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BOOK REVIEW

'House of Meetings' by Martin Amis

Male rage, erotic violence and infidelity in the gulag

By James Marcus

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House of Meetings: A Novel

Martin Amis

Alfred A. Knopf: 248 pp., \$23

Every novelist nods. For Martin Amis, who's been able to write better than almost all of his peers since he was in bell-bottoms, this dreaded moment came in 2003 with "Yellow Dog." The book did garner some grudgingly positive notices. More prominent, though, was the slew of brickbats taking the author to task not so much for his prose — which still contained its share of glinting felicities — as for his clunky exploration of male rage and erotic violence. Nobody argued that these were inappropriate topics for a novel. What bothered many readers was the suggestion that every man was a rapist *manqué*, just waiting for a blow to the head to release his inner brute.

How did Amis respond? He's done what any stubborn, self-respecting novelist would do: He's written another novel about male rage and erotic violence. And this time, he's serious. "House of Meetings" is darker than its predecessor. Instead of ascribing his hero's poisonous impulses to a cerebral head trauma, the author has now latched onto a bigger, badder and more diffuse culprit. Yes, folks, we're talking about the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Here is the devil that made the narrator do some very nasty things.

Nasty, of course, is a relative term. Yet the narrator, an aged and ailing Soviet defector to the United States, has racked up an impressively vile résumé. As he makes a last trip home during the final months of 2004, he lays it all out in a valedictory letter to his American daughter: serial rape, murder, petty graft and treason. Most of it he attributes to "historical forces, along with everything else. History did it."

Give the guy some credit. He does make an eloquent case for the soul-destroying properties of the Russian national character, with its "freedom from all responsibility and scruple, the energetic championship of views and beliefs that are not only irreconcilable but also mutually exclusive, the weakness for a humor of squalor and cynicism, the tendency to speak most passionately when being most insincere, and the thirst for abstract argument (abstract to the point of pretension) at unlikely moments — say, in the middle of a prison stampede, at the climax of a cholera riot, or in the most sepulchral phase of a terror-famine."

You might argue that this is the insanity defense writ large. It neatly omits the element of volition — the temptation, elsewhere noted by the narrator, to deliberately embrace "the chemical heat of mass emotion, and the infuriant of power." Let's grant that this sociopath wrestles more persuasively with his conscience than does the protagonist of "Yellow Dog." He also has a lot more to answer for.

But hold on: Let's roll back the tape for a moment. So far, "House of Meetings" may sound like a classic novel of ideas, in which marionettes do the bidding of those notoriously Russian abstractions.

It's not. Amis clearly recognized that after his brilliant riffing on the industrial-strength madness of the Soviet Union in the memoir "Koba the Dread" (2002), he couldn't simply repeat himself. So he upped the ante by setting most of his new novel in the nihilistic quintessence, the *anus mundi* of the Stalinist universe: the gulag. Then he added a love triangle. Not only do the narrator and his half-brother Lev scuffle for survival in a prison camp that might charitably be described as hell plus snow; they're also locked in a tacit struggle for the sensual and free-spirited Zoya — to whom Lev happens to be married.

For the narrator, this tortured *ménage à trois* is the heart of the matter. His crimes against humanity are small potatoes compared to his betrayal of his brother. And as is generally the case with a love triangle, everybody gets hurt. The distribution of pain, however, is not what you would call equilateral.

"I sometimes like to think that the triangle is isosceles: it certainly comes to a very sharp point," the narrator writes to his daughter. "Let's be honest, though, and admit that the triangle remains brutally scalene. I trust, my dear, that you have a dictionary nearby? You never needed much encouragement in your respect for dictionaries. Scalene, from the Greek, *skalenos*: unequal."

As Nabokov once wrote, you can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style. How the narrator came by his sounds a little contrived: Like so much else in his life, he owes it to Stalin. Or more accurately, to Stalin's death in 1953 — an event that would have convulsed the nation like the death of God, if the dictator hadn't already killed him off. Without its greatest booster, the gulag began to collapse. Three years later, the narrator was free. He gravitated to Moscow and to a British-born, poetry-spouting mistress, who satisfied his hunger for the springier cadences of English verse. What she couldn't satisfy, of course, was his appetite for his sister-in-law. Hence, the ugly engine at the heart of this elegant, self-flagellating novel.

Or so the author would have it. Clearly, he wished the little story and the big story — the little tyranny and the big tyranny — to dovetail. Instead, they keep falling apart. What really works in "House of Meetings" is not the narrator's doomed attraction to Zoya, who resembles any number of Amis' mouth-watering female creations, but his agonizing relationship with Russia itself.

The author has done his homework, quarrying the devilish details from such scholarly productions as Anne Applebaum's "Gulag" and Orlando Figes' "Natasha's Dance." At first, you anticipate some formidable, foolish ventriloquism. Instead, Amis really does carve out his own little piece of the northern Eurasian plain, "the land of compromised clerics and scowling boyars, of narks and xenophobes and sweat-soaked secret policemen" — then he parachutes the reader into its midst as if the book were some kind of survivalist exercise.

There's no escape. A kind of dread coats the entire landscape, like a layer of aerosolized blood. It's not just the innocents who get sucked into the vortex of crime and punishment, not just the dogs and cats, but even the inanimate objects, so that the rusting keel of an "upended ferryboat glares out across the water with personalized fury, as if oxidation were a crime it would lay at your door." Such wit! Such projective power! Amis has called literature one long "war against cliché" — a war against slack language and calcified thoughts — and on a sentence-by-sentence basis, this stylistic warrior can hardly be bettered.

For this, much can be forgiven. So, let's ignore the pulpy romance, whose emotional clout is in any case outweighed by the fraternal relationship. Let's forget the Nabokovian teasing and feinting. Let's pretend we never encountered the thinly imagined daughter with her crudely symbolic name (Venus), and the even more vaporous American wife, with her crudely symbolic name (Phoenix). These are tiny sins against literature. (For the wife's name alone, Amis deserves a long moment in the dunk tank.)

I don't believe I'm carping. After all, there are no resurrections in "House of Meetings." No absolution. And certainly no closure, which the narrator defines as "a greasy little word which, moreover, describes a nonexistent condition. The truth, Venus, is that nobody ever gets over anything." Truer words were never spoken. And for a novelist, they might as well be the First Commandment.

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