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House of Amis

15 October 2006

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Steve Braunias reports from London, where Martin Amis launches his new novel with a peculiar appearance at the Royal Festival Hall.

1. That hunched little man with a lot of thin hair doing its best to rise like a majestic surf over the top of his head, wearing an oversized striped blue shirt, the unbuttoned cuffs covering his knuckles as he finishes a cigarette outside the front steps of the Royal Festival Hall in London earlier this month - good heavens, that was him, tarring his amazing teeth with one last puff before he went on stage, live, in person, one of the world's most astonishing writers, English novelist Martin Amis.

He flicked his fag away, and smiled nicely as the door was opened for him and a tiny, tanned, dark-haired woman. It may have been his wife, Isobel Fonseca, who is always referred to as an American heiress, but seldom as the author of a highly respected book on east European gypsies. They scuttled like mice up the stairs, these two silent tots clad in black, so petite and neatly boned. Later, standing on the vast, high-ceilinged stage of the Royal Festival Hall, he looked diminished, like an infant dolled up in an adult's clothes. Handsome, louche and decayed, a balding, haggard baby, 57.

What a curious sight, and what a strange evening. Amis had flown in from Uruguay - he has a house there, another on Long Island - to promote his 11th novel, House of Meetings. It was an opportunity to watch genius at play. No offence, but he's smarter than you. Amis is maybe the cleverest writer alive, with his dazzling, spectacular prose, his knockout lines, his brilliant thinking, his urban swagger. "Among my friends," he once told novelist Will Self, "I am known as the tyrant of cool."

He's also a celebrity. Famous Amis, with his famous father (Kingsley), his famous friends (Christopher Hitchens was his best man), and the most famous teeth in literature - he

ABOUT STUFF**FEEDBACK**

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spent \$US30,000 to replace the diseased agonies that howled inside his mouth. The papers crucified him. They attack him every time he moves; as a target for so much hostility, Amis wrote with impressive calmness about the quality of English hate, in his memoir Experience. They're fools, he grimaced. They're pygmies. Three years later, in 2003, they got their revenge, when Amis published his novel Yellow Dog, a book so rotten that it's now better known as Complete Dog.

It inspired this notorious line from Tibor Fischer in the Telegraph: "It's like your favourite uncle being caught in a school playground, masturbating." As with many readers, Fischer was awed by earlier Amis novels, such as The Rachel Papers and Money, and by his superb journalism and reviewing, collected in The Moronic Inferno, Visiting Mrs Nabokov and The War Against Cliche. Now, he declared, Amis had gone ga-ga, was sad, embarrassing and burnt out.

Fischer is still burying him -incredibly, the Telegraph offered him House of Meetings to review. He hated it. A dozen or so reviews have appeared in the English press. Most were positive. "A return to form", that sort of thing. But there was something constrained about the praise, as though it wore a fixed grin, exchanged pleasantries, and couldn't wait to leave.

Amis read from his novel at the Royal Festival Hall. It was so boring that a gentleman in the second row (TVNZ reporter Tim Wilson from One News) nodded off, his head jerking backwards and forwards in deep

slumber, as Amis droned on in a lovely, dark, posh English voice. Poor old Mr Wilson woke up when the audience greeted the end of Amis' reading with thin thank-you applause. It had not exactly been a triumph.




But then the small bore sat down with a glass of white wine, and took questions. What answers. Genius at play, the tyrant of cool -he was quite something. He was kind of mad, actually.

2. Literary historians will look back at House of Meetings as Amis' "Russian period". In 2002, he wrote an intense, rather baffling study of Stalin and the horror of the Soviet

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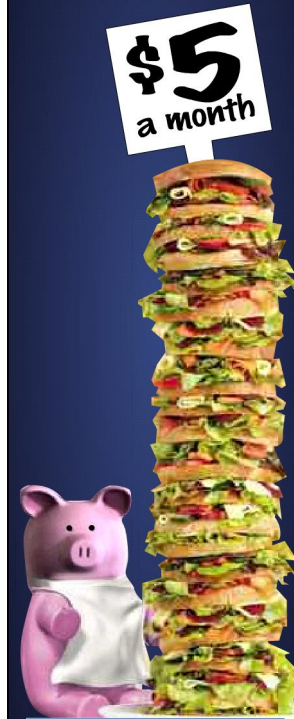
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gulags, in *Koba The Dread*. His novel is almost a sequel; his vast reading on the subject drained into the subconscious, and welled up again as fiction. (Fischer, that hateful toad, runs his hand up another metaphor: "Clearly he felt he could reheat the leftovers and serve it up once more in an invention sauce.") The impulse was a bizarre fact he had come across - Russian slaves granted conjugal visits to the faraway labour camps. Love in hell, one night only. Hence the book's title, and its imaginings of a love triangle between two imprisoned brothers and one of their wives.

"I've never been to Russia," Amis said. But he sat on stage as an expert on Russian affairs. Its population, he stated, would be halved by the year 2050. The reason? Shame, guilt, self-hatred. "Germany dealt with the holocaust. Russia hasn't dealt with the gulags." Ah, but Amis has. He suffered for Russian sins. "I've been rebuked for not doing 10 years' hard labour. Perhaps I should have. But I had to do a lot of suffering with this book. I had to convince myself I was writing morally about the gulags while living in Uruguay with my beautiful wife and beautiful children."

How he struggled, he said. He felt quite tormented, he said. There was something ludicrous, even offensive, about listening to the despair of a bird in his gilded Uruguayan cage. But, he said, it was his responsibility as a novelist to deal with the important theme of our age - the terror of ideology. There was nothing funny about Soviet Russia, nothing funny about Islam.

"I can imagine a future," he said, "where comedy and humour hardly exist. I can imagine a committee humourlessly deciding to end humour." It sounded as though Amis was nominating himself to chair that committee. He said he had started writing a black comedy on Arab suicide bombers, but ditched it. "It was incredibly offensive," he said. "But I just felt it was too serious to satirise."

Last month, Amis wrote a very long, stiff-necked essay in the *Observer* about Islamic ideology. Be afraid, be very afraid, he warned. At the Royal Festival Hall, he laid into English liberals who protested against Israel's invasion of Lebanon. "The bias against Israel in this country is shocking. There has been a shift in England to a leaden-witted wooziness. I've seen protesters, bourgeois whities, with a banner reading, 'We are all Hizbollah.' That's a negative epiphany. Enjoy it while you can, because it will come to a bloody end. Hizbollah want to kill us. That's their aim. You can't respect people who want to kill you."

Well, he was asked, what about Israel's aggressive policy in the Middle East? "Always think of Israel in terms of mortal fear. Mortal fear makes people do strange things." Good grief.

Amis moved to his next chief interest: feminism.

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"Feminism," he declared, "is half way through its second trimester." When was the baby due? Only when women started acting like women. "Women have tried behaving like men. They're still at it - ladettes are plagiarising the sexual attitudes of men. But it doesn't work out."

That reminded him: critics of House of Meetings have said the main female character was "a male fantasy". The fools! "But she's just pretty." He shook his head sadly. "Is it," he wondered, "because book reviewers can't pull?"

In turn, this reminded him of a party a long time ago, when a 70-year-old drunk told him he didn't think in terms of men and women: "I just think about people." Oh right, said Amis. Well, consider the male spider. After it has sex with a female spider, she starts eating his legs. "I don't think it likely, as he crookedly crawls off, while the female spider gnaws on his other five legs like drumsticks, that he will say, `I just think about spiders.'"

Kind of mad, or clear-eyed? In its confidence, its beautiful phrasing, its vigour, it was a thoroughly enjoyable performance. He seemed to age on stage, like a man settling into his armchair, his slippers in front of the fire, a fine port within reach. Like his father. He has been falling madly in love with the late Kingsley Amis recently, writing about him in Experience, in Koba The Dread, and in the novel he is now writing. Yes, yes, apparently all men turn into their fathers, and you have to wonder whether Amis is doing that in public - the old duffer, sighing at the folly of youth and liberals, telling women and Arabs how to behave.

He scuttled off stage, a vulnerable, charismatic figure. You hoped someone was looking after him. Told him it was time for bed. Reminded him to brush those amazing teeth. Gently led him to his cot.

- Martin Amis' House of Meetings is published in New Zealand by Random House UK.

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