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To Russia, but not with love

Don't expect laughs in Martin Amis's new novel set in the Stalinist era. Next, he says, is a book that will 'make them hate me all over again in England'

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FROM TUESDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL

NEW YORK — A curl sneaks onto the upper lip of Martin Amis as he peers down at the lounge menu of the chic Royalton Hotel. “‘Artisanal cheeses,’” he reads, giving the adjective his best flat American intonation, so it comes out as deliciously faux: “art-i-ZAN-uhl.”

“Don't you love the word ‘artisanal?’” he continues. “That's so sort of Gucci. Sort of fake respectability and patronizing, all at the same time.”

You can feel a caustic riff crackling to life here, like something out of Amis's 1980s-era showbiz satire *Money* or his middle-aged-male-ego send-up in *The Information* (1995), and he teases the possibilities with another crack, one about “proletarian cheeses.” But then he curbs himself, as if sensing it would be unseemly to continue, for he's here to talk about a novel in which the two main characters, imprisoned for years in a Stalinist gulag, rarely have bread, never mind cheese, proletarian or otherwise. (Still, Amis allows himself the indulgence of ordering up a glass of chardonnay and a shrimp cocktail.) For those who know Amis primarily for his bleakly comic work, the new *House of Meetings* will feel like a dour shift, for it is indeed bleak but rarely funny. Writing of a camp companion, Amis's half-starved narrator says, “The only impulse resembling desire that Tanya awoke in me was an evanescent urge to eat her shirt buttons, which were made from pellets of chewed bread.”

Amis has covered the subject before, with his 2002 non-fiction work *Koba the Dread*, in which — despite having never visited Russia — he offered a Swiftian portrait of the country and its cynical leaders, particularly Stalin, from the 1920s to the 1950s. As in his Holocaust novel *Time's Arrow* (1991), in which he gave us a former Nazi doctor, in *House of Meetings* we are beguiled by a despicable individual, in this case an unnamed 84-year-old Russian narrator who, during a Siberian pilgrimage in September of 2004, writes a letter to his American stepdaughter outlining the horrors of his early life, particularly his decade spent imprisoned as an enemy of the people.

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Author Martin Amis. (*J.P. Moczulski/The Globe and Mail*)

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That narrative forms the spine of Amis's tale: After serving as a loyal member of the Soviet Army in the Second World War, which he concluded by raping his way across Germany with the rest of his troops, our narrator aroused the suspicions of the authorities and found himself in a foul, freezing and violent hell on earth above the Arctic Circle. In time, his half-brother Lev turns up at the camp with soul-shattering news: He has married Zoya, a fantastically sexy Jewess and the only woman the narrator has ever loved.

But even as he wishes to supplant Lev, the narrator protects him in the camp like the big brother he is, saving him numerous times from brutal beatings.

Until, that is, the doors to the camp are opened after Stalin's death. Lev deteriorates but our narrator thrives, becoming a rich man and eventually defecting to America.

The divide between the West and Russia is one of Amis's primary themes: Even as the narrator explains himself and asks for forgiveness, he scorns the notion of being judged by someone who would never be able to comprehend the cynicism that is a Russian's birthright. Emphasizing the point, the book's present-day framing sequences occur against the backdrop of the Beslan school hostage-taking, with its unspeakably calamitous ending.

“If as a people you've had no freedom or responsibility for 1,000 years — the duration of the Russian state — then the whole idea of responsibility is weakened, the whole idea of scruple is weakened.

“Whenever I felt motivation was a bit thin, I would shrug and say [of the narrator]: He's Russian. You know? The whole idea of cause and effect as we understand it, is non-applicable in the Russian case.”

This was the toughest book Amis has ever written. “The difficulty was legitimacy, the right to talk about a victim,” he says. “Almost every scene, I had to start from scratch, gouge it out of myself. It was as if the book was begging me to abandon it.”

Still, every day he would troop dutifully into his study in Montevideo, Uruguay, where he'd relocated with his wife Isabel Fonseca and their two young daughters, to flail away in frustration. This was about two years ago. One night, he was in the company of writers who were talking about their craft, “and I suddenly thought, I'm not among their number any more. It's all gone. I'm not a writer any more. ...”

“And the next day, it began to lift and I thought, maybe that was hitting bottom.”

It takes a while to get used to the spectre of Amis as he appears here in this lounge. Most publicity shots, even recent ones, try to capture something of the angry-young-man persona he inherited from his father Kingsley, which is to say: youngish, and angry. But he is now 57 years old and, physically, greying around the edges; he has something of the eight-year-old thrust into a grade-school play about, say, founding fathers, who has been sprinkled with too much talc by an enthusiastic teacher. His wardrobe of jacket and vest, which had seemed consciously dapper in a younger writer, is now merely the common dress of men his age. And anger? Amis spends most of the hour looking off to the side, to an unoccupied corner of the lounge, so those eyes, which are so steely when they peer out from the backs of his books, come off as almost uncertain and apologetic.

But then, he's been on the ropes a little over the last few years. The books he published under a notoriously remunerative contract with Talk Miramax Books failed to meet expectations, including his last novel, the widely excoriated 2003 effort *Yellow Dog*. So for a while, Amis was feeling so unsure of *House of Meetings*, so protective, that he planned to sandwich it between two short stories and an essay. Shortly before publication, though, he reread it in galley form and gave the stand-alone novel his blessing.

As if coming back off the canvas with an extra jolt of life, Amis has already almost finished his next novel. It is called *The Pregnant Widow* and concerns itself with feminism. The title is a nod to the Russian intellectual Alexander Herzen, who said that the result of a revolution is like a pregnant widow: The father is dead but the child has not yet been born. So it is, says Amis, with feminism, which is only now in its second trimester.

“As you get to my age, you want to know what happened in history while you were alive. And one of the biggest things that happened was the sexual revolution and the emergence of women,” he says.

“There's a bit about my father in it. Quite a lot about [Philip] Larkin in it, about Saul [Bellow], and Hitch [Christopher Hitchens] is in it and Salman Rushdie — all people visited in *Experience*, but on a more intimate level. I think you're allowed one novel like that in your life, where you nakedly use your own experience to try and illustrate some things.”

The book, he promises, will be “blindingly autobiographical. It'll make them hate me all over again in England.”

As for the promise of being the target of more hate, Amis seems to enjoy the prospect. “There was a wonderful moment with Christopher Hitchens, it must have been 30 years ago, we were in a little restaurant about to have dinner, and these sort of pouting, posh hippies in waisted suits came in, long hair. And they were having some sort of party and they were all arranging the tables a bit, and one of them came over, crouched on his haunches in front of us, and looked up with a pouting, simpering look on his face that I'm sure had charmed many thousands of people in the past, and he said, ‘You're gonna hate me for this.’ And Hitch said, ‘We hate you already.’” So, says Amis, speaking of *The Pregnant Widow*: “They're gonna hate me for this. But they hate me already.”

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