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Fiction

Out of the darkness

REVIEWED BY ROBERT MACFARLANE

HOUSE OF MEETINGS
by Martin Amis

Cape £15.99 pp198

Martin Amis's interest in the Soviet Experiment, as it is so chillingly called, approaches obsession. He has engaged with the subject in essays, lectures, debates, polemic — and now, finally, in fiction. It is an obsession that has in the past led him severely astray. His memoir-history *Koba the Dread* (2002) sought to fill what Amis, with excessive certainty, called "the central lacuna of 20th-century thought: the indulgence of communism by intellectuals in the West". Like the fellow-travelling that the book sought to scarify, however, its intentions were palpably good and its outcomes deeply unfortunate. Historical and linguistic inaccuracies, and tonal improprieties, marred *Koba* savagely throughout.

House of Meetings, Amis's new novel, commits none of the crimes of *Koba*. It purports to be a letter written by "an old Russian, coming home" to his half-American daughter. "Home", it turns out, is a gulag in Predposylov in the Russian Arctic, where our narrator was incarcerated as a political prisoner after the war: a place where "man was wolf to man". He is returning to the camp for a final reckoning of some sort.

The letter cuts back and forth between recollections of the gulag years and their aftermath, and reflections on present-day Russia: the narrator is composing his letter in the "real time" unfolding of the Beslan tragedy.

His life has been lived, it emerges, in the terrible service of the state. Conscripted into the Red Army as a teenager, he raped his way to Berlin. After demobbing, he was imprisoned in the gulag for a meaningless thought-crime. Much of the book recounts, movingly, life in the polar hell of Predposylov, and his relationship with his half-brother, Lev, who was also an inmate there. Lev preserves his humanity, the narrator does not: he bullies, injures, and eventually kills in order to survive. Yet it is Lev who emerges from his imprisonment hollowed out and ruined, while the narrator — pragmatic murderer and self-refashioner that he is — seems to adapt successfully to post-gulag and post-glasnost life, eventually emigrating to America as a wealthy man.

The narrator's voice is gruff, eloquent, with the

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measure of stylistic self-indulgence appropriate to a man who knows he is writing his own last story. As such, Amis is able to include some characteristically fine prose flourishes without them vandalising the plausibility of the narrative voice: an old postman who stares at a beautiful woman “with his mouth unevenly agape and one eye shut, as if over a gunsight”, the moist pale hands of an old man clasped into a “vile bivalve”, the “holster-shaped snout” of a dog.

Like Amis, but for clearer reasons, the narrator is fascinated by atrocity. His commute back to the gulag during the Beslan crisis also prompts meditation on the “purely recreational” massacre at Columbine, the Dubrovka cinema siege and the Holocaust. Amis’s novel thus constitutes something of an atrocity exhibition, or at least a grimly mesmerised retrospect on what the Sovietologist and poet Robert Conquest called the last “ravaged century”.

But there is also, it slowly emerges, an individual atrocity buried in the book: a crime committed by the narrator, the gradual revelation and explication of which is part of the letter’s purpose. We come to understand, by its subtle end, that House of Meetings represents both a study in the moral repercussions of brutalisation, and by extension a thought-experiment in the ethics of blame.

The question implicitly asked throughout is: who is to blame for the crime at the book’s dark heart? Who or what — “history”, perhaps, or the state — can usefully be said to have brought it about? No answer is found.

Amis’s novel represents one man’s obsession told as another man’s story. It is the curious emanation of a British intellectual’s desire to have been involved, truly involved, with a history from which he should be thankful to have been excluded. One must consider why Amis chose to imagine an alumnus of the gulag into being, when Herta Müller’s *The Land of Green Plums*, Vasily Grossman’s *Life and Fate*, and Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* exist: books by those who lived under Soviet totalitarianism.

Nevertheless, *House of Meetings* is unmistakably Amis’s best novel since *London Fields* (1989). He has finally abandoned his manic verbal excesses, which reached their pitch of rabidity in *Yellow Dog* (2003). He has written a slender, moving novel, streaked with dark comedy, which investigates how Stalinism exacted a price from its subjects, a price which was “to be paid, not by the spoonful or the shovelful, but by the dayful, the yearful, the lifeful”.

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