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The Amis Archipelago
Books

BY ADAM KIRSCH
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Martin Amis has always been afflicted with a certain kind of narcissism that is perversely common among the gifted. Like the world-class pianist who wants to be admired for his amateur poetry, or the basketball star who insists on taking up baseball, Mr. Amis has always seemed oddly dismissive of his true gift, and clamored instead for a reputation he doesn't deserve and can't sustain. That true gift is for verbal comedy, for phrases that preen and swagger in their delightful unlikeliness. The gift denied, for which he pines incessantly, is moral seriousness, the kind of sympathetic imagination that can address the largest historical tragedies and make them feel immediate.

These two powers do not, of course, have to be at war: Saul Bellow, the loudly praised god of Mr. Amis's idolatry, is perhaps the best recent example of a novelist who enjoyed both. But with Bellow, as with Dickens and Melville, the novelist's sheer joy in his plastic powers only amplifies his appetite for reality. With Mr. Amis, on the contrary, a certain cult of "good writing,"

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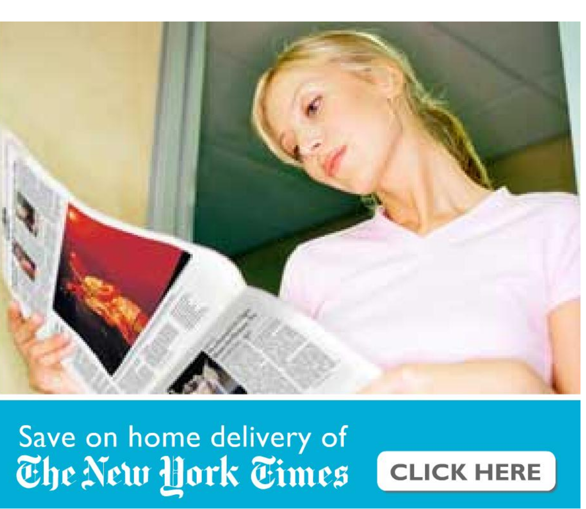

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inherited from Nabokov, enforces a spurious and costly division between the page and the world, as though the former could come alive only in its emancipation from the latter. This was the doctrine Mr. Amis advanced in his essay collection "The War Against Cliché," where he defined good writing as "a campaign against cliché." By that standard, the novel and unexpected always trump the true and profound.

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Really, of course, these kinds of value are not opposed; one might argue that, in the best fiction, they always go together. Indeed, Mr. Amis himself suspects as much, which is why the id of his prose is constantly being bullied by the superego of his theme. Even at his best, in the sick eroticism of "London Fields" (1989) or the Punch-and-Judy slapstick of "The Information" (1995), he feels compelled to ballast his black comedy with ruminations on the Decline of the Modern City and the Male Existential Crisis. The problem is that these shotgun weddings of fizzy style and doomy subject are always pulling toward divorce. The constant, self-pleasuring inventiveness of Mr. Amis's prose looks insolently immature next to his large moral pronouncements, while the pronouncements sound sentimental and insincere couched in his prose.

This disparity has never been more acute than in "House of Meetings" (Knopf, 248 pp., $23), a book whose high-concept summary cannot help sounding like a joke: It is a Martin Amis novel set in the Gulag. The Gulag is not, in fact, a new subject for Mr. Amis. In 2002, he published "Koba the Dread," a nonfiction book about the crimes of Stalin that was also a meditation on the reasons those crimes have not penetrated Western consciousness as thoroughly as their Nazi equivalents. In writing on this subject, Mr. Amis was settling all kinds of private intellectual scores: His father, Kingsley Amis, was a staunch anti-Communist, while his own youthful associates, like Christopher Hitchens, plumed themselves on being socialists.

But "Koba the Dread" was also, in a strange way, Mr. Amis's confession of the limits of his own moral imagination. One of the most memorable passages in the book came when he wondered why he allowed himself to nickname his own infant daughter "Butyrki," when the volume of her screams reminded him of the screams of the tortured in that infamous Moscow prison. Why, Mr. Amis asked, did he find this nickname permissible, where he would never have referred to his baby as something like "Dachau"?

The question was remarkable in its shamelessness and moral unaccountability, and gave a good clue to the workings of Mr. Amis's mind. For of course the only decent answer, especially for a person as knowledgeable about Soviet terror as Mr. Amis, is that one should never use "Butyrki" as a nickname because it is a monstrous and sacrilegious joke. Yet for Mr. Amis, this answer was insufficiently interesting because it is an ethical one that requires action, not an aesthetic one that licenses self-interrogation. In other words, even face to face with the Gulag, Mr. Amis remained trapped within his own imagination, more interested in the effect evil had on him than on his responsibilities toward it.

Exactly the same limitation is on display in "House of Meetings," a book that at times feels nearly blasphemous in the way it treats ultimate evil as a backdrop for Mr. Amis's usual favorite obsession: male sexual potency. The blasphemy, if such it is, begins with the novel's form: An unnamed narrator is writing a memoir for his stepdaughter, an American girl named Venus, who has no conception of what life was like in the old Soviet Union. The Gulag memoir, like the concentration camp memoir, is one of the distinctive genres of the 20th century, and nobody who has read one can ever forget that its defining characteristic is quietness. In the face of cruelty and misery too great for the imagination, the victim-witness writes plainly, reticently, and accurately. It is a way of acknowledging the wall that must separate literature, which can be experienced, from testimony, which can only be accepted.

This kind of reticence is, of course, the exact opposite of everything that makes Mr. Amis the writer he is. Not for a moment does his prose sound anything like a camp survivor's, nor does his narrator ever exist as a credible character. Instead, he is a ventriloquist for Mr. Amis's jokes and remarks, on everything from the badness of Georgian poetry to the fecklessness of American teenagers. Even though Mr. Amis goes to some lengths to explain why this Russian man born in 1919 can joke knowingly about Lascelles Abercrombie and the popularity of chin-piercing — providing him with a résumé that includes stints in England and America — the reader never forgets that we are just listening to Mr. Amis as he spreads himself out at leisure.

This would not be so irritating were it not for the novel's claims to be penetrating a historical heart of darkness. The narrator, we learn, was sent to an Arctic labor camp after World War II, in common with millions of Red Army veterans. Soon he is joined by his younger half-brother, Lev, a poet and intellectual who seems unequipped for survival. What enables him to make it through the tortures of the camp — ghoulishly culled by Mr. Amis from history books and reproduced with relish — is his soul-sustaining romance with Zoya, a Jewish woman whom the narrator had also loved. Yet when Zoya is allowed to visit Lev for a conjugal visit, in the camp's so-called "house of meetings," he emerges a shattered man. The last half of the novel charts the brothers' opposite courses after their release: The narrator becomes a petty crook and operator par excellence, while Lev descends into depression and impotence. What happened at the house of meetings to provoke this change is the narrative mystery which Mr. Amis artificially prolongs, resolving it only at the end of the book.

Even in outline, the bad faith of this plot is unmistakable. By turning the experience of prisoners in an Arctic labor camp into a romantic melodrama, Mr. Amis falsifies history in exactly the same way as a Hollywood screenwriter might: He replaces strangeness with familiarity, suffering with excitement, the reality of evil with a dream of love. It is plainly incredible that either brother, after a decade of physical and mental torture, could keep up their rivalry over Zoya; they would have had enough to do trying to stay alive. But then Zoya herself is equally incredible, a polymorphous fantasy in the mold of Nicola Six from "London Fields."

Silliest of all is Mr. Amis's attempt to make a novel about the Gulag pivot on the success or failure of Lev and Zoya's night of love. Doubts about his sexual prowess might serve as a man's dark night of the soul in a Western comedy of manners — they served Mr. Amis to that effect in "The Information" — but they seem ridiculously picayune in "House of Meetings." The narrator of the novel is constantly berating Venus, his American addressee, for the triviality of her sufferings — her bad relationships, her anorexia, all the usual complement of American self-indulgence. But Mr. Amis is a victim of exactly the same self-indulgence. His moral imagination begins and ends in the bedroom.

All the while, Mr. Amis continues to produce his usual inventive phrases and witty lists, the "good writing" for which he is deservedly famous. Yet in this context, the reader can't help but wonder what Mr. Amis's good writing is good for. When he describes the physical violence in the camp as "warm work with the spanner and the pliers, the handspike and the crowbar, vicings, awlings, lathings, manic jackhammerings, atrocious chisellings," we recognize Mr. Amis's delight in coining words and the springy rhythm of his sentences. What we don't recognize is any sense of what it is like to live in a world where you are at risk of being maimed with an awl or a chisel. In other words, Mr. Amis has once again turned away from the world to the page, where he amuses himself with a heedlessness that in other contexts, in other novels, is indeed delightful. Here it is at best bad taste, and at worst obscene, in the true sense of that word: A casual dragging into view of things that deserve, from horror and pity, to be kept offstage.

akirsch@nysun.com

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