



## Catastrophe theories

Amis has set himself a monumental task. Do the results match his daring ambition?

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### **In Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million**

Jonathan Cape

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'All writers,' Martin Amis once said, 'if they mean business, if they're ambitious, have got to think they're the best. You haven't got a chance of being the best unless you think you're best.' It follows, then, that Amis must at least think he is the best - because he is, after all, a writer of terrific ambition, is he not? Just look at his subjects: the atomic threat, Aids, the Holocaust, the terror of 11 September and now, in *Koba the Dread*, the gulag and the murderous crimes of Stalin. Amis is a monumentalist: nothing, it seems, is too big for him. There is nothing that he will not dare to write about, even if it means turning the Holocaust into a utopian narrative as he did in his novel *Time's Arrow*, nothing he will not seek to dignify in his own hyperbolic style, with its riffs and repetitions, its playful paradoxes and its ironic inversions.

In the immediate aftermath of 11 September, Amis, writing in the *Guardian*, expressed his feelings of 'species-shame' at what had happened in New York and Washington - as opposed to, say, species pride at the simple heroism of so many ordinary Americans. In *Koba the Dread*, reflecting on what Nazism and Bolshevism tell us about what it means to be human, he writes, using a now familiar formulation: 'The truth is that both these stories are full of terrible news about what it is to be human...This is species shame.'

Why is Amis so drawn to catastrophe? Why does he return, again and again, to what is worst in the human story? He offers a partial explanation here when, having struggled through an article by Lenin, he writes: 'When I read someone's prose I reckon to get a sense of their moral life.' Later in the book, he suggests that the burnish and authority of the prose style of his old friend Christopher Hitchens - with whom he is presently having a tedious public debate about youthful political affiliation - improved with the collapse of the Berlin Wall, as if the crumbling of despotism all over Europe freed Hitchens from the moral taint of his own fellow travelling past and thus to write again. Amis is obsessed with prose style - his own and others'. It underscores his own restless quest for linguistic novelty ('I don't want to write a sentence that any guy could have written,' he once told an interviewer), and his preoccupation with posterity, with his eventual place in the scheme of things. It is the reason he titled his book of literary criticism *The War Against Cliché*.

But, in seeking to honour the old Conradian dictum that any work aspiring to the condition of art must carry its justification in every line, he too often embellishes and distorts what should be simple and clear - such as the writing of a political memoir. It is why the long middle section of this book, a biographical essay on Stalin drawn entirely from over-familiar secondary material and febrile with psycho-historical speculation, reads as little more than an exercise in style, in ostentatious display. Amis defers to few people in his life - Saul Bellow certainly, as well as Robert Conquest, the veteran cold warrior whose *The Great Terror* (1968) did so much to alert the world to the truth about the atrocity exhibition that was life under Stalin and from whose work Amis quotes extensively in this book. In many ways, Conquest has become a kind of surrogate father to Amis: he is his sage, his adviser, his ideal historical chronicler. But the triumphalism and zeal of Conquest too often make him an unreliable guide, not to the Soviet past, but to the present and near future. To Conquest, we are indeed living at the end of history. There is nothing to hope for beyond the smooth operation of free markets under the rule of law. But equally there is nothing to believe in: ours is the era of the long aftermath, when all illusions have passed. Amis, you feel, under the tutelage of Conquest, has begun his own long slow journey to late-middle-age reaction. But this book is not as

egregious as many critics have suggested, on both sides of the Atlantic. For a start, Amis's celebrity may lead many readers to a subject in which they thought they had scant interest - and, from there, his extensive bibliography may lead them to follow him still further into the darkness of the Soviet inferno. Amis also asks important questions of the British Left, indeed of career leftists everywhere, such as why were you so silent for so long about the worst excesses of the Soviet experiment? Why were you so reluctant to equate communism with fascism? Why were you (and here continentals are far more culpable than the British), as Orwell once put it, so willing 'to kiss Stalin's arse'?

Yet missing from a book detailing the brutal realities of Stalinism is any attempt to explain the significance of communism as an idea: its peculiar appeal to the bourgeoisie. There is little sense, from an honours student of Eng Lit, of the clash and dynamic of history - or understanding of how so much of the attraction of communism was its very nihilism, that old Bolshevik desire to destroy and to rupture. There is no discussion of the tradition of ironic opposition to totalitarianism, as perfected by Milan Kundera and other dissident writers who ridiculed the idiocies of Stalin long before Amis thought him a subject worthy of his time and attention.

Nor is there anything on how communism was in fact not a crude aberration, but the legitimate heir of European history. Instead, there is too much candid revelation, such as details of recent Amis family holidays and how the night-time tears of his baby daughter are reminiscent of the screams emanating from the gulags, and too much narcissistic self-positioning. On BBC2's Newsnight last week, Amis spoke of his shock at the hostility of historians to his book. Perhaps they were telling him something important - that, for instance, it's time to return to what he does best, which is writing comic fiction.

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