The Times September 30, 2006

Required reading

Past troubles bleed into present horrors

In House of Meetings Martin Amis investigates the destiny of the individual as shaped by the horrors of a Soviet universe. Douglas Kennedy admires his skills

HOUSE OF MEETINGS
by Martin Amis
Jonathan Cape, £15.99; 208pp

LIFE MAY BE DAMNABLY short, but literary careers are peculiarly long — especially if you happen to be a writer who first achieved fame only a few years out of university.

Certainly this was the case with Martin Amis. And perhaps one of the reasons why he has been given such a recent hard time by the exponents of critical vitriol is because his early career appeared to be so effortlessly charmed.

Anyone with even a passing interest in things literary over the past few decades knows his curriculum vitae: the middle child of one of the key English postwar novelists — Kingsley Amis — who graduated with first-class honours from Oxford and entered the literary fray with *The Rachel Papers*, published when he was only 24. Not only did he win the Somerset Maugham Award for that tyro novel but, within a decade, he established himself as a supreme stylist: a writer whose pyrotechnics and whiplash-like prose were perfectly attuned to the cupidity and mammonism of the 1980s.

Indeed, in novels such as *Money* (1984) and *London Fields* (1989), Amis seemed to be the great *Zeitgeist* surfer; the fiendishly talented bad-boy writer of the moment, in tune with the emptiness lurking behind the material excesses of modern life. So what if — as many noted — there was something caricaturish about his dramatis personae. So what if his hyper-kinetic style seemed more central than narrative drive. Amis was a one-off; an original.

And for those who still dismiss him as a sort of literary Mick Jagger — or still talk about all the tabloid inches spent on his private life and his dental work — it's worth remembering that Amis has never been a writer who has coasted in the imaginative slow lane. Look at *Time's Arrow* — with his daring use of reverse narrative structure in an attempt to confront the central meta-historical event of the past century: the Holocaust. Re-read *Night Train* for its strange gender-bending take on an American policier. Whether you embrace them or not, you come away from these books thinking: this is a writer who takes risks and who doesn't shy away from the big stuff.

Amis's new novel, *House of Meetings*, grapples with another of the past century's principal horror stories — the Soviet gulags — while posing questions about the nature of memory and personal responsibility, and the way we are all enslaved by life's infinite moral complexities.

Narrated by an elderly émigré Russian — currently on a grim cruise "on the Yenisei River, which flows from the foothills of Mongolia to the Arctic Ocean" — the story is, in part, a mosaic-like piecing together of past sorrows, as he reflects on his relationship with his brother and their involvement with the same woman. She was Jewish, living in a postwar Moscow where passers-by shouted endearments like "Dirty kike bedstraw" when they saw her. It was the era of Stalinist oppressive insanity — and, before you could say "show trial", the two brothers found themselves in a labour camp in the Arctic wastelands.

Though only about 200 pages long, *House of Meetings* has the density and texture of a far more hefty work — due, in part, to Amis's meticulous re-imagining of the postwar Soviet nightmare and his detailing of the internecine hierarchy of the labour camps, with its cast of "shiteater"' and "pigs" and "brute"' and "bitches", where conjugal visits are allowed if the spouse is willing to make the journey to this frozen back-of-beyond above the 69th parallel.

But the novel is also a meditation on the nature of man-made horror — not just the slave camps, but also that new global bête noir called terrorism. Reflecting on the Russian Federation's most appalling recent atrocity — the siege, by Chechen extremists, of Middle School Number One in North Ossetia — Amis's narrator notes: "Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy: each of them insisted on a Russian God, a specifically Russian God. The Russian God would not be like the Russian state, but would weep and sing as it scourged."

The novel is brimming with aphorisms, as there is extended talk about the inherently bleak Russian world-view ("To one of Conrad's terse characterizations of Russian life — 'the frequency of the exceptional' — I would like to add another: 'the frequency of the total.' Total states, with your sufferings selected, as if off a menu, by your sworn enemy"). There is also much musing about the nature of totalitarianism ("Something strange was happening in the Soviet Union after the war against fascism: fascism"). And, as this is an Amis novel, there are plenty of clever asides: "In the Gulag, it was not the case that people died like flies. Rather, flies died like people."

As a novelist, Amis has never been emotionally user-friendly, and in *House of Meetings* there is a chilly distance created between the narrator and the horror show he is describing. As such, it's a bit like being guided through a series of museum exhibitions depicting a vortex of hell. Though fascinating, they lack visceral punch. This reservation aside, the novel has a cumulative power and resonates with many reflections about the course of individual destiny in a profoundly cruel universe. And it's a reminder — especially for the *Schadenfreude* brigade — that Amis is always, at the very least, an interesting writer.

Douglas Kennedy's new novel, Temptation, is published by Hutchinson on October 5