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Siberian Fields

By [LIESL SCHILLINGER](#)

THE cold war may not be quite over, after all. For more than a decade, writers of thrillers and spy novels — and not a few conservative strategists — have been bedeviled by the transformation of the evocative evil empire into an oligarchic quasi-capitalist power. The world has provided other villains, but the peculiar charm of the pallid, citrus-starved Slavic heavy persists. And a spate of recent deaths of Russian whistle-blowers — most recently the murder of the journalist Anna Politkovskaya in Moscow and the polonium 210 poisoning of the former spy [Alexander Litvinenko](#) in London — shows that the Soviet back story isn't entirely buried. Like the Stalinesque corpse that keeps popping up in Tengiz Abuladze's film "Repentance" (from the now-quiet Glasnost era), dark secrets have an afterlife. And when you dig them up, you sometimes find evil interred with the bones.

The narrator and protagonist (by no stretch could you call him the hero) of Martin Amis's new novel, "House of Meetings," is an archetype of the eternal Soviet nightmare, a decorated war veteran who "raped my way across what would soon be East Germany" in the first three months of 1945. Now an octogenarian American exile, returning to Russia as a tourist, the unnamed man is recording his complicated history, dominated by the dozen years he spent as a political prisoner in a Soviet gulag, in a letter to his mythically named stepdaughter, Venus, whom he acquired peacefully and late in life, in the United States. This confession is no apology: Venus's father, tiptoeing toward death, wishes posthumously to acquaint her with his grim past of rapine and ultraviolence, and to explain, in the discordant therapy-speak he affects to court her Yank earnestness, "why I could never 'open up,' why I found it so hard to 'vent' and 'decompress.'"

"Venus, I ask you to read on," he writes, "merely noting, for now, the formation of a certain kind of masculine nature." He was in no way exceptional, he explains. According to eyewitness accounts, the Red Army "was an army of rapists," and "Russian soldiers were raping every German woman from 8 to 80." He doesn't blame himself. "History did it," he says flatly. Still, he offers as extenuation the Arendtian truism that "the peer group can make people do anything." Nonetheless, he concedes that his conscience is clouded by the question of what damage his wartime career may have worked on his soul. "We know quite a lot about the consequences of rape — for the raped. Understandably little sleep has been lost over the consequences of rape for the rapist," he muses. "The peculiar resonance of his postcoital tristesse, for example."

Whether or not a daughter would want to find a record of paternal postcoital tristesse — "a shapeless little heap of degradation and horror" muscled into manuscript form — among his bequests is a question he leaves open. "It would suit me very well," he tells her, "if, at this point, I could easternize your Western eyes, your Western heart." And that is the mission this novel undertakes. Through his singularly unlikable narrator, Amis attempts to impart to readers (as he has done before) his revulsion at the depredations of Soviet

HOUSE OF MEETINGS

By Martin Amis.

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Communism and, latterly, post-Soviet history (the gassing of hostages, along with terrorists, in a Moscow theater in 2002; the horrific North Ossetia school siege in 2004), along with his bleak idea of the Russian God, which “would weep and sing as it scourged.”

To make an invidious comparison, in [Vladimir Nabokov](#)'s short story “Russian Spoken Here,” a similar subject is treated with greater resolve in eight pages, when expatriate Russians in Berlin recognize a Communist malefactor and imprison him for life (or until “the Bolshevik bubble burst,” whichever ends first) in the bathroom of a tobacco shop. Of course, poetic justice makes for a more satisfying bookend than a clean getaway, but Amis's abused abuser has been robbed of any belief in fairness by his prolonged servitude, having absorbed the brutalizing lesson that “despite your obvious innocence of any crime, the exaction of the penalty is not inadvertent.”

Only in the world of Martin Amis would a “heroic rapist” tainted by the “ferrous hormone of war” be granted the delusive consolation of “obvious innocence.” Even the camp veteran Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was not convinced that such consolation applied. In “The Gulag Archipelago,” he wrote: “If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”

Writers seeking to capture the nature of Russia in one take have often favored grand oppositional schemes: “Crime and Punishment”; “War and Peace”; or, in the case of [Woody Allen](#), “Love and Death.” It goes without saying that there's more punishment than crime in Dostoyevsky's novel; and a guilty secret of Russian bookworms is that many of them skim or skip the war parts of Tolstoy's classic, focusing on the romantic sections devoted to peace. But “House of Meetings” is primarily, obsessively, occupied with the gulag and lacks a counterweight, at the expense of the usual teeter-tottering Amis brio. A woman named Zoya masquerades as a love interest. Luscious, lurching, swivel-hipped and Jewish, she is the wife of the narrator's brother, Lev.

The narrator, his emotions stunted by his history of sexual assault, harbors for Zoya a feeling he mistakes for love. He suffers with cold reptilian misery when Zoya visits the camp and has a night with Lev in the gulag's trysting cabin, known as the House of Meetings. In a rare instance of offhand irony and compression, Amis's narrator explains, “The love story is triangular in shape, and the triangle is not equilateral.” But the reader easily sees that the writer's love for his brother's bride is little more than lust and envy.

Apart from one or two splashes of heat — a camp inmate named Tanya stirs an “evanescent urge” in the protagonist to “eat her shirt buttons, which were made from pellets of chewed bread”; a cruise ship on the Yenisei is bedecked with “brothel red velvets” — this is a fire at which nobody could warm himself. The narrative's true romantic lead is Amis's fact-fed fantasy of slave-camp life, which, as intricately and faithfully as he presents it — plausibly animated in all its cruelty, pain, ordure and boredom — will never be Natasha Rostova in a ball gown. Thus, on the whole, as the narrator of “Love and Death” remarked, “Things were a little tense.”

Amis trod the ground of the gulag only four years ago in “Koba the Dread: Laughter and the 20 Million,” his impassioned book of essays about the harms of Lenin, [Stalin](#) and the Soviet system, and the blindness of Western intellectuals who refused (and, in some cases, still refuse) to condemn them sufficiently. But in

2003, the journalist and historian Anne Applebaum published “Gulag: A History,” a new volume about the Stalin-era camps, informed by archives that were opened after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In his acknowledgments to “House of Meetings,” he declares her book “magisterial” and “indispensable,” and also praises other recent works, like Orlando Figes’s “Natasha’s Dance: A Cultural History of Russia” and Simon Sebag Montefiore’s “Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar.” Evidently, the wealth of new scholarship spurred him to create a novel, so as to make the suffering of the gulag come alive in a more manageable size than Solzhenitsyn’s doorstep, and with the immediacy and vividness that fiction can supply. Fortified by an arsenal of new details, he has revisited his magnificent obsession with systematized inhumanity, coloring in areas of despair that previously had languished in murky outline, eye-catching to scholars but perhaps not clear enough to others.

The practice of using a work of historical research as a springboard to fiction is one Amis used to better effect in his 1991 tour-de-force, “Time’s Arrow.” There Robert Jay Lifton’s nonfiction book “The Nazi Doctors” inspired Amis to send a German physician backward through time, reliving wartime in rewind — the “triumph” of Auschwitz, in which humans were reconstituted whole from ovens, women emerged from medical experimentation labs “looking 20 years younger,” and Jews were dispersed from Poland’s ghettos, ferried “back to their villages” and furnished at police stations with “budgies and puppies etc.”

In 1999, in his autobiography, “Experience,” Amis declared that part of the job of the novelist is writing “the fiction that other people have in them,” though he quibbled that “what everyone has in them, these days, is not a novel but a memoir.” In “House of Meetings,” he creates the memoir that his protagonist, “a vile-tempered and foul-mouthed old man,” has in him. Let’s just say he’s no [Frank McCourt](#).

So why let him unleash his comfortless memories? Solzhenitsyn anticipated such a question in the preface to “The Gulag Archipelago.” Citing an old Russian saying, he wrote that people bent on reconciliation might argue: “‘No, don’t! Don’t dig up the past! Dwell on the past and you’ll lose an eye.’ But the proverb goes on to say: ‘Forget the past and you’ll lose both eyes.’” Either way, it’s not much of a choice.

Liesl Schillinger is a regular contributor to the Book Review.

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