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BOOKS OF THE TIMES

Love, Bludgeoned and Bent by the Camps

By [MICHIKO KAKUTANI](#)

[Martin Amis](#)'s new novel, "House of Meetings," tackles the same sobering material his 2002 nonfiction book "[Koba the Dread](#)" did: [Stalin](#)'s slave labor camps and the atrocities committed by the government during the failed "Soviet experiment." The novel is everything that misguided earlier book was not. Whereas "Koba" weirdly mixed chilling, secondhand historical accounts of Stalin's crimes with self-indulgent asides about Mr.

Amis's upper-middle-class life in England, "House of Meetings" is a powerful, unrelenting and deeply affecting performance: a bullet train of a novel that barrels deep into the heart of darkness that was the Soviet gulag and takes the reader along on an unnerving journey into one of history's most harrowing chapters.

After his embarrassing 2003 novel, "Yellow Dog" — a book that read like a parody of a Martin Amis novel, featuring gratuitous wordplay and a willfully perverse fascination with the seamy side of modern life — the author has produced what is arguably his most powerful book yet: a novel that subjugates his penchant for postmodern pyrotechnics to the demands of the story at hand, a novel that takes all the knowledge he accumulated in the course of researching "Koba" and transforms it, imaginatively, into the deeply moving story of two brothers who were interned at a slave labor camp in the arctic wastes of the Soviet Union. It is a story about fraternal love and resentment, but more important, it is a story about the emotional consequences of survival, about the connection between public and private betrayals and the human costs of a totalitarian state's policies of internment.

The narrator of "House of Meetings" is a "vile-tempered and foul-mouthed old man" who seems compelled, like the Ancient Mariner, to recount the story of his life and crimes as a kind of penance. His remarks are addressed to his American stepdaughter, Venus, in the form of a lengthy e-mail letter, as he makes a final journey back to Russia, back to the camp where he and his brother Lev were interned for the better part of a decade.

His monologue will become a meditation not only on his own experiences, but also on the fate of Russia and the profound differences between the East and the West, between those fully initiated into the dark side of history and those still innocent of those horrors. The narrator warns Venus that there is no such thing as "closure" for people like him and his brother, that their experience in the camps has taught him two truths: one, that "nobody ever gets over anything," and two, that "whatever doesn't kill you doesn't make you stronger. It makes you weaker, and kills you later on."

This narrator, we learn, was a wounded and decorated World War II veteran, who was subsequently sent to the Norlag labor camp by his own government. He is a hardened brute of a man: he raped his way "across

HOUSE OF MEETINGS

By Martin Amis

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what would soon be East Germany,” and in the gulag, he methodically kills three informers.

His brother Lev is a gentler soul, a poet, who believes in the doctrine of pacifism and who married the great love of his life, Zoya, shortly before he was arrested. The beautiful Zoya also happens to be the woman the narrator has worshiped for years, and the resulting love triangle will have momentous consequences for all concerned. After he is released from the camp in the mid-1950s, the narrator goes on to become a wealthy arms dealer and entrepreneur who will use his money and connections to move to the United States; his brother, meanwhile, will return to Zoya a changed man, bereft of both his idealism and his vocation as a poet.

Mr. Amis depicts these characters' lives with an economy of language and detail, choosing, after the debacle of the overwritten “Yellow Dog,” to rely on an almost fablelike minimalism to evoke the horrors of Norlag. His narrator starkly conjures up the deadly class structure there, including “the pigs — the janitoriat of administrators and guards”; the urkas, “socially friendly elements” who did no work; “the snakes,” otherwise known as informants; and the “politicals,” or so-called fascists, like himself and his brother, who are regarded as “the enemies of the people.”

He then proceeds to describe the daily calendar of violence at the camp: one urka sprinting flat-out after another urka “with a bloody mattock in his hand, a pig methodically clubbing a fascist to the ground, a workshy snake slicing off the remaining fingers of his left hand.”

“Here,” the narrator tells his brother, “man is wolf to man.”

Here, terror is the first pillar of the system, and boredom is the second: “boredom is no longer the absence of emotion; it is itself an emotion, and a violent one.” The third pillar is perpetual hunger: “Young men, after their arrival,” the narrator recalls, “would talk about sex and even sports for a couple weeks, then about sex and food, then about food and sex, then about food.”

“There were fluctuations,” he says, “but in general the death rate was determined by the availability of food. Massively and shamefully, the camp system was a phenomenon of food.

“In ‘hungry ’33’ one out of seven died, in 1943 one out of five, in 1942 one out of four.”

Though many of the most compelling parts of this novel consist of the narrator's straightforward descriptions of life at Norlag, Mr. Amis has given his story an overarching architecture, built around the brothers' competition for Zoya's affections, and the mysterious events that transpired between Lev and Zoya one evening at the “house of meetings,” the little shed at the camp designated for conjugal meetings between prisoners and their spouses. Their reunion is described in a letter Lev has left for his brother to read after his death — a letter that supposedly explains the tragic arc that both their lives will subsequently take.

This is the one bit of literary contrivance in this novel, and it's not only a tad forced, but it also turns out to be thoroughly unnecessary, given the emotionally detailed portraits Mr. Amis has already drawn of his heroes and his devastating account of their travails in the arctic wastes of the gulag.

