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The House of Meetings by Martin Amis

Bloodlust lays down like... wine?

By **Tim Martin**

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"I have an informal method of evaluating tomes of this kind (729pp)," pronounces Martin Amis of *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*, one of the many books acknowledged in the endpapers of his new novella *House of Meetings*. "I look to see how many notes I have made at the back of them..." Reading that, I felt the sudden brief thrill of identification that one feels when coming across something very minor held in common with a figure one admires - the me-too! of learning that your favourite artist used to drink in your local, say, or that Descartes too really preferred to get up at noon. Then, flipping expectantly to the end of my review copy, I felt the elation evaporate. Littered across the blank pages were not the concise formulations that Amis lists in support of his own method ("39 - serf theatres and orchestras ... 552 - Nabokov Sr's murder") but something that more resembled the code-clusters of a military transmission. "51. VAPHR. 52. VAPHR," it read. "57. VAPHR. 72. VAPAR. 79. VAPHR. 113. VAPAR. 117. VAPHR."

See if you can work it out. On page 51, the VAPHR runs as follows. "I think of those more or less ridiculous words, Greek-derived, for irrational fears... anthophobia (fear of flowers), pogonophobia (beards), deipnophobia (dinner parties)... But there's one for rust (iophobia); and I think I've got it. I've got iophobia." On page 72, the VAPAR ends like this: "Don't you find, my dear, when you step out into the rain, that you always have a moment's grace before feeling the first few dots on your hair? Cold isn't like that. Cold is cold, obviously, and wants all your heat. It is on you. It grips and frisks you for all your heat." And here is the VAPHR from page 117: "What I'm doing, now, is dead reckoning. I am making a reckoning with the dead."

Very Amis Phrases; Very Amis Paragraphs. That's what they are. If you could blind-taste literature then those little coda sentences, with their little flourishes of rhetorical reformulation, would stand out like a glass of Coca-Cola slipped in among the Chardonnays; undeniably, distinctively identifiable, vintage Martin. It's this voice, this particular and inimitable way of putting things, that has been the real protagonist of each of Martin Amis's 12 works of fiction: plots and parts may change, but the VAPHR inevitably supervenes. You judge a new novel not on how well Amis manages to impersonate his characters, but on how plausibly he has them impersonate him.

So: *House of Meetings* is a short novel about the Russian gulag. Some months ago, the publishers abandoned their plan to issue it in the same volume as a pair of short stories about Saddam Hussein's doubles and the 9/11 hijackers - conceived, perhaps, to demonstrate that after the quasi-comic farrago of *Yellow Dog* Amis had set his sights on the most undeniably serious of serious concerns - and so it comes off more as a tactical strike on humour than an all-out thermonuclear assault. This year's inhabitant of the Amis voice is an 86-year-old veteran of the Soviet slave camps, who returns in late 2004 to the site of his and his brother's incarceration in the Arctic Circle. On the news, Chechnyan terrorists have taken hostages in a school in Beslan, and the Russian military is preparing to lay siege. In a book-length letter to his American stepdaughter, the unnamed narrator tells the story of his and his brother's love for the same woman, of the murders, rapes and rebellions that stalked their Arctic prison, and of what happened in the house reserved for conjugal visits by the wives of Soviet prisoners - the *House of Meetings*.

Readers of *Koba the Dread*, Amis's running-commentary-cum-digest of the literature on Stalin, will recognise the tone and much of the content here: the ghastly brutality, the incessant psychic and physical mutilation, the death of love, the death of reason - and, new in this

edition, the death of Russia, painted as a form of willed national suicide. Fair enough. You wouldn't expect a comedy. But there's something essentially unserious, something almost glib, about Amis's constant propensity for aphorism, about the glittering delight in words that overlays the text, about the relentless editorialising that each character is now compelled to undergo. You can almost see Martin, stooped over his laptop, becalmed, trying to think of another smart epithet for another horrible thing. And the result, more often than not, comes to read like a wicked parody of the Amis style. Sometimes, indeed, it appears that the author has wholly abdicated in favour of Craig Brown. "Oppression lays down bloodlust. It lays it down like a wine," writes Amis, and you imagine the cogwheels whirring... or a... or a... check what else you lay down... Or there's this: "Air, even the air, with its smells and ashtrays (everyone still smokes, patients, cleaners, caterers, doctors, nurses), fierce medications, and terminal tuberculosis, tastes nice."

(Wait for it.)

"Air tastes nice."

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