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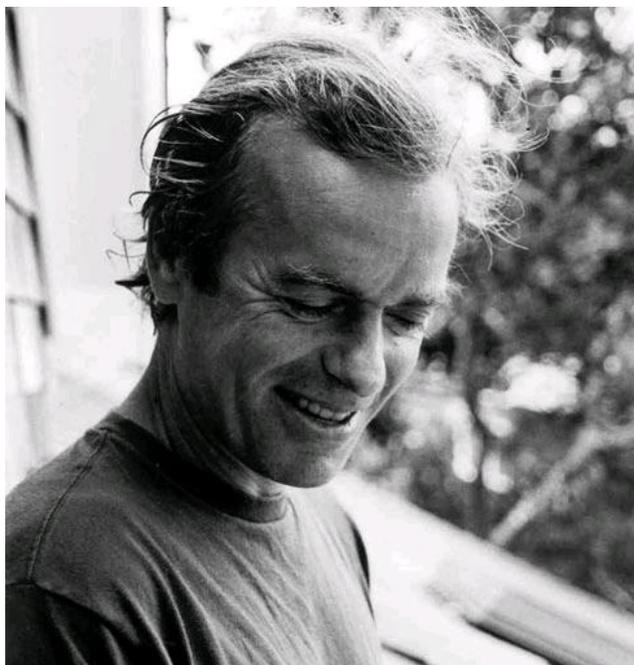
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## SPOTLIGHT

### THE BARD OF BRASH

Martin Amis on his new book, the Iraq war, and a long-ago love affair with Tina Brown

by Chris Lehmann



FAMOUS CHOPS Martin Amis

If an enfant terrible can have a second childhood, Martin Amis is well into his. After creating a huge stir among his countrymen in the mid-90s by (temporarily) forsaking London for New York, taking up with a new wife, a new agent, and even a newly photogenic set of teeth, the brash English novelist incited still more rancor in his homeland with the 2003 novel *Yellow Dog*, which recorded a middle-age protagonist's porn addiction in graphic detail. Tibor Fischer famously likened it in the London *Telegraph* to discovering "your favourite uncle being caught in a school playground, masturbating."

With his latest novel, *House of Meetings*, Amis tackles a far more solemn theme: life in the Soviet gulags. The plot pivots on a love triangle; the book's never-named narrator vies most of his life with his younger brother and gulag-mate, Zev, for the affections of a Jewish woman, Zoya, who miraculously evades the camps. But the romantic tension builds to a brutal climax, disfiguring the inner lives of all three, not to mention the person of Zoya. Though a somber turn from previous works and in certain circles considered a welcome return to form, *House of Meetings* still earned Amis some feminist taunts—Stephanie Merritt in the *New Statesman* decried Zoya as a "woman reduced to pure sexual allure ... a sort of Russian-Jewish Jessica Rabbit."

*Radar* caught up with Amis recently in New York to talk about the politicized readings of his latest work, his perspective on the turmoil in the Middle East, and the healing powers of Tina Brown.

*"Tina sort of saved me, because she was very pretty and ebullient and publicly affectionate. She got the scent off me"*

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**RADAR: One of the things that struck me about *House of Meetings* is it takes a more measured view of male brutality than some of your other novels have. It seems that the book's worst indictment of the Soviet system is that it kills the ability of men to love women.**

**MARTIN AMIS:** That tattoo from the Norlag camp, the one that says, "You may live, but you will not love," is really the summary of the book—the feeling that not all of us can transcend this brutality, that we can't just soar above all this. Most of the writers who did write memoirs of the gulags, they all had terrific force of life in them. It was my suspicion that the more typical experience would have been like my character, ruined in emotions by the degradation and injustice.

**Right, and even though your narrator undeniably turns into a monster, I still found him sympathetic.**

Me too. There's very little that can be used to justify what he does with Zoya. But [as for the brutality against German women] we're being too fastidious if we think that if the biggest army in history comes charging across your border without provocation to wage a war of annihilation that killed 25 million of you, that a little vengefulness is not mysterious.

**Still, both here and in Britain you get feminist critics saying you've excused this kind of action by explaining it.**

Well, it's so wrong to have that kind of a politicized reader. You just have to decide that you're going to do without them. You don't care if you don't have them because if they are that politicized then they've really got no business reading fiction.

**This is a dramatic shifting of gears, but speaking of women, can you tell me about your affair with Tina Brown?** She was at Oxford. I was 23, she was 19. What do you want to know?

**Was it mutually satisfactory?**

Yes. She was and is adorable. She sort of rescued me. I don't know if you've ever had one of those periods in your younger years when suddenly, not only are you not seeming to get a girlfriend, but it's as if the women all know that you can't get a girlfriend. The news has got around that you're not going to get a girlfriend. I was going to write about this in an autobiographical novel I'm doing. I was beginning to understand what it must be like to be Philip Larkin—the women *all* know. I didn't actually fear it then; well, no, I did. I was just feeling sort of grubby and exasperated, it just gets worse and worse. The women all—it's as if they've all been ringing each other up and saying, "Don't go near that guy." But Tina sort of saved me, because she was very pretty and ebullient and publicly affectionate. She got the scent off me and gave me confidence. That spell, she banished that. I don't think I've ever said this to a magazine before, but that's what I think about it.



THE TINA PAPERS Brown at VF

**Do you miss America?**

It's always a treat for me, because there's so much less baggage for me here in the States. And I think what makes the difference is that my father [Sir Kingsley Amis] is a more dominant figure in Britain, and I'm always seen as a continuation of him. And just as you get sick of your political leaders after two terms, the Amises have been stinking up the place for 60 years. They've had enough.

**In a recent online chat with readers of the London *Independent*, you called out the British Left for their affinity to Hezbollah. Did you encounter the same tendencies in the American Left?**

It probably is there. It's not there in the general psyche in the same way as in England. It isn't so much an American disease, at least certainly not in New York. But it's rampant in England.

**It just seems perverse and borderline anti-Semitic, as reluctant as I am to reach for that term in these debates.**

I completely agree with you. I was just reading today that the phrase *anti-Semitism* was created in 1870 by an anti-Semite, a crusading anti-Semite, who was saying, in essence, "That's our banner." But that wave of anti-Semitism at the end of the 19th century and beyond was an attempt to delegitimize Jewish equality, which had only recently been established in many places. And now the drive is to delegitimize Israel. An English lefty is never more comfortable, never more deliciously smug than when attacking Israel. It's anti-Semitism with a clear

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