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Lessons from the gulag

Toby Lichtig enjoys Martin Amis's memorable novel about Stalin's Soviet Union, *House of Meetings*

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Observer

House of Meetings

by Martin Amis
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Martin Amis's new novel is billed by its narrator as a love story; from the off, we know that it's going to be a twisted one. Immediately, a qualifier is inserted: 'All right. Russian love,' our narrator concedes. Amis has opened with similar promises before, notably in *London Fields*, another 'love story', whose femme fatale, Nicola Six, has something in common with this latest incarnation of Amis's erotic daydreams: the caricature of fantasy.

Zoya is shaped like the Americas (Brazil for a bottom; Panama for a waist) and sports an 'outrageous allocation of physical gifts'. Predictably, she knows exactly what to do with these: 'She was a big woman who weighed about half a kilo in bed.' She is also Jewish and, thus, embattled, enticingly vulnerable.

Zoya forms a point in a 'brutally scalene' love triangle between two brothers in postwar Moscow. One is our hard-nosed chronicler. Now in old age and having defected to the United States, he is writing this testimony as a letter to his stepdaughter while on a final return to his homeland.

The other, Lev, is more gentle, idealistic, uglier. We first meet him on arrival in the gulag, where our narrator is already an old hand. Lev has recently married Zoya, much to the chagrin of his jealous brother. Lev also owes his incarceration to her: he was arrested after being overheard praising her 'Americas'.

Occasional conjugal visits take place. Zoya spends the night with Lev, who emerges a broken man. It is assumed (gleefully) that he has failed to perform, but Lev dismisses this notion and promises to divulge what has happened some day. Part of the novel's thrust is our anticipation of this revelation; but *House of Meetings* is driven by far more.

Amis's prose, though typically exuberant, is more measured than it has been for a while, less full of the shoe-horned jokes. Once we get over our narrator's suspiciously good English and the fact that his voice is essentially that of Amis, it is difficult not to be impressed by this compact tour de force. Despite its early pledge, *House of Meetings* is more than a love story; it is about envy, ethics, chaos, resistance, violence, solipsism and confession.

Not to mention politics. Amis may be indulging his Stalin fixation, but he has produced an insightful depiction of Soviet Russia's Mendel-like logic. The ghosts of its fallout are also plain to see: the modern country is a mess. 'A man in Russia is nine times more likely to die violently than a man in Israel,' our narrator tells us; he is writing in the middle of the 2004 Beslan school hostage crisis.

History, for our narrator, has a lot to answer for. Character, we are told, is not so much destiny as 'demographics' - 'and demographics is a monster'. Having raped his way across Nazi Germany as a soldier ('In the rapist army, everybody raped'), the taint of war is on his lips; when he thrusts them at her, Zoya can taste it. 'Look at your eyes. You're not kind,' she later tells him. The gulag does not exactly soften him, perhaps just as well because Lev is committed to pacifism and needs a violent brother to look out for him.

Amis is excellent on the deprivations of the camp; the 'foetus-kick' of hunger, the boredom, the transformation of priorities. He revels in the nuances and instruments of brutality, the 'warm work with the spanner and the pliers, the handspike and the crowbar, vicings, awlings, lathings, manic jackhammerings, atrocious chisellings'. He is consistently funny, even in his puerility. Fellatio in Stalin's Russia is 'worked on by socioeconomic reality. In the postwar years, there were no non-swallowers ... none'.

Despite the caricatures and the indulgence of ventriloquism, Amis has produced a memorable novel and a memorable protagonist. The fulcrum of the book is the latter's relationship with the quixotic Lev. He tries to persuade Lev that, within the bounds of penal servitude 'What you do doesn't count.' 'Doesn't it? Won't it?' Lev replies. 'You don't see it, do you? It'll count.'

And count it does, personally and politically. 'The conscience,' we are told, 'is a vital organ. And if it goes, you go.' Russia, meanwhile, is dying.

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