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House of Meetings

Martin Amis *Jonathan Cape, 198pp,*
£15.99

ISBN 0224076094

Reviewed by Stephanie Merritt
Monday 2nd October 2006

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In his non-fiction study of Stalin's Russia, *Koba the Dread* (2002), Martin Amis asked about life in the Gulag: "What made the difference between succumbing and surviving?" His answer - "In a place dedicated to death, what you needed in yourself was force of life" - could be the tag-line for a redemptive Holocaust movie, but did little to offer a clear definition of this "force". *House of Meetings*, Amis's tenth novel, gives it a human face and a dark moral complexity: in the camps, "force of life" might mean a readiness to embrace violence in order to survive. The book also asks a further question: what will have been done to the humanity of those who survive? One caste in the camps, the *urkas*, tattoo their mantra on their bodies: "You may live, but you won't love."

Yet *House of Meetings* is "a story about love". It takes the form of a confessional memoir sent by an anonymous Russian narrator, now in his "high eighties", to his African-American step-daughter, Venus. He is journeying towards assisted suicide after a final cruise to Norlag, the labour camp where he and his half-brother, Lev, were interned for almost a decade from the mid-1940s - "The Gulag tour, so the purser tells me, never quite caught on". As he updates his memoir from points around the archipelago, he watches the school siege of Beslan unfold on hotel televisions and muses on the endogenous brutality of the Russian character.

He and Lev were students and therefore belonged to a category of prisoners known as "politicals" or "fascists"; though both were arrested by quota, the pretext was their association with Zoya, a Jewish student whose beauty bewitches both brothers. The narrator - tall, handsome and a decorated war hero - pursues her without success; Lev - hunched, ugly and afflicted with a stammer - marries her. Both find their will to survive in the camp - that elusive "force of life" - nourished by the idea of her.

Zoya herself is only truly present in her influence over the relationship between the brothers. She is woman reduced to pure sexual allure to the point of becoming cartoonish, a sort of Russian-Jewish Jessica Rabbit (the brothers' nickname for her is "The Americas"). At the camp, Zoya remains a fantasy for the brothers, one that strengthens their bond, until the introduction of the eponymous House of Meetings, a meagre hut intended for conjugal visits, where the narrator is confronted with the reality

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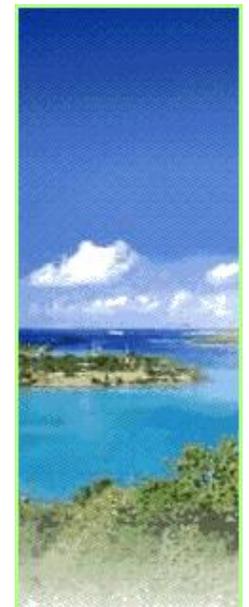
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of his brother's marriage and his own failure.

It is in the depiction of daily life at the camp - the internecine struggles, the shifting alliances and compromises, the casual abandonment of humanity merely to stay alive - that the novel really gains in sinew and the power to move. But on reaching the list of acknowledgements, a curious thought occurs: we already have Gulag memoirs, and Amis credits several of them. After the eyewitness accounts of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Janusz Bardach (who has a cameo role in this novel), what can a British novelist whose childhood barely overlaps with these events hope to add to the genre? It may be a means of viewing Stalin's regime in the context of modern terror, but it is also hard to escape the sense that this is a self-imposed challenge. Perhaps it is the same kind of hubris that prompts a writer, amid the flurry of 9/11 narratives, to create a story in which he puts himself inside the mind of Mohammed Atta.

"I am not a character in a novel," states the narrator at the beginning of *House of Meetings*, *pace* Conrad. "Like many millions of others, I and my brother are characters in a work of social history from below, in the age of the titanic nonentities." Yet, although the substance of his story is borrowed from those memoirists who had the misfortune not to be fictional, he is a character in a novel, and he is fortunate to have Amis's inimitable humour and effortlessly brilliant sentences at his disposal.

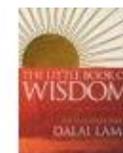
For admirers who feared, after his last novel, *Yellow Dog*, that Amis's non-fiction endeavours had leached the force of life from his fiction, *House of Meetings* should be a reassurance; taken alone, it is a compelling work of fiction in which learning and imagination are beautifully counterpoised. Placed alongside Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, however, it can't help but look like an audacious fake.

Stephanie Merritt is the author of "Real" (Faber & Faber)

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