

# MARTIN AMIS

## THE ULTIMATE ROGUE BRITISH NOVELIST WON'T STOP SAYING WHAT HE THINKS. AND WHAT HE THINKS ABOUT IS AN HONEST WORLDVIEW

Very early in his 2000 memoir, *Experience*, Martin Amis frames this interchange between himself and his son during a car ride: "If nothing else was changed by you not being famous, would you still want to be famous?" his son asks. "I don't think so, I answered." "Why?" "Because it messes with the head." Martin Amis is a writer who knows a thing or two about the hostile head trip of fame. Perhaps it is due to his literary father, Kingsley, or his own well-earned successes that span 1973's *The Rachel Papers* all the way up to his latest effort (notable notches include 1984's *Money* and 1989's *London Fields*), but the British press can't resist turning any newfound Martin Amis fact into a news bulletin. He has been investigated for his dental work as well as his choice of suits. Most recently, he caused a stir for a September 2006 essay he wrote for *The Observer*, which serves up a biting critique of radical Islam and Western culture's disturbingly ineffectual response to such enmity. But few readers follow writers for their scandalous headlines. What Amis knows more than just a thing or two about is writing. He's one of the most influential stylists in contemporary literature. But even more, he's a stylist who can still rub words together that mean something—passages that can get at the nerves and run havoc on the brain. His latest novel, *House of Meetings*, is a slender piece of brilliance that follows two Russian brothers interned together in a gulag: their crime was thinking. Woven as a letter from the old, reflective (but unflinchingly lucid) narrator to his American stepdaughter, the story rips through torture, morality, betrayal, the evils of the Soviet state, and—never far from Amis's horizons—a shared love for a single woman. "What I'm doing now is dead reckoning," the narrator writes. "I am making a reckoning with the dead." Only Amis could take us so far away from ourselves—1950s Russia—to the land of the dead and the desperate and retrieve so much life. **Christopher Bollen**

**CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN** *House of Meetings* isn't your first investigation of the Soviet Experiment and all of its brutal horrors. You've written about it before—in 2002's *Koba the Dread*. But this time you've put it into fiction. What prompted that?

**MARTIN AMIS** It's happened to me several times that you look into something in a journalistic spirit or as an amateur historian, and a year or two later you find, after talking about it in discursive prose, that your understanding of it has moved on a level. What's happened is that it's gone down to your subconscious. I found I had something more to say, and I hadn't done the camps much in the book. The way a novel gets started is a moment. And you think, Oh, I could write a novel about that. It's not any more organized than that.

**CB** Does it have to go that route of digestion—you take material in first analytically as journalism and only last can you turn it into a story? You can't take the reverse route?

**MA** No, I don't think you can. Writers are helplessly dependent on their subconscious. Half the time you think you can just knock off and lie on a hammock and let the subconscious do it. But it takes time. You can't hurry it. That was three years before it reappeared as fiction.

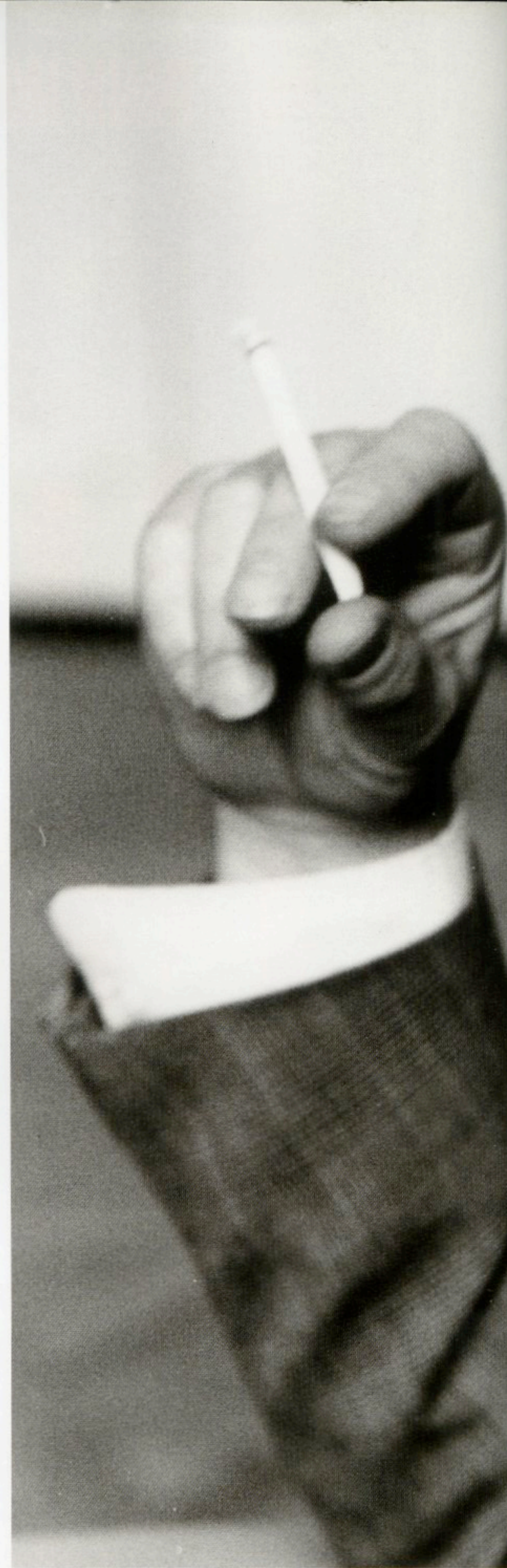
**CB** In the novel's first pages, you have your narrator explain: "This is a love story. All right, Russian love. But still love." It's odd to find love as the engine of a story that largely deals with two brothers imprisoned in a gulag. But that's pure Amis. Many of your books are love stories wrapped around extreme violence.

**MA** The start, or what Nabokov calls the throb—which is getting the idea—happened when I was reading in Anne Applebaum's book *Gulag: A History* about these conjugal visits. What really touched me was that the other persons have always respected the suffering of the man after the visit—which seems very human. It wasn't a place of human kindness. But upon this one subject, everyone had respectful silence. It all flowed from that. There is a slight redemptive scene, which is also a love story, between the narrator and his stepdaughter. I think I didn't make it sufficiently clear in the text that she is black.

**CB** I had a sense she might be; I don't know why, now that I think about it. Maybe because her name is Venus.

**MA** Yeah. There are many hefty clues. But if you really did imagine her as black, you're almost the first reader I've come across who's got it. There are half a dozen details that would be meaningless if she weren't black. Like calling her a "slave." But I think I'll have to fix that to really get it across. It's very important that she's black. Anyway, the only redemptive thing you can point to is his sending this girl out into the world very well equipped. That's not nothing. It's not just Hollywood producers who like a bit of redemption. Even dark novelists like a bit. I think that's the big thing on his credit side.

**CB** The last line of the book reads, "Russia is dying. And I'm glad." Do you really feel that post-Soviet Russia is in fast



decline? It's the failed experiment.

**MA** Demographically it is dying. It's a great shame to them. There never was a state more interested in face than the Russian state, and it's misery for them to have to admit it. But the population is shrinking by something like 900,000 each year. It never happened before. And morally, at the moment, it couldn't be more weirdly poised for a candid return to authoritarianism. Maybe it's just the geography of Russia—the heavy center.

**CB** The narrator wishes Venus off into the world, "with your good diet, your lavish health insurance, your two degrees, your languages, your property, and your capital." That's a fitting tribute to all of the pluses of our current young American generation. So many writers see the United States as dying. You name this American after love.

**MA** He mocks her ideology a bit, and her swallowing the stuff that's around. It's a lot about the neurosis of young Americans, the slightly brainwashed attitude they have. Of course I'm very pro-American. I want to be as pro-American as I can. I'm married to one. I was married to one before. All of my children are half-American. I think that it's dug itself a big hole under Bush, no question about that, in practically every department.

**CB** You've lived in the States—as well as recently in Uruguay. Why South America?

**MA** We lived there for two and a half years. We've just come back.



My wife is a very good mixture of New York Jew and Uruguayan. It's a very good mixture, I will tell you. She wanted to take up that side of her life. Her father is Gonzalo Fonseca, the sculptor. He was that country's major artist for his generation, although he was never there. He got the hell out very young and lived in New York and Italy. But nevertheless, she had thirty first cousins in Montevideo. So she had a life to pick up on there.

**CB Did you like it?**

**MA** It was a great little packet of time that can't be repeated except ending our days there. It was to be cherished.

**CB It must have been isolating after being in the thick of London. I don't think of you as an isolationist writer.**

**MA** It was isolating because I don't speak Spanish, like everyone else in my life. So I would often not say a word for three weeks. You dig down in yourself. But now I'm back, and it's weird and stimulating. I have had my life poisoned the last few months by the presence of builders where I'm living in West London. You wouldn't understand this as an American, but in England there is a huge, deep class tension between builders and bourgeoisie here. It's the last hurrah of class war. The bourgeoisie loathe the builders and the builders loathe the bourgeoisie. It's poisonous—as bad an experience as a divorce or a house move or a nervous breakdown. It's colored my attitude. But London is fascinating and bursting and very multicolored. You never hear the same

language used twice or same alphabet used twice.

**CB There's been quite a reaction in London to the piece you wrote on the rise of Horrorism and extremist radical Islamic youth. A lot on the Islamic side weren't too pleased with your critique. Did you expect this kind of response?**

**MA** I finished the piece in America before coming back to England. When I had been back a few days, I thought, Christ, what I've written is going to be so right-wing, because the center had moved so far to the left. There were fat middle-class guys this summer with placards saying "we are all Hezbollah now." Well enjoy it while you can, because Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, said famously, we don't want anything from you, we want to eliminate you. So that fatuous, gooey terror over making any judgment or thinking you are right in any way or cringing with multicultural guilt... This historical meeting between Islam and our civilization is colored by the fact that we are at our absolute weakest because we don't know we are in a fight. We are so up the ass of any minority or any dissenting little group.

**CB You see the leftist intellectual as not vilifying communism and Stalinism the way it did Nazi fascism. That's clear in *House of Meetings*. And the same could be said for its defense of Islam. You think we have a fear of making judgments?**

**MA** That's a new contagion—the fear of the belief that you can be right about anything at all. Firm opinion is the majority opinion

and it's not a majority of opinion right now in this country. We are comically weakened for this particular enemy. And they exploit that. England is the hub of world terrorism and they are all here on welfare. All of the clerics and intelligentsia are bending over to accommodate them. There was a fake headline the other day that said, "liberals fear the Islamic reaction to Western protest about latest massacre." That's how gentle we are being with them. And what's happening here is that a lot of the anger is being directed toward Israel and Jews. That's the way the line has shifted.

**CB It's startling how much the English press has gone after you for all of these years. I don't think in the United States there is a single author that gets anywhere near that much ink. Maybe Norman Mailer several decades ago, but nobody now. Do you think the notorious literary author is an English phenomenon?**

**MA** The difference is, to get the treatment I've got, you'd not only have to be David Updike, you'd have to have gone on being David Updike, but have written almost as many books as John Updike. Imagine the kind of trouble that would cause some reporters.

Martin Amis in Paris, January 1997

**Photography Isabelle Lévy-Lehmann**

*House of Meetings* is out in January 2007 from Knopf Publishers