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LEISURE & ARTS

Famous Amis

Both fiction and journalism are fertile territory for him.

BY AMY FINNERTY
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NEW YORK--Martin Amis excels at descriptions of creepy men--sweaty misogynists, soused lowlifes, and thugs. Take, as an example, this passage--from his recent novel, "House of Meetings"--about a brute in a Soviet gulag: "His eyes were positively flamboyant. Looking at those eyes, you felt not just fear but also the kind of depression that would normally take a week to build." The book is narrated by an introspective rapist and set mostly in a labor camp. Humiliation, starvation and violent competition for shovels and bunk space set the scene for, of all things, a love triangle involving two prisoner-brothers.

After reading the book, it was a relief to meet Mr. Amis in person. He is easygoing, flawlessly polite, Britannically correct in accent, and physically meager, and there seemed no need to worry that he'd been mining his own character for his fictional villains. I'm small, but as he approached me in a New York hotel, I felt pretty sure I could take him out in a pub brawl. He ordered wine for himself, I suspect, just so I would not feel awkward doing so (he barely touched his glass). He rose from our table--twice--to ask a waiter to turn down the music so that my tapes would later be audible.

Mr. Amis, now staring down 60, and the father of five children, no longer resembles Charles Highway, the hormonal, Oxford-cramming protagonist of his first (autobiographical) novel, "The Rachel Papers." Since his flashy literary debut at age 24, when he wore a groovy shag haircut and was best known as the prodigious son of Kingsley Amis--making him, predictably, a target of gossip and envy--he has produced a dozen novels, including "Money," "London Fields," "The Information" and "Time's Arrow." But he has slipped back and forth over the border that separates journalism and fiction, and has been drawn, lately, to dark historical themes. "House of Meetings" is his second book on Stalinism; the first, a work of nonfiction, was "Koba the Dread."

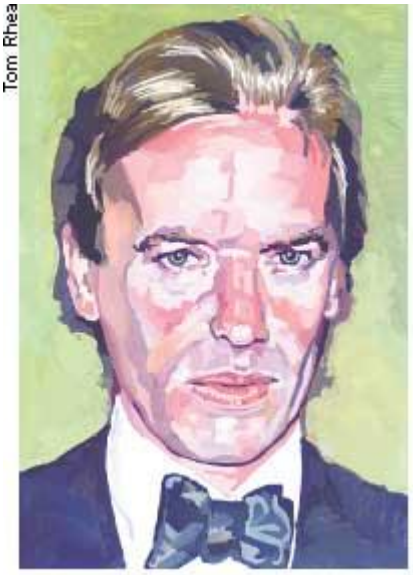
The two forms--fiction and journalism--inform each other, he says. "As often happens, you look into something as a journalist, and then a couple of years later you write your immediate response, which is your rational response. Then it trickles down into some other part of you where your novels come from, usually known as the unconscious, the subliminal."

The "house of meetings" of his recent title was an out-building where gulag prisoners were allowed, on rare, tormented occasions, to see their wives. "It was a kind of holdover from the ridiculous ideas of the Bolsheviks. They liked to be very modern and hip and thought it would be very adult. They were very puritanical, the Bolsheviks, but they had this idea that the prisoners

should be able to see their wives. Imagine having conjugal visits in Auschwitz. It wasn't as bad as Auschwitz, though. . . . I believe it wasn't as bad."

Mr. Amis is often praised for his "mastery of the English language," which shouldn't be considered noteworthy in one who writes books for a living, in English. But his virtuosity becomes glaring in conversation. He does not so much talk as assemble flawless paragraphs in the air, fielding subjects from tax cuts to teen fashion.

Sometimes in sympathy with the left, Mr. Amis doesn't hew to any ideological orthodoxy, but is disturbed by the moral mushiness of some Britons on the subject of Islamist extremism. He has been called Islamophobic, but says "Islamismophobic" would be a better (though still imperfect) term. "It's Islamismophobia. The situation in Britain is ridiculous and contemptible. Some left-wing people--it's a bit insulting to the left to call them that . . . see someone with a grievance who hasn't got white skin and they think, Well, we must have done something really horrible to them. There's this masochistic view that we can't be right about anything. The woozy left has made itself an apologist for a creedal wave that is racist, misogynist, homophobic, totalitarian, imperialist and genocidal. But at least they're not white!


Tom Rhea

"The Guardian is a great paper, but they print Osama Bin Laden on the op-ed page with a byline. . . . And I've said Islamismophobia is not the right word, either, because a phobia is an irrational or exaggerated fear and it is neither irrational nor exaggerated to fear a movement that wants you dead and has said it wants you dead. This great gust of irrationality coming from the Middle East, we meet it with another gust of irrationality."

While Mr. Amis is tough-minded on Islamist extremism, he thinks the War on Terror has been badly bungled, and he has distinctly mixed feelings about President Bush. "I'm not an automatic Bush-hater. . . . There is a vast plurality of people in Europe who thirst for the failure of Iraq just because they hate George Bush. I was against the war, but the minute it started, from the opening salvo of shock and awe, I wanted it to work."

Mr. Amis, famous son of a famous writer, now talks about Mr. Bush, son of a president, as one might a literary character: "I'm very interested in how his whole persona has changed. Do you remember around 2002 and 2003, his body language was that of someone looking for a fight? Even his walk was very drunk with power. . . . Now his upper lip has stopped working. He can't smile. I'm glad to see it. Think of the difference between Lincoln at the start of the Civil War and Lincoln at the end: this beautiful man, emaciated by war, by the distress and pain of it. And Bush is showing it, in his sinews and his glands. It's taking a very heavy toll on him. And so it should."

The narrative Mr. Amis spins is tragicomic. "No human being in history had a power rush like Bush did on September the 12th. American hegemony up until then had been a matter of graphs and pie charts. . . . On September the 12th, it became a matter of possible boots on the ground . . . America was revealed as the most powerful country that had ever been, so far ahead of the next 30 countries combined. . . . So that's a mitigating factor. . . . You wouldn't expect any human being to be able to absorb that kind of elevation. He was a tax-cutting seat-warmer until September the 11th. Then he was the War President. It was a huge rush of power."

It couldn't have happened in Europe: "In the European culture, the political class, they school them on the corrupting effects of power. . . . The reason it was inculcated in the political class in Old Europe wasn't just mental hygiene, it was because a corrupt mind makes corrupt decisions."

In a deeper deconstruction of the president's soul, however, Mr. Amis gives him credit for exceptional social courage. "In one veteran's hospital alone . . . Bush has made 35 visits to severely injured troops, and that's a lot. If I were president I'd try to keep it down to three, or perhaps two, or maybe one. Or maybe not visit at all. I mean, it's so impossibly painful. Some people have said to me that they think . . . it's very emotional and that he's addicted to that. But I'd give him the benefit of the doubt and say, that's brave to do that, to go and confront the results of your policies."

Martin Amis knows how it feels to be criticized. He has been accused of demeaning women in his fiction. Yet he puts such alleged misdemeanors into perspective when he speaks, in quaint '60s slang, about Islamic fundamentalists. "They hate us. They hate chicks, too." He refers to Bernard-Henri Levi's journalism on the subject: "At the training camps you hear about in Afghanistan and Pakistan, if you go to one of those, if you're a young jihadi, in the morning it's suicide bombs, in the afternoons it's IEDs, and in the evenings it's hating women. . . . That's what they hate about the West. They say it's all this other stuff, but what they hate is the equality of women, because they're a patriarchy, and that's their last fiefdom. Here's what a fundamentalist Muslim feels when he sees you driving a car. He feels dishonored. It's hard to get your head around that, isn't it? . . . It's a psychology which has been solidified over 13 centuries, 60 generations."

Modernity produces its own share of irrational behavior, Mr. Amis believes, and in "House of Meetings" he touches upon the prison fashion, body-cutting and anorexia of prosperous American youths. They are a ghostly echo, he suggests, of the horrors of past centuries--of the gulag, for instance, where one didn't have a choice about being starved or wounded. Divorce, he says, is another way in which we do to ourselves what wars and slave labor camps once did--it separates men from their women and children. He theorizes that it is a way of "punishing yourself for your privilege, for not having had to endure the sufferings of history. It's the numbness of advanced democracy and the market state."

When asked about Tony Blair, Mr. Amis smiles tolerantly, as if at a hopelessly slow pupil. "My dear, it doesn't matter what anyone thinks of Blair in any but the local, bitchy gossip sense. In British politics . . . you go along with Americans because it gives you influence at the top table." But on the genesis of that special bond, a Churchillian flourish or two slips into his language, delivered with Oxonian confidence in that "Masterpiece Theatre" voice: "When England ceased to be a great power, after the Second World War, broken by the war and pauperized by the war, it turned to America. The fantasy was: We were Greece to your Rome. We would advise you. Our wisdom as an ex-colonial power would guide the young turk, the young bull of America." Things didn't work out that way, though. "Our influence has been shown to be practically nil. Blair had one thing that he could offer Bush on the run-in to Iraq. Bush needed--didn't need it absolutely, but it was awfully nice for Bush--that the American people heard approval for the war in an English accent."

Ms. Finnerty writes for the Journal on culture and the arts.