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Martin Amis expanded his study of Stalin to book length after 11 September seemed to make fiction pointless.

A little right belief

Aidan Smith

A small girl with striking straw-blond hair bounds barefoot across the stripped-wood floor and into the arms of the man sitting in the drawing-room window. "Daddy," she says, tugging at his dirty-white tennis shirt, "I saw you in the papers today."

Today and yesterday and for some time now, Martin Amis has been all over the papers. He's written a book. Not his usual thing. *Koba The Dread* is a polemic against communism. It's also a horror-story about Stalin's Great Terror and its 20 million victims. Laughs are pretty thin on the ground. And through its grim 306 pages he wonders what his father and his best friend ever saw in the old USSR. Predictably, to him, he's taken a terrible kicking for it.

Kingsley Amis turned from commie to curmudgeonly right-winger long before his death but the friend, Christopher Hitchens, a one-time Trotskyite, has been despatching fizzing volleys of dissent and disappointment. Back and forth across the net, the gilded chums from Oxford have been at it all summer long, though not actually on the court, for "Mart" is keen to stress that "Hitch" doesn't play tennis. But what a stonking literary spat it's been.

Hitchens has been appalled to find himself the "anti-hero" of the book, particularly after cautioning Amis against it ("Don't do it Mart - they can't write about your teeth anymore, but they love a bit of fratricide in the morning"). In a 6000-word review published in America, and assorted papers here, he's put his side of a story dating back to their student days when they shared a "sock" (a typical piece of Amis-ese for a manky flat, but one originally coined by Hitchens).

"He calls me a Holocaust denier, which more than slightly pisses me off," says Hitchens, who, at 18, joined the Trotskyite International Socialists, "not least because it was the least Stalinist organisation on the planet". He dubs the book "sentimental and trivial" but says he forgives Amis it, "only because, until two years ago, he wouldn't have known the difference between Bakunin and Bukharin". It has always been a sorrow to him, he adds, that his "dearest friend" has never really been interested in politics.

In the quiet of the afternoon in Primrose Hill, 52-year-old Amis is up for a couple of sets and, before his match, discussion on an exotic array of subjects - Pilates, pub games, porn, poets and

why they don't drive, and his pen (just how mighty is it?). But he's not ducking the issue. Rolling a ciggie, he says criticism of Koba The Dread has left him "reeling". Maybe this is what it feels like to be beaten up by Keith Talent and his mates from the Black Cross in London Fields - Norvis, Dean, Thelonus, Curtly, Truth, Shakespeare and F***er.

"I always anticipate criticism but I'm always surprised by it. This time I'm naively surprised. I mean, fiction and lit crit are rugged areas but politics - jeez! It makes me realise how unpolitical I am. I stand by the book, though I wish I'd stressed more that Christopher was not a Stalinist. But the central fascination in all of this has to do with political belief. My father had it and Christopher sort of had it - not in the USSR, but that the revolution might eventually have gone in the right direction. I never believed that. It's against human nature, a denial of human nature."

'I wish I'd made things clearer about Chris , but I'm not ashamed of the word naive. I think novelists have to be naive'

So why did Amis write the book? One critic senses an anger in him (Anger about his father's death? Or about being a fiftysomething novelist who's run out of things to say?). Another claims that for some time he's been rooting around for "the big one", a whopping subject worthy of his prose.

This is how it came about: on 31 December, 1999, along with Tony Blair and the Queen, he attended the celebrations at the Millennium Dome. "I had hoped that at midnight I would get some chiliastic frisson," he writes. It didn't happen. But a couple of days later, inspired by the book he was reading, Robert Conquest's *Reflections On A Ravaged Century*, he started to write about the hundred-years just ended, the worst on record, and what he considered to be its "chief lacuna" - the indulgence of communism by western intellectuals.

In the book, Amis does not lay claim to any new research. He read "yards" about the Soviet experiment, including *The Great Terror*, also by Conquest - Kingsley's best friend - and a monument to the millions who vanished in the Stalinist purges.

To begin with, Koba - Stalin's childhood nickname - was supposed to be a long essay. He returned to his next novel (about the porn industry) prior to 11 September, then quickly put it down again. He turned to journalism and wrote majestically about the Twin Towers attacks ("I have never seen a generically familiar object so transformed by effect ... the second plane meant the end of everything. For us it was the worldflash of a coming future.") Then, in a follow-up piece, he described how the atrocities seemed to render fiction pointless and self-indulgent ("The so-called work-in-progress had been reduced, overnight, to a blue streak of pitiable babble"). Thus, he pressed on with the big one.

But Amis is still in his post-Experience experience. His moving family memoir, maybe his masterpiece, gained this writer of brilliant but sometimes brutal fiction entry into "the great democracy of feeling". So there's more feeling in Koba: globs of personal anecdote and poignant reminisces about his father and his younger sister Sally, who died two years ago, aged just 46.

In the family snaps in *Experience*, Sally, as a young girl, and her brother both had the same straw hair as Amis's daughter, now playing noisily in another part of the house. "Sally rendered me a profound service: she awakened my protective instincts," he writes. So is there guilt at her death?

"Oh yes. A lot." She had struggled with alcoholism. "As my mother put it: 'What a sad little life.' When Sally died, we felt terrible. Then you think: 'Well, it's lifting.' But then came this second wave which was even more crushing. You think you kind of understand your own death when you're an

adolescent. In my view you don't properly understand it until you're 45. Then, the realisation you haven't aged you, plasters it all over your face. And, since Sally's death, I've come to realise that it's the deaths of others that kill you in the end."

Guilt, then, but is there also anger behind the book, as that critic suggested, following his father's death? He fumbles with another roll-up. "I miss Dad in so many ways." In *Koba*, Amis writes two letters, one to "Comrade Hitchens" and another to Kingsley's ghost, where he describes how Sally's daughter turned up at her funeral. Father and son hadn't seen Catherine since she was put up for adoption. "I know you would have taken to her very much," he writes. "She's one of the last 30 or 40 people in the English-speaking world who doesn't say 'between you and I.' "

Does Amis miss him as a critic - what would he have made of *Koba*? "Oh, I think he would have found it interesting. We had terrible arguments about politics. When he got frustrated with me, he'd say: 'You're getting the wrong end of the stick, through the eye of a needle in a haystack!' But that applied to him more in the last year of his life - he went nuts.

"I've just been a humble Labour voter all my life. And I've never been political, Christopher always was. I've never had a zealous period when I believed in something and I kind of regret that. I was only ever interested in literature and thought that made me seem limp-wristed, a dilettante. Mind you, Christopher and I did share an enthusiasm for sex. I remember him saying that it was all we ever talked about. When we worked at the *New Statesman* together, it was tradition for a politician to come to lunch on Thursdays. Once he told me: 'You've got to make this one - we've invited God.' He meant Tony Benn. I said I was seeing a girl and he just looked at me with such utter contempt ... "

He laughs. He's said his bit about politics. And now that he's starting to lose members of his family, he doesn't want to misplace any more friends. He and Julian Barnes don't speak any more, but "Mart" and "Hitch" will sort things out. "We already have. I wish I'd made things clearer about Christopher, but I'm not ashamed of the word naive. I think novelists have to be naive. And I've certainly been demonstrably naive at my surprise that this book could evoke such passions."

But, no, they won't play tennis. "I saw Christopher on a court once. It just looked wrong. Same when he's behind the wheel of a car. There are a large number of poets who don't drive - James [Fenton, his other great friend from uni days] has only just passed his test. They lack that bit in the brain, that grid. I mean, you wouldn't want to be driven across America by John Berryman or Robert Lowell, would you?"

Amis has been stretching his mind, obviously, but also the rest of him. He does Pilates. Good for you, I say, so do I. "But I hate it," he mutters. Typically he just doesn't believe in it. There seem to be regional variations in the teaching methods. He's never heard of The Plank - extreme buttock-clenching in a press-up position. "I do The Little Rainbow." Afterwards, he retokes down the pub. "There's this fiendish knowledge game - you conquer countries by answering questions. The feeling of power you get when this big empire is throbbing away ... " (He used to be a Space Invaders addict).

Next, it's back to the fiction. He says he doesn't think writers change all that much. "They carry on writing about the same things, a little bit wiser, a little bit more fucked-up." But, after all the politics, he must feel on surer ground with porn. Then, for this fan, a wonderful thing happens: the great literary stylist, always so good with character names, asks me to help him choose a porn-star moniker. "Curt Smoker or Curt Drinker? They're both in the Manhattan phone book." Curt Smoker. "OK."

Feeling on a roll, I go for it. I ask him about the big one. Nothing to do with books, this, but the current issue of GQ claims he's enormously well-hung. He chortles, like you imagine his father used to. "Merely average. Before I started writing about Dad, I thought every son had a good relationship with his old man. Turns out not to be the case. I couldn't wish anything more for myself than that.

"But what magazine is that in? I must show it to the wife ... "

Koba The Dread is published by Jonathan Cape, price £16.99

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