

"Laughter in the Dark"

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On the anniversary of September 11, **TISHANI DOSHI** talks to **MARTIN AMIS** in his London residence about what it means to be comic in defiance of the world, about tragedy and collective human consciousness and his new book ***Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million***, a polemical account of the Soviet experiment. Amis interweaves the personal with the political and challenges the indulgence of communism by intellectuals of the West including his father Kingsley Amis and close friend, political journalist, Christopher Hitchens. In the writing of ***Koba***, Amis refutes Stalin's infamous aphorism, "Every death is a tragedy, the death of a million is a mere statistic." Martin Amis is the author of 16 previous books, fiction and non-fiction, including ***London Fields***, ***Money***, ***The Information***, ***Experience*** and ***The War against Cliché***.

Your last two books, ***Experience*** and ***Koba***, have been memoirs, how do you see this as a departure from your fiction writing?

WELL, the first one came about because my father died and I always knew I was going to have to write about him at some point so after his death it seemed like a natural break. When I finished that, I didn't feel I wanted to go back yet to the novel that was cooking inside me before I wrote ***Experience***, so I began the thing on Stalin and it grew to book length. So it felt like a kind of pause for breath in my fiction, a mid-term rearrangement. .

How do you manage in your own mind the combination of being this brilliant comic writer along with the desire to say serious things about huge topics?

I do regard myself as a comic writer but that's only because it seems to me that the other genres are used up. This isn't an age for epic or for tragedy in the classical sense, but comedy is the place where you can be really free. And it's a difficult time to be a comic writer because of the constrictions of correctness, there's less and less to joke about. More and more is unsayable and of course this has all been changed by September 11. I think every writer on earth was considering a change of occupation on September 12 because what you had to say seemed so dwarfed by events.

Soon after September 11 I looked at the novel I was writing and some paragraphs simply didn't stand anymore but I thought, no, this'll be a post-September 11 novel of course, but consciously that, and it'll be a

comic novel and that cheered me up and got my fighting instincts going again. I'm a comic novelist, that's the surface I use, but serious things get said too.



*You've said in **Koba** that laughter refuses to absent itself in the Soviet case, you've called it the "catastrophe of laughter". Can you talk more about the role of laughter as a political response?*

Well, that's a vast question. Post September 11, suddenly the world feels bi-polar again, and one of the things being directed at us along with irrationality, hatred of women, religiosity, and fanaticism, is humourlessness. Humour is the obverse of common sense. As Clive James said, "Humour is common sense dancing." And without humour there can be no common sense. Humourless people aren't just the people that don't laugh at jokes; I mean they can't be trusted with anything. I don't know how they get across the road without getting knocked over, it seems to me such a basic human quality, so it's important to assert comedy and laughter in the face of its opposite.

Your work has become increasingly social in that there is a political subtext in it which wasn't there before; what would you say is the responsibility of a socially engaged writer?

Well, I don't like the word responsibility, don't take it personally, but I'm wary of it. I think willy-nilly all writers, roughly speaking, are in the education business. You're trying to expand the perceptions of your readers, to make the world look richer, more nuanced, so in that sense you have a public responsibility but it's not to the Labour Party or to any other conglomerate.

*I get the sense from reading your novels of this collective human consciousness. Where would you say this arises from and is this is the same as "species shame" that you talk about in **Koba**?*

Well, that's more something to be aimed for rather than something we already have. Rather than thinking about your nation or your continent you should be thinking in terms of species. Species consciousness is sort of the next goal where we don't have these conflicts and territorial disagreements and we see the planet as one. It's obviously a long way away, and further away than ever since last September.

Has the idea or the memory of your father changed over the years? By re-reading him, are you finding out new things about your relationship?

Only in the details really, when I wrote **Experience** I was very immersed in him and communed with him a lot mentally but I think with this book I'm going to cease to engage with him in print although he is ever-present in other ways.

In your mind is there anything that's immortal?

Yes. Your work has a chance of being immortal, or at least a long life.

And your offspring, your descendants?

Robert Jay Lifton, the historian, said that immortality is the great quest for every human being, and that's what takes people to religion if you go in that direction but the most common form for this quest for immortality is the having of children. So there's that and there's language.

Do you consider yourself right wing or left wing or do these phrases mean anything to you?

Oh yes, they do. They're not gone, although the landscape has changed almost beyond recognition. The impulses of the left remain and the impulses of the right remain. But I've always been a little bit left of the centre myself, not far, and can't imagine ever changing. Everyone is dying for me to become right wing so I travel in my father's direction but I can't see it, I can't imagine it.

If I were to ask you to introduce your work to a completely different literary culture, say India, how would you do it?

Someone once characterised my stuff as common places, obvious things, delivered with tremendous force, so not very subtle, or not obviously very subtle. I would call it laughter in the dark, that's the phrase I'd use.

Whom among your contemporaries do you enjoy reading?

Well I'm sorry to say I'm not a great reader of my contemporaries. You know you have to read your friend's books, so I do and I'm very glad that I do because I admire Ian McEwan and Salman Rushdie and Richard Ford, but you tend to read your elders I think and that's a very natural thing. It's slightly disgraceful to read your youngsters, although I am, like everyone else, very keen on Zadie Smith. There are occasional exceptional cases, Will Self is not that much younger but certainly a generation younger.

What are you working on next?

I'm a hundred and something pages into this novel which is, as I said, post-September 11, but comic and defiant in that sense. As a general trend I can see myself getting more and more anti-religion. I think if you have to do it, do it at home by yourself, with your family, but don't take it out into the streets, into the battlefield. Human beings enjoy believing more than they enjoy thinking, knowing, finding out and seeing and it's a barbarous indulgence and it's an enormous drag on species. You can't get anywhere with it. As V.S. Naipaul said, describing religious fervour in India, there are people incapable of seeing man as man, needing this backdrop of various mechanisms to do away with death and to provide a justice that just isn't there. We've got to start contemplating man as man, it's all we've got, and the backdrop, the universe is far more chillingly grand than any creed. Reality is more fantastic than religion in that sense.