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Review

## Executioner Songs

By [John Banville](#)

*House of Meetings*

by Martin Amis

Knopf, 246 pp., \$23.00

Here is Joseph de Maistre, jurist, philosopher, and grand reactionary, in exile in St. Petersburg in the first part of the nineteenth century, contemplating the figure of the Executioner, with whom so many of his fellow French aristocrats had suffered an all too intimate encounter a couple of decades previously:

So who is this inexplicable being who, when there are so many pleasant, lucrative, honest, and even honourable professions in which he could exercise his strength or dexterity to choose among, has chosen that of torturing and putting to death his own kind? Are this head and this heart made like our own? Do they contain anything that is peculiar and alien to our nature? For myself, I have no doubt about this. In outward appearance he is made like us; he is born like us. But he is an extraordinary being, and for him to be brought into existence as a member of the human family a particular decree was required, a FIAT of creative power.<sup>[1]</sup>

And here, quoted by Martin Amis in his book *Koba the Dread* (2002), is the biographer Dmitri Volkogonov writing of a particular executioner:

No other man in the world has ever accomplished so fantastic a success as he: to exterminate millions of his own countrymen and receive in exchange the whole country's blind adulation.<sup>[2]</sup>

It might be said that Martin Amis and Stalin's Russia were two things that were waiting to happen to each other. What other novelist of his generation would have risked treating the enormities visited upon the twentieth century with such vigor, such moral outrage, such foolhardy daring? In *Time's Arrow* (1991) he found a novel means of tackling that most perilous—for the novelist—topic, the Holocaust, by having his protagonist live his life backward, from all-American citizen in the present day to newborn German baby in the young century, with visits in between to the death camps, where, it is discovered, he played a modest but not insignificant role.

*Time's Arrow* was a risk, but it succeeded. In interviews at the time, however, Amis insisted that it was one of a kind, and that he was not a political but, essentially, a comic novelist. The book, as he wrote in an afterword, was inspired, if one may speak of inspiration when the subject was so dire, by his friend Robert Jay Lifton's *The Nazi Doctors*, without which, Amis wrote, "my novel would not and could not

have been written."<sup>[3]</sup> And sure enough, his next novel, *The Information* (1995), was a return to the form of his great, sprawling comedies *Money* (1984) and *London Fields* (1989). Yet the world was too much with him for a full withdrawal from the arena of public history.

Through his journalism especially he could venture at will into that arena, bringing back hair-raising reports of what it was like when the lions were let loose—all that blood, all those screams—but also essaying wonderfully comic turns, such as his non-encounter with Madonna, who refused to be interviewed by him because he was "too famous." "Madonna (I wanted to tell her), don't say another word. I completely understand."<sup>[4]</sup> Amis's observing eye is constantly abulge with amazement at the wickedness and folly of his fellow human beings. He looks upon the world with incredulous surprise, like a man stumbling befuddled out of a dim restaurant into the acid sunlight and traffic roar of a summer afternoon in a strange city. For Amis, something always seems just to have happened, something not quite identifiable yet very bad. Or if it has not already happened, it is surely about to.

**W**hen he was born, in 1949, his father Kingsley was among England's most highly regarded novelists, one of the original "angry young men" of the postwar period, whose comic novel *Lucky Jim*, published in 1953, was an immediate and huge success, and was one of the works—John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956) was another—that contributed to the making of a new kind of culture in Britain. Amis père and his literary confrères, whom Somerset Maugham famously dismissed as "scum,"<sup>[5]</sup> were irreverent, priapic, anti-Establishment, and, above all, funny.

Though the same adjectives might be applied to Martin Amis, he at first displayed scant interest in his father's world, yet he admired many among his friends, such as the historian Robert Conquest and the poet Philip Larkin. He was, by his own admission, something of a feral youngster. The photograph on the cover of the English edition of his memoir, *Experience*, of a ten-year-old, tow-headed Martin striking a pugnacious pose with a cigarette in his mouth, was an augury of what was to come. It was Kingsley's second wife, the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard—they were married in 1965 after Kingsley's painful breakup with Martin's mother, Hilly—who took young Martin in hand and set about rectifying his educational shortcomings and generally smartening him up, giving him a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. "That was when he started to read properly...."

Young Amis was a quick learner, and his stepmother's lessons were not wasted. He abandoned the louche, flares-and-flower-prints teenage life he had been living, chasing girls and doing drink and drugs, and went off to Oxford, where he secured a First in English. Back in London, he became the wunderkind of the literary world there, first with a job on the *Times Literary Supplement* and then, aged twenty-seven, as literary editor of the left-wing and at that time highly influential *New Statesman*, where he met, among others, Christopher Hitchens, who has remained a lifelong friend and political sparring partner. Later, Amis became a feature writer on the *London Observer*, and a famously well-paid reviewer with the *Sunday Times*. His first novel, *The Rachel Papers* (1973), is one of the most impressive literary debuts since Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall*.

The three novels that followed—*Dead Babies* (1975), *Success* (1977), and *Other People: A Mystery Story* (1981)—were clever, funny, and baleful, and consolidated his reputation as a novelist in the waspish and calculatedly outrageous tradition of

Waugh, Angus Wilson, and, indeed, Kingsley Amis. However, with *Money: A Suicide Note*, published in 1984, Amis found a new fictional voice, a hectic, high-octane, mid-Atlantic babble the haste and noise of which did not conceal the high artistry by which it was forged.

**A**mis had long been an admirer of Nabokov, but at the start of the 1980s he became a friend of Saul Bellow, and it is Bellow's influence that is most directly discernible in what one thinks of as the trilogy of novels *Money*, *London Fields*, and *The Information*. Bellow has spoken of how in his early books he was trying to be an American Flaubert, but that when he came to write *The Adventures of Augie March* he decided to let rip artistically, and never looked back. The famous declamatory opening of *Augie March*—"I am an American, Chicago born"—has a counterpart in the jazzy, nerve-jangling first sentence of *Money*: "As my cab pulled off FDR Drive, somewhere in the early Hundreds, a low-slung Tomahawk full of black guys came sharking out of lane and sloped in fast right across our bows." Readers at the time had to do a double-take: This is an *English* writer?

Amis's decision to do his own kind of letting rip was a large one, and must have taken a deal of courage. It won him a new freedom, and a reputation as England's most ambitious, most exciting, and, at times, most controversial novelist. A number of younger writers saw in him an example of how to escape the crabbed confines of English letters, and sought to write with a similar freedom, irreverence, and energy. *Money* did for the writers of the 1980s what *Lucky Jim* had done for their counterparts a generation earlier.

How have they held up, these novels which we may regard as the work of Amis's early middle period? The comic energy never flags, the metaphors dazzle, and whether he is describing a dog defecating or the play of light on a stretch of the Thames he achieves an intensity of poetic specificity on a level with the work of such masters of style as Nabokov and Updike. In the matter of character and plot, however, there is overall a peculiar haziness, a lack of or withholding of focus, which can leave the reader feeling baffled and slightly cheated. Even the main figures in the novels, John Self in *Money*—"I'm called John Self. But then who isn't?"—Guy Clinch and the talentless Keith Talent in *London Fields*, and the rival writers Richard Tull and Gwyn Barry in *The Information*, seem not so much portraits of plausible human beings as marionettes gesticulating wildly in the glare of Amis's pyrotechnical prose. The women characters in particular can seem thin to the point of two-dimensionality, as in the case of Nicola Six, the dark lady of *London Fields*, who is striking yet insubstantial, like one of those phantasmal Morgan Le Fays we encounter in dreams. Amis could legitimately claim, in the postmodernist way, that aspects of the novel such as character and plot are far down on his list of priorities, and that his artistic concerns lie elsewhere. And it may be that his disdain for the verisimilitude that is a staple of novels by, say, Kingsley Amis, for example, is an ideological artistic position taken against an outworn convention.

**H**owever, in his new novel, *House of Meetings*, the first since the widely criticized *Yellow Dog* (2003), Amis has subjected himself to a decided cooling-off. *House of Meetings* is short, the prose is controlled, the humor sparse, while the characters strike us as real, or at least possible, people. It is a remarkable achievement, a version of the great Russian novel done in miniature, with echoes throughout of its mighty predecessors. There is the Dostoevskyan struggle between ill-matched brothers carried on against a vast and unforgiving Tolstoyan landscape; there is a star-crossed Zhivagoan love that endures a lifetime; there are immense

journeys, epic sufferings, agonized renunciations, unbearable losses; there is even a revelatory letter, kept for twenty years and only read on the brink of death, as well as a homely sister, called Kitty, whose task it is to fill in this or that necessary detail of the narrative.

The book tells the story of two half-brothers, both of whom are in love with the same woman, Zoya, and both of whom spend terrible years together in one of the labor camps of the Gulag. The unnamed narrator, a decorated hero of the war against Hitler, who defected to America in the 1980s and made his fortune through the invention of an item of prosthetic gadgetry, has returned to Russia to revisit the place in the far north of Siberia where he and his brother, Lev, were held as slave workers from the late 1940s until well into the 1950s, after Stalin had died. Neither of them had committed any crime. The narrator was arrested, like many Russian veterans who fought in Germany, on suspicion of having been exposed to fascist and Western influences while outside the USSR. Lev was convicted for having been heard "praising America" in his college cafeteria line (in fact, he had been praising "The America's," his code name for Zoya).

As he travels on a rickety cruise-ship up the Yenisei River from Krasnoyarsk and across the Arctic Circle to Predposylov, a fictional city based on Norilsk,<sup>[6]</sup> the narrator broods upon the past, and in particular on his hopeless love for Zoya, the Jewish beauty, now long dead, who spurned him and married his brother. It is the beginning of September 2004, and news is coming in of the Beslan atrocity, in which Chechen terrorists took over a school in North Ossetia and resisted a three-day siege which ended with the deaths of 344 civilians, 186 of them children. For the narrator, then, present and past horrors play against each other in frightful counterpoint. He broods on the plight of the children in the school:

They are parched, starved, stifled, filthy, terrified—but there is more. Outside, the putrefying bodies of the people killed on the first day are being eaten by dogs. And if the captives can smell it, if the captives can hear it, the sounds of the carrion dogs of North Ossetia eating their fathers, then all five senses are attended to, and the Russian totality is emplaced. Nothing for it now. Their situation cannot be worsened. Only death can worsen it.

He has already quoted "an old Kremlin hand"—in fact it was Viktor Chernomyrdin, former Russian prime minister and now a billionaire oligarch—saying "We wanted the best, but it turned out as always." Chernomyrdin was referring to a disastrous episode in the Kremlin's attempts at economic reform that he oversaw in the early 1990s, and his statement has become a popular sardonic proverb among Russians. "They didn't want the best, or so every Russian believes," Amis's narrator bitterly insists of the Russian government, and also, by implication, of the Russian people in general. "They wanted what they got. They wanted the worst." And surely Beslan was, if not the worst, then very nearly: "It is not given to many—the chance to shoot children in the back as they swerve in their underwear past rotting corpses."

**H**ouse of Meetings, though fiction, is a companion volume to *Koba the Dread*, and that book could profitably be read in tandem with this later one, for Stalin is the reigning fiend here, too. *Koba* is Amis's furious, Swiftian account of the terror campaigns in the USSR from the 1920s through the 1950s, and, specifically, a denunciation of Stalin, the "Koba" of the title. The book when it was published provoked some mutterings regarding the weakness of its scholarship—even though

Amis had made no claim to being a scholar—and what was seen as his naiveté in taking on such a subject in such a manner. Yet the book is a powerful and not untimely reminder of what Lenin and Stalin and their henchmen between them did to their enormous, vulnerable, and tragic country. Taking much of its inspiration as well as its tone of moral outrage from the work of Robert Conquest,<sup>[7]</sup> it is in large part a challenge and a rebuke to liberal and left-wing Westerners, including, indeed, the young Kingsley Amis, who Amis fils believes failed for too many years to condemn the horrors of successive Soviet regimes and refused to place Stalin in that same circle of Hell already occupied by Hitler.

It is one of the characteristics of a novelist that nothing is wasted on him, nor does he let anything go to waste. Amis tells us that he read a shelfful of books in preparation for the writing of *Koba the Dread*; many of the same books inform *House of Meetings*. Indeed, the title itself is taken from the heading of a subchapter in Anne Applebaum's definitive *Gulag: A History*, in which she writes of the visits to prisoners that relatives would sometimes be allowed to pay. Wives would travel thousands of miles, by train, by hitching rides, and finally on foot, to spend a day with their husbands at a designated "House of Meetings" on the edge of the prison camp. One survivor described such a house, with its cotton curtains, its window boxes of flowers, its two neatly made beds:

There was even a lampshade over the electric-light bulb. What more could a prisoner, who had lived for years on a common bunk in a dirty barrack, desire of this model petit bourgeois dwelling? Our dreams of life at liberty were based on that room.<sup>[8]</sup>

The same witness, the Polish novelist Gustav Herling, noted that such meetings often went disastrously wrong, with the men despairing of their sexual competence after years of privation (Amis's narrator recalls that his relationship with his "ladyfriend" at the camp, which held male and female prisoners, was, like many camp romances, platonic: "The only impulse resembling desire that Tanya awoke in me was an evanescent urge to eat her shirt buttons, which were made from pellets of chewed bread"). The wives, for their part, were exhausted from weeks of travel and, in some cases, distracted and guilt-ridden by the fact that what they had come for was not a romantic tryst, but to ask for a divorce in order to break the damaging link to a political prisoner, which made it hard to find work and get housing back home. "I came to the conclusion," Herling wrote, "that if hope can often be the only meaning left in life, then its realization may sometimes be an unbearable torment." Possibly it was this sentence that gave Martin Amis the inspiration for a major strand in the intricate tapestry that is *House of Meetings*, for it is after a visit from his wife Zoya to the prison camp that the narrator's brother loses his faith in life and life's possibilities.

The story proceeds on three distinct time levels—the narrator's present, and the past before the war and after the war—woven together with such novelistic skill that despite the brevity of the novel the reader has the illusion of a nineteenth-century expansiveness. There is a complex interweaving too in the provenance of the brothers:

We were half-brothers with different surnames, and we were radically unlike. To be brief. My father, Valeri, was a Cossack (duly deCossackized in 1920, when I was one). Lev's father, Dmitri, was a well-to-do peasant, or kulak (duly de-kulakized in 1932, when Lev was three). The father's genes predominated: I was six foot two, with thick black hair and orderly features, whereas Lev...

Lev is a stammering runt, short, ugly, his "features thrown together inattentively, as if in the dark," with a nose that was "a mere protuberance" —"And when you looked at him side-on, you thought, Is that his chin or his Adam's apple?" Yet it is Lev, the hapless *intelligent*, whom the beautiful Zoya chose over his tall, dark, and handsome half-brother. Zoya, cheerfully promiscuous, was one of pre-war Moscow's great beauties, "tall and ample and also wasp-waisted." She and the narrator attended the city's Institute for Systems together; at the time he was twenty-five and she nineteen, "And Lev, for Christ's sake, was still at school." So it is a severe shock when in the winter of 1948 Lev, not yet twenty, arrives to join his brother in the prison camp and informs him that he and Zoya are married.

**T**he heart of the book is the relationship between the brothers, more significant, in the end, than that between the brothers and Zoya. Lev is a pacifist, who as a new arrival has the strength to fight his way to a better position in the barracks. Instead, he contents himself with sleeping on the floor, among the filth and the germs, to the disgust of his brother, for whom violence is "currency, like tobacco, like bread." Lev becomes, therefore, a standing moral rebuke to the narrator, who in the recent world war, as a Red Army soldier, had, by his own admission, raped his way across eastern Germany, a fact of personal history which at the close of the book will have a violent and tragic repetition.

The book's portrayal of life in the camp, if life it can be called, is so horrifying that at times the reader will suspect that Amis is indulging in a characteristic giganticism, yet when we check with the historians we find that he is being never less than factual. There is, for instance, the larger-than-life monster Uglik, one of the "janitoriat" (the camp administrators) who makes a brief but horribly memorable appearance at the prison where he has been sent, "as demotion and punishment for a string of disgraces at various camps in South Central Asia." Allowed the freedom of the place, he spends a day diverting himself by beating, tormenting, and humiliating inmates—Lev is deafened for life in one ear by a slap from Uglik's leather-gloved hand—then gets hopelessly drunk and passes out in the open in forty degrees below freezing, which results in him losing both his hands to frostbite, and later dying of dementia. Turning to another one of Amis's acknowledged source books, Andrew Meier's *Black Earth: A Journey Through Russia after the Fall*, we discover that Uglik had an original in real life, a certain Lieutenant Colonel Barybin, whose drinking resulted in his being sent to the camp at Norilsk, where he, too, lost his hands, saying afterward "that he did not realize it got so cold in Norilsk."<sup>[9]</sup>

Amis's description of another set of monsters, the *urkas* or criminal class of prisoners, makes them seem like fantastical creatures out of *Star Wars*, yet they were all too real. The narrator describes the camp hierarchy this way:

At the top were the *pigs*—the janitoriat of administrators and guards. Next came the *urkas*: designated as "socially friendly elements," they had the status of trustees who, moreover, did no work. Beneath the *urkas* were the *snakes*—the informers, the one-in-tens—and beneath the snakes were the *leeches*, bourgeois fraudsters (counterfeiters and embezzlers and the like). Close to the bottom of the pyramid came the *fascists*, the counters, the fifty-eighters, the enemies of the people, the politicals. Then you got the *locusts*, the juveniles, the little calibans: by-blows of revolution, displacement, and terror, they were the feral orphans of the Soviet experiment. Without their nonsensical laws and protocols, the *urkas* would have been just like the locusts, only bigger.

The locusts had no norms at all... Finally, right down there in the dust were the *shiteaters*, the goners, the wicks; they couldn't work anymore, and they could no longer bear the pains of hunger, so they feebly brawled over the slops and the garbage. Like my brother, I was a "socially hostile element," a political, a fascist. Needless to say, I was not a fascist. I was a Communist. And a Communist I remained until the early afternoon of August 1, 1956. There were also animals, real animals, in our animal farm. Dogs.

The origins of the *urkas*, Anne Applebaum tells us, "lay deep in the criminal underground of tsarist Russia, in the thieves' and beggars' guilds which controlled petty crime in that era." Ms. Applebaum quotes Antoni Ekart, a Polish prisoner, who was horrified by the

complete lack of inhibition on the part of the *urki*, who would openly carry out all natural functions, including onanism. This gave them a striking resemblance to monkeys, with whom they seemed to have much more in common than with men.

In *House of Meetings* the *urkas* are engaged in a merciless "war between the brutes and the bitches," as the narrator dubs it, a struggle between those *urkas* who wanted to join the camp staff and those who wanted to go on being *urkas*:

This was the year when the tutelary powers lost their hold on the monopoly of violence. It was a time of spasm savagery, with brute going at bitch and bitch going at brute. The factions had, at their disposal, a toolshop each, and this set the tone of their encounters: warm work with the spanner and the pliers, the handspike and the crowbar, vicings, awlings, lathings, manic jackhammerings, atrocious chiselings. Even as Lev jogged across the yard to the infirmary, there came through the mist the ear-hurting screams from the entrance to the toy factory, where two brutes (we later learned) were being castrated by a gang of bitches armed with whipsaws, in retaliation for a blinding earlier that day.

Amis then chooses another animal image, more horrifying and more telling than that of monkeys. He reminds his stepdaughter, Venus, to whom the book is addressed, of how disappointed she was when he took her to the reptile house in the zoo, because "the lizards never moved":

Imagine that hibernatory quiet, that noisome stasis. Then comes a whiplash, a convulsion of fantastic instantaneity; and after half a second one of the crocodiles is over in the corner, rigid and half-dead with shock, and missing its upper jaw. *That* was the war between the brutes and the bitches.

Despite his refusal to fight, Lev survives the years of back-breaking labor, the hunger and the cold, and on July 31, 1956—the novel is very specific on dates, which contributes to its aura of authenticity—Zoya comes to visit Lev at the House of Meetings. The jealous narrator, undergoing his own convulsions of torment, comforts himself with the thought that the encounter between the beautiful wife and her half-starved and sickly husband will surely be, sexually at least, a disaster. And a disaster it is, though not of the kind the jealous one had hoped for. He presses Lev to tell him how it went between him and Zoya—jealousy and masochism being close bedfellows—but Lev demurs, saying that one day he will reveal all, but not now. And he is as good as his promise: years later, after Lev's death, the narrator takes

delivery of his effects, among which is the letter—the *fateful* letter, one almost writes, in the best nineteenth-century mode—which he will carry with him for two decades, and which he will only open on the eve of his own death.

**T**he novel itself is framed as a letter, or better a testament, addressed by the narrator to his American stepdaughter. In the presentation of Venus and her now-dead mother, Phoenix, Amis falls back into that narrational haziness mentioned above. We intuit a complex, loving but difficult triangular relationship here just as fraught in its way as that between the narrator and Lev and Zoya, yet for some reason this part of the story has been left, limply curling and underexposed, on the cutting-room floor. Phoenix and her daughter seem to be black, but we surmise this on the thinnest of hints. What the narrator's American life was like, even in general, we are not to know. Is this intentional? Does Amis wish us to understand that nothing that came afterward could compare in vividness with the years that the narrator spent first in the camps and then in post-Stalin Russia, before his defection, when he reencountered Zoya, divorced now from Lev but still in love with him? Certainly the memory of those tragic years is suffused with passion and pain such that anything that came after probably could not begin to compare—the scene in which the narrator begs the now middle-aged Zoya to defect with him to America is reminiscent, in its pathos, pain, and delicacy, of Humbert Humbert's last encounter with his lost Lolita:

I said I was getting out: America. Where I would be rich and free. I said I had thought about her a thousand times a day for thirty-six years. Here and now, I said, she delighted all my senses.

So the second question is—will you come with me?

There it was again: the sweet smell. But now all the windows were closed. And at that moment, as the blood rose through my throat, both my ears gulped shut, and when she spoke it was like listening long-distance, with pause, hum, echo.

"America? No, I'm touched, but no. And if you want me to just kiss goodbye to what I have here and put myself back at risk, at my age, you're wrong.... America. It's months since I've been out in the street. It's months since I've been *downstairs*."

Still, the missing American years rankle with the reader.

This is a small complaint, if it even is a complaint. *House of Meetings* is a rich mixture, all the richer for being so determinedly compressed. In fewer than 250 taut but wonderfully allusive, powerful pages Amis has painted an impressively broad canvas, and achieved a telling depth of perspective. The first-person voice here possesses an authority that is new in Amis's work. It is as if in all of his books he has been preparing for this one. In his depiction of a nation stumbling, terrified and terrifying, through rivers of its own, self-spilt blood, he delivers a judgment upon a time—our time—the spectacle of which, if it had been but glimpsed by the great figures of the Enlightenment on whose reasonings and hopes the modern world is founded, would have struck them silent with horror. Stalin and Stalin's Russia have provided Martin Amis with a subject worthy of his vision of a world which, as Joseph de Maistre has it, is "nothing but an immense altar on which every living thing must be immolated without end, without restraint, without respite, until the consummation of the world, until the extinction of evil, until the death of death,"<sup>[10]</sup> and in which, in the cruelest of Wildean ironies, the victims of tyranny survive to become tyrants in

their turn, destroying even those whom they love most dearly. It is a bleak vision, assuredly, yet as always in the case of a true work of art, our encounter with Amis's dystopia is ultimately invigorating.

## Notes

[1] Joseph de Maistre, *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, translated by Richard A. Lebrun (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), p. 19.

[2] Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million* (Talk Miramax, 2002), p. 214.

[3] Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (Basic Books, 1986); cited by Amis in *Time's Arrow*, p. 175.

[4] Martin Amis, *Visiting Mrs. Nabokov and Other Excursions* (Harmony, 1993), p. 255.

[5] In a Books of the Year feature in the London *Sunday Times* on December 25, 1955, Maugham picked *Lucky Jim*, describing it as "a remarkable novel" of "ominous significance." He went on to characterize the new class of grant-aided university students, the "white-collar proletariat," with which the novel is concerned: "Charity, kindness, generosity, are qualities which they hold in contempt. They are scum." Quoted in Zachary Leader, *The Life of Kingsley Amis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006), pp. 356–357. Ironically, both Kingsley and Martin Amis won the Somerset Maugham Award for fiction, twenty years apart.

[6] One assumes this to be the case—the atlas shows no Predposylov. However, it is worth noting that there is a character of that name in *The Eternal Husband*, a novella by Dostoevsky which shares many thematic elements with *House of Meetings*.

[7] When asked to suggest a new title for a revised, post-glasnost edition of his book *The Great Terror*, Conquest wrote to his publisher, "How about *I Told You So, You Fucking Fools*?" Quoted in *Koba the Dread*, p. 10.

[8] Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (Doubleday, 2003), p. 254.

[9] Andrew Meier, *Black Earth: A Journey Through Russia After the Fall* (Norton, 2003), p. 223. In light of the recent disgraceful if minor media frenzy over ridiculous charges of plagiarism leveled against Ian McEwan for his novel *Atonement*, it is worth noting the use that Amis has made in *House of Meetings* of the work of historians, memoirists, and travel writers. The section on a river voyage from Krasnoyarsk to Norilsk in Meier's book—which Amis acknowledges—provided some key material, from the description of conditions on board the steamer in which Meier sailed up the Yenisei to the blood-red pools of iron oxide on the roads outside Norilsk. Barybin, the model for Uglik, occupies only five lines in *Black Earth*, but look what Amis makes of those lines; thus does art distill truth out of mere facts.

[10] De Maistre, *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 217.

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