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Q&A with Martin Amis

By LEV GROSSMAN

Monday, Feb. 05, 2007



Author Martin Amis

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Martin Amis is, and has been for several decades now, one of the world's greatest living novelists, and the fact that he attracts some of the world's worst reviews only makes him more interesting. A relentlessly intelligent, funny, and kind writer, he's endlessly interested in stupid, humorless, cruel people, and in his new book *House of Meetings* (Knopf; 256 pages) he turns for a fresh supply of them to Stalin-era Russia. Ranging back and forth from frozen Arctic prison camps to the unseemly capitalist free-for-all of the post-Soviet era, *House of Meetings* is two love stories — one of romantic love, and one of the love between brothers — that are woven together, then crushed and deformed by the state-sponsored terror of the mid-century Soviet regime.

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The story is told by a survivor of the camps, who's trying to explain what happened to his stepdaughter, to somehow convey the damage he sustained in terms that a child of the prosperous American future can understand. (I'm doubly well-disposed toward *House of Meetings* because the hero — the narrator's saintly brother — is named Lev, an unusual choice which I accept as an homage a moi.) I reached Amis by phone in Philadelphia, where his book tour has taken him. We chatted about *House of Meetings*, the ego of the novelist, the boredom of good characters, and why the English hate writers.

TIME: Glad you could spare a moment.

Amis: Nice to talk to someone named after the hero of my book.

It was a little unsettling. You don't see a lot of Levs these days.

No, you don't come cross many of them.

Was that a reference to [Lev Nikolaevich] Tolstoy?

I suppose so, yes.

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I'm curious — how did it work? Here you've just finished up *Koba the Dread* [a non-fiction work about the horrors of the Stalin era], and — what? You weren't done with Russia?

What often happens is that you look into something as an amateur historian, or a journalist, and a couple of years later you find it's trickled down into the bit the novels come from. The unconscious. A different ventricle of the heart. Generically fiction is a more intimate form, so you're going to get — perhaps you hope to get — closer to the essence of it, the human essence. Because history is from above, and fiction's from below. It's closer in, more immediate.

You must have had to figure out a new way to come at the same material.

I had a terrible time writing it, between you and me. The big breakthrough came with the idea of addressing the whole thing to his stepdaughter. Who, by the way, is meant to be black, although nobody's sort of picked up on that. In the paperback I'm going to spell it out. She was in the first draft, but only in one scene, just a tiny thing from her childhood. And then I realized, if he addressed the whole thing to her, made her the central, the only remaining human being he still loved, then it gives it all kinds of improved focus. I kept on saying, why is he telling us this? It also lodges it in the present day, and contrasts what he went through with what an average Westerner in a market-state democracy is going through.

This is one of those novels where the narrator isn't the hero, someone else is.

Yeah, Lev's the hero, really. Although I got a lot of time for the narrator. I know he's a rapist and a murderer. But I kind of like him.

You really did make him a bit of an ass---

Well, I wouldn't say an ass---. Isn't that a bit lacking in historical imagination? He's an ass--- when judged by enlightened prosperous 21st century American mores. But he has a few excuses. Like the Second World War.

You could have just had Lev tell the whole thing.

Nah, that would have been too goody-goody. What is it Montherlant said? "Happiness writes white." Good characters — I think he's plenty vivid, but they don't quite live on the page the way monsters or semi-monsters do.

The narrator reminded me a little of Humbert Humbert [in Nabokov's *Lolita*], speaking of Russians and monsters.

Yeah, except Humbert is arch, as well as being an ass---. Nabokov takes it one step further. I mean, the sexual bribes chapter, quite late on, begins with the sentence, "I am now faced with the distasteful task of recording a definite drop in Lolita's morals." That compounds the cruelty, because he's using it as the butt of his wit. So he's really complicatedly awful. It all works absolutely brilliantly. But my character's a bit more straightforward than that.

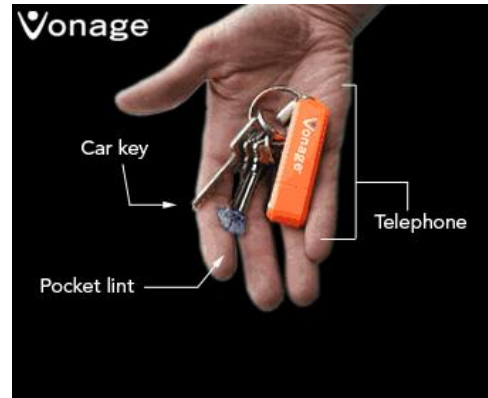
Remind me of the narrator's name — or does he have a name?

He doesn't. He was only named once in the first draft, and then I thought, he doesn't want a name. And since the book I was using as a model in my mind was *Under Western Eyes*, where the narrator isn't named, I thought, no, he doesn't want a name. And I didn't give him one.

How embarrassing for me that I haven't read *Under Western Eyes*. Nor can I even

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“ I've quit periodically over the last several years. I've got an ironclad demand from my wife that in the stresses of the campaign I don't succumb. I've been chewing Nicorette strenuously. ”

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remember who it's by.

Conrad. Joseph Conrad. It's his best novel by a mile.

Really? Over here they don't teach it. They teach *Heart of Darkness*. And *Nostromo*.

And they're not very good. I think neither of those are any good. Or much good. But *Under Western Eyes* and *The Secret Agent* are as good as anything ever written.

What did *Under Western Eyes* have that you wanted for this book?

This whole distinction between Western eyes and Eastern. It's very good on Russia. He's very insistent that you have to make the imaginative effort to see it — you have to pluck out your Western eyes when you think about Russia. Russia never really decided whether it was a European or an Asian country, and there's that mix in the national character that is both European and Asiatic.

Did I read somewhere that you've never actually been to Russia?

That's right.

Do you have the urge?

I'm not so sure now. I'm assuming this will be published in Russia. I'm sure I'll cop a shot of polonium 210 if I go, having written this. (laughs) Once I started this I thought, I'd better not go. You'd come back overloaded with sense impressions — this is stuff that has been milling around inside me since I read Dostoevsky as a nihilistic teenager, and you don't want to adulterate it at that point.

It's a love story, but a fraternal love story, not a romantic love story.

I was very pleased to be writing about brothers. I adore my brother. But he's just a year and 10 days older than me, so we had plenty of rumbles early on. It is a funny mixture, it is a love-hate thing between brothers.

The narrator is a very disillusioned man.

It's more like an insanity of bitterness rather than disillusionment. And, in fact, every character in the book has the right to feel that. Even the terrible old writer Ananias, they've all been twisted into horrible shapes by the state. You may live, but you won't love, that's the slogan. As Lev says, they took away the men we were going to be. That's the nature of the offense.

You seem to be getting more and more drawn to history and geopolitics as you get older.

Like everyone else, I was politicized, or repoliticized, freshly kitted out, by September 11th. I think I wrote *Koba* really to give myself a political education. In lieu of literary criticism — I find I haven't done much of that at all since Sept. 11th. But I've written almost a sort of book-length amount of journalism, and a couple of stories about September 11th and all that implies, that era beginning then. And the novel I'm working on now has an Islamic theme.

There are a lot of fiction writers who shrink from that kind of overt engagement with international politics. They feel like they're not entitled to comment.

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I always thought American writers were a bit more willing to do that, because their opinions on such things are valued. In England the opinion of the novelist on any issue is considered of rather less interest than the man in the street. They hate writers in England. They think they're sort of jumped-up pointy-heads. Stick to fiction, is what you hear, if you venture any opinion.

But you refuse to stick to fiction.

That's right. Well, some people tell me, stick to non-fiction. (laughs) So you get it from one direction or the other.

You've bulled your way into the international dialogue, one way or the other.

You wouldn't believe how out of kilter regular opinion is in England. I was on a TV program with a big audience who asked questions, and someone said that since America backed Osama while he was fighting the Russians, their response to Sept. 11th should be as follows: they should drop bombs on themselves. And the audience applauded with enthusiasm.

They applauded. What did you do?

I just made a face. I'm not like Christopher Hitchens, who likes nothing more than giving an audience the finger. I just thought, it would take me all night to get anywhere with this. During the summer war in the Middle East there were white middle-class demonstrators waddling around under placards saying, we are all Hizballah now. They're suffering from what Paul Berman calls rationalist naivete. They think there must be historical reasons why this is happening, and this is all our fault. If someone's got dark skin, there's a very good chance that we f---ed them up in the past, and therefore anything they do to us is morally intelligible. They haven't sensed that this is in fact a millennial death-cult which is on the rise.

A lot of American writers are very paralyzed by this. They can't bring themselves to produce the words, "violent Islamic fundamentalists are wrong." We can't say it, the words won't come out.

(laughs) Well, you must try harder.

Of course, *House of Meetings* takes place in a pre-September 11th world. Is it an artifact from a bygone era? Or is there stuff in there that's still relevant to the present?

There is this paradox that terror is always a concession of impotence and insecurity and illegitimacy, and Stalin's rule had that. And with terror comes boredom, in the oddest way. Mohamed Atta brought boredom to us too. It's not just airport queues, with some humorless airport official frisking your 6-year-old daughter. It's the confrontation with the dependent mind. There's no argument possible. We share no points of discourse. It's like being with any fanatical Christian, for instance. The higher faculties just close down, because there's nothing for them to do. So there's that paradox: when you get terror, you also get this completely daunting lack of response. You can't have an argument with it.

You must be happy about the critical reception of *House of Meetings*, which has been quite good.

Yes, I am. I don't read much of it, but it's nicer to get the sense that it's gone down well.

"Return to form" is a phrase I'm seeing a lot.

Yeah, I don't buy that. There's nothing wrong with *Yellow Dog* [Amis's previous novel]!

How much of that stuff did you actually read?

You don't want to have all these phrases knocking around in your head. The novelist's ego is such that any praise is instantly absorbed and then brings you up to where you should be already. But any dispraise can really get in your head. And I don't want to give it headroom, so I stay away. But I'm aware that it's gone down well. And it's a lot better than it going down badly.

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