, is still the great form. 'Everyone's dying for me to a) go Right-wing, b) go soft and c) to write non-fiction. The novel is much more of an adventure, and an expression of freedom. You're not free when you're writing about Stalin. Whereas that's the frightening thing about a novel: how do you control the quicksand reality floating out at you? There are no budget restrictions on what you can do.'

Does he feel the weight of expectation on him? 'All I worry about is writing the books I should write, the ones that are in you when you were born. That's a responsibility to yourself, which is much tougher than the weight of expectation from the fourth estate.'

As a dynastic pair, Kingsley and Martin Amis have been unique in terms of their success and longevity. How would he feel about his own sons wanting to be writers? 'Well, I would follow my father's example of not encouraging them, because that is an egotistical drive.'

But he wouldn't be alarmed if they showed signs of literary talent? 'I read my older boy's [Louis] essay on Othello recently and had shivers up my spine - it was so well-written, and in a good conversational style. There was no fucking around with 18-syllable words, which is what I thought was literary at his age. And I felt pleasure in that. Kingsley wasn't pleased, I think, when I started getting attention as a writer. I remember him being interviewed on TV by Russell Harty, and as soon as a question about "your son the writer" came up I could see the look on his face - "Oh, here we go again". I thought, "Whoa, he really doesn't like this." '

But the old man could be funny about this perceived rivalry, too, as Amis admits. 'He told me a story about being at a party and a woman coming up to him and saying, "How does it feel to have a son who's more famous than you?" And he said, "He's not more famous than me." She said, "Oh yes he is - MUCH more famous than you." ' And there follows - a rare but cherishable sound this evening - a rich cadence of Amisian laughter.

- 'Koba the Dread' (Jonathan Cape) is available for £14.99 plus £1.99 p&p from Telegraph Books Direct. To order, call 0870-155 7222

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- ▶ [12 November 2001: Amis on Amis](#)
- ▶ [21 April 2001: Martin's monsters \[review of The War Against Cliché 1971-2000\]](#)
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