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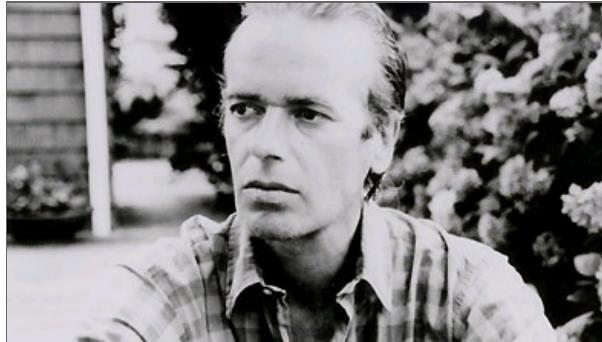
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**Brother grim****Martin Amis takes a fictional glance at Soviet Russia**By Andre Mayer  
January 31, 2007

Author Martin Amis. (Arranda Edwards/Getty Images)

For much of his career, novelist Martin Amis has made satiric sport of man's vices, be it lust (*The Rachel Papers*), gluttony (*Money*), vanity (*London Fields*) or envy (*The Information*). But lately, the British writer seems less prone to literary caricatures. His chiselled sentences have become increasingly heavy-hearted — a significant development for a writer whom critics have accused of lacking compassion.

In 2002, Amis released *Koba the Dread*, an "amateur history" (his words) of the 20 million Russians who died in the grip of Soviet dictator Josef Stalin. A typically fierce bit of writing, the book scolded Western lefties for excusing the brutality of **Stalinism**. This past September, Amis wrote a 10,000-word lament in London's Guardian newspaper about a more recent scourge. Entitled "**The age of horrorism**," the piece mourned the failings of fiction in an era where religiously motivated men and women turn their bodies into bombs. In the essay, Amis talked about abandoning a satirical novella he'd been writing about a disgraced fanatic. What made him stop? In the face of Islamic extremism, Amis owned up, "irony, even militant irony (which is what satire is), merely shrivels and dies." Coming from a master satirist, those are grave words indeed.

"I felt it was possible to be outside politics, be outside history, to a point," says the 58-year-old writer during a recent phone interview from his home in London. "But after September 11, I realized I was in it. I think I wrote *Koba* to give myself a political education, because I was going to need it — I could feel it coming on. Getting older, you do feel what a delicate organism the human body is. You're more appalled, nauseated, by this age of body parts and beheadings."

*Koba the Dread* was a bracing reminder of a political system that tried to rid the Soviet Union of dissidents, intellectuals, artists and Jews through confinement or murder. *House of Meetings*, Amis's stunning new novel, offers a first-person account of a Soviet gulag.

Set in the present, *House of Meetings* takes the form of many classic Russian novels: first-person memoir. "Dear Venus," the book begins, "if what they say is true, and my country is dying, then I think I may be able to tell them why." The unnamed narrator is an elderly Jew writing from a Russian steamer as he revisits the site of the Siberian gulag where he and his brother Lev were interned in the late '40s and early '50s; "Venus" is his stepdaughter. In that time, the brothers were subjected to isolation, filth, starvation, spine-snapping labour and enervating boredom, as well as the threat of violence from fellow inmates. In Amis's book, the gulag has an implicit hierarchy: at the top are the "pigs" (guards), followed by "urkas" (friendly guards), "snakes" (informers), "leeches" (middle-class fraudsters), "fascists" (dissidents), "locusts" (juveniles) and, finally, "shit-eaters" (the physically feeble). Amis ploughed through

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## ANDRE MAYER

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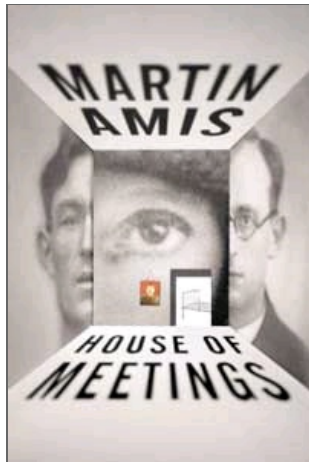


many volumes of [Soviet history](#) to get the period detail right. Getting into the head of a gulag inmate was considerably harder.

"It was a very difficult task to feel like a [gulag] victim, and very difficult to do when you're basking in the sunshine in Uruguay with your beautiful wife and beautiful little girls and life is without any stress whatever," Amis notes wryly. (He divides his time between London and the Uruguayan coastal town of José Ignacio.) Amis says he had bouts of "terrible uncertainty, feelings of fraudulence and that I wasn't speaking from the heart." It went on for eight months, before "it all swung around and I began to feel OK about [the book] — and then, much later on, *good* about it. What it was, I think, was a search for legitimacy."

Amis claims *House of Meetings* was the most difficult novel to write since *The Information* (1995), which he composed while in the throes of divorce. Amis is also coming off his least-loved novel, *Yellow Dog*. A chaotic tale about, among other things, a doomed airliner, the future queen of England, a porn maven and a man who suffers a personality-altering blow to the head, *Yellow Dog* earned Amis some of the most [caustic](#) reviews of his career.

"I used to be much more resilient," says Amis. "Also, I didn't start getting bad reviews until recently. And then it became this weird phenomenon that surfaced in the London Review of Books, where a young man who knows my stuff better than I know it writes [an endless piece](#) that the new book [*Yellow Dog*] is unpublishably bad. The only thing that lingers with you about that kind of piece, of which I've had many, is that they clearly spent dozens of hours reading you. And yet, how does it express itself? In a kind of competitive, jeering way, rather than any expression of gratitude. And I wonder, why do I attract so many of these little shits?"



(RandomHouse Canada)

Save for one or two [snarky put-downs](#), *House of Meetings* has been met with well-earned praise. The book's title refers to the place in the concentration camps set up for conjugal visits. With no other hope to sustain them, the men pined for those rare rendezvous with their wives or girlfriends. Sadly, the trysts could never match the inmates' feverish *anticipation* of them — just one more defeat in a life of enforced misery.

While Lev is a poetry-writing pacifist, his brother is a classic Amis thug: cynical, amoral, Darwinian — with a cutting insight always at the ready. As a soldier in the Red Army, he committed rape; after Stalin's death, he defected to the U.S. and became an arms dealer. During his interment, he orchestrated vicious beatings of other inmates. The reason the house of meetings figures so prominently in his narrative is because it was a focal point for a corrosive love triangle between the narrator, Lev and Lev's wife, Zoya.

Amis says it was always his intention "to turn everyone into bastards. Even Lev, who is a much more pure figure than his brother, is turned into a cynic and a *schadenfreude* merchant, embittered." It's not surprising that Amis would take this tack; his [oeuvre](#) features few, if *any*, sympathetic characters. But in *House of Meetings*, moral blackness seems apt. "The narrator reflects that what all Russians seem to be doing all the time is fighting off insanity and bitterness. That's what they were left with," says Amis, "That was the gulag's whole purpose: to degrade beyond recovery."

Over the course of his sordid account, the narrator also reflects on the horrors plaguing *modern* Russia — particularly the "[dirty war](#)" between Moscow and [Chechnya](#), which led to the [2002 Moscow theatre massacre](#) and the [2004 school hostage-taking in Beslan](#). At one juncture, he bemoans the fact that unlike Germany, Russia continues to be defined by its ugly past. Amis has a simple explanation. "Germany has made itself sort of a cathedral of transparency, and done the flagellation," he says. "Russia hasn't done the work."

While Russian history continues to preoccupy him, Amis's next novel will be a more playful work. It's called *The Pregnant Widow* — Amis describes it as a "high-brow celebrity novel" with many "autobiographical" elements. Given his doubts of late about the power of parody, it's reassuring to hear that he hasn't given up on

satire. "[The next book] will get me into a lot of trouble," Amis dryly admits, "but it's what I have to do."

House of Meetings is published by Random House and is in stores now

On Friday, Feb. 2, Martin Amis is interviewed on The Arts Tonight, CBC Radio One, 10:05 p.m., 10:35 p.m. in Nfld. Part two of the interview airs on Writers & Company on Sunday, Feb. 4, 3:05 p.m. ET, 3:35 p.m. in Nfld, 5:05 p.m. CT/MT/PT. (It will be repeated Friday Feb. 9 on The Arts Tonight, same times as above.)

Andre Mayer writes about the arts for CBC.ca.

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