

House of Meetings by Martin Amis (Jonathan Cape)

17 December 2006

After the near-universal execration to which Amis's last novel, *Yellow Dog*, was subjected, *House of Meetings* represents a return to form and to something like critical favour.

House of Meetings at first sight could not be more different from its predecessor. Whereas the former was an aggressively modern work, bristling with the obscenities of the 21st century, *House of Meetings* takes a long backward look at the horrors of the 20th century. Its protagonist and narrator is an aged Russian ex-soldier; a decorated war hero, he fell from grace after the war along with hundreds of thousands of his compatriots and was sent to one of Stalin's slave camps or gulags above the arctic circle. There, by chance, he was joined by his younger brother Lev. Released after Stalin's death, he became a prosperous black marketeer and, later, respectable entrepreneur.

The story is told as the man returns in old age, on a bleak, underpopulated tourist cruise, to the site of the gulag. It takes the form of a letter to his step-daughter, a young African-America called Venus, at once a confession of the many atrocities he committed and a confrontation of the realities of 20th century Europe with what he calls her "ideology", the comfortable pieties of political correctness in contemporary Chicago.

He insists that his story is a love story: "All right, Russian love. But still love." The love in question is in the rivalry between him and his brother for the beautiful Zoya, a Jewish girl of considerable charms and few inhibitions. As glamorous and handsome war hero, the narrator should have no trouble in eclipsing his dwarfish, almost comically ugly brother; and yet, sensing that the narrator is "not kind", she prefers Lev, and marries him. The two brothers are opposed also in other ways: the narrator enters fully into the spirit of dog eats dog prevailing in the camp; Lev is a pacifist. The narrator, justifying after the event his career in the "rapist army" where "everybody raped", says "the peer group can make people do anything, and do it day in and day out": "My dealings with women," he confesses, "were ruthless and shameless and faithless and solipsistic to the point of malevolence."

Lev, on the other hand, "always stood back from the general opinion, the general mood"; he is determined to survive in his own way, that is, without resorting to the group ethic. There is something curiously irresolute about Amis's presentation of the narrator's bond with his brother: is it, as he often assures us, proof of his irredeemable rapacity, or does it represent his one claim to being fully human? If there is a positive in the novel, it is the love between the brothers; the narrator several times saves his brother's life, and yet Amis wants us to believe that at some level he wants Lev dead, in order to have Zoya for himself.

One might argue that it is of the nature of such relationships to defy analysis, but in this instance Amis tantalises us with the prospect of an unread letter from Lev that, we are led to believe, will clarify all. When, at the end of the novel, the letter is opened ... well, suffice it to say it does not clarify all.

The problem may be that Amis is trying to write both a love story and a history of an era: "I and my brother are characters in a work of social history from below," the narrator says. Amis's point is presumably that in a totalising situation like Russia in the 20th

century, the most private emotions are functions of cataclysmic social forces: “destiny is demographics,” he says elsewhere, “and demographics is a monster.”

This is a not unfamiliar point. It is not one, though, that readily lends itself to the form of the novel, with its privileging of individual experience over demographics, and Amis’s belief in his characters is not strong enough to counter this bias: too often they seem like puppets of his design rather than victims of destiny.

The pleasures of this novel are thus not in its over-all design but in the detail, the finely crafted sentences, the merciless observations: regarding the clasped hands of a despicable old collaborator, the narrator records “an abstract pity for the mote of dust that might be caught there, in the vile bivalve of his clasp.” It’s an unforgettable image, the vile bivalve, but can we believe in pity, even abstract pity, for a mote of dust?

In the end, too much of the novel is like this: the brilliance of the writing blinds us to its contrivedness, its lack of emotional substance. Given the hugeness of Amis’s theme, this is all the more surprising: there would seem to such immense human questions ready-made in the historical data. But just as *Zoya* is little more than a blow-up doll of the imagination, so the meticulously recorded hardships of the gulag come to seem like scenes from the film of *Dr Zhivago*: beautifully assembled two-dimensional set-pieces. I said at the outset that *House of Meetings* represents Amis’s return to form, and would persist in that judgement in spite of some severe misgivings about its human content. Amis remains a master of disenchantment: it is belief in the preceding enchantment that he lacks.