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A survivor mourns life lost to gulag

By **Reviewed by Gideon Lewis-Kraus**
Feb 4, 2007



Martin Amis. Chronicle file photo, 2003, by Katy Raddatz

House of Meetings

By Martin Amis

KNOPF; 242 PAGES; $23

"Most people," Milan Kundera wrote in "The Joke," "deceive themselves with a pair of faiths: they believe in eternal memory (of people, things, deeds, nations) and in redress (of deeds, mistakes, sins, wrongs). Both are false faiths.

"In reality the opposite is true: everything will be forgotten and nothing will be redressed." A suicide note, at least as imagined by Martin Amis, disavows the latter faith as it reluctantly trusts the former one. It indulges the hope that some record of the unredressed might endure.

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that hangs together over time, a way that justifies that life's perpetuation; the suicide nonetheless would like to be remembered, or believes there is some lesson to be found in how his life's story lost its coherence.

No one writes suicide notes like Martin Amis; one might even say that he has invented the suicide note as a literary genre. "Money" (1984) is frankly subtitled "A Suicide Note." "Time's Arrow" (1991), which narrates a Nazi biography in reverse, can

be read as a kind of third-person suicide note, a suicide note written on behalf of a man too unreflective to recognize his life's narrative incoherence. And it does not spoil his new book -- there are many clues along the way -- to say that "House of Meetings" eventually reveals itself as a suicide note.

"House of Meetings" is a letter from an aging Russian curmudgeon to his 24-year-old American stepdaughter, Venus. The narrator has returned, after two decades in Chicago, to Arctic Siberia as a tourist: He has taken a perverse pleasure cruise along the Yenisei River to the gulag camp where he spent 10 years as a political prisoner. The story, he remarks at the beginning, is a love story. More specifically, it is a love triangle -- a "brutally scalene" love triangle -- between him, his younger brother Lev, and a Jewish woman named Zoya. Zoya is effortlessly and unself-consciously voluptuous, a "big woman who weighed about half a kilo in bed."

The narrator, a veteran of Gen. Georgi K. Zhukov's Soviet Army, falls into unrequited love with Zoya upon his return from Berlin to Moscow, where her self-possession and integrity provide "a rebuke to the prevailing conditions." Shortly thereafter, the narrator is branded a fascist and sent to the gulag; Lev joins him there a bit later, and brings the news that he has married Zoya. The House of Meetings is the cabin where prisoners -- after Stalin's death in 1953 -- were allowed conjugal visits. Zoya comes for such a visit, but when Lev emerges the next day, he is forever changed. He refuses to tell his brother what transpired in the House.

The narrator is now, 50 years on, returning to the camp to die. He finds himself "iophobic": afraid of rust. "It is a Mars of rust," he writes in a passage worth quoting at length (it is a novel constructed of only passages worth quoting at length; that is, it is a Amis novel), "in various hues and concentrations. Some of the surfaces have dimmed to a modest apricot, losing their barnacles and asperities. Elsewhere, it looks like arterial blood, newly shed, newly dried. The rust boils and bristles, as the keep of the upended ferryboat glares out across the water with personalized fury, as

if oxidation were a crime it would lay at your door. ... Rust is the failure of the work of man. The project, the experiment, the venture: failed, given up on, and not cleaned up after."

Amis' nonfiction book about the "Soviet experiment," "Koba the Dread" (2001), suggests that the euphemistic "experiment" deserves its quotation marks: It implies not only some laboratorial discretion but also an aspect of reversibility. You try out one thing, and if that doesn't work, you try out something else. As the narrator writes, "A for-the-duration rapist (or so it then seemed), a coldblooded (but also tumescent) executioner, I intended, when I ever thought about it, to go back to being the kind of man I was in 1941" -- before the exigencies of war (murder, rape), the camps (murder) and the Soviet system (paranoia) dehumanized him. But no mere "experiment" makes its subjects unrecognizable to themselves. "Koba the Dread" ultimately amounted to less than the sum of its parts because its descriptions of such unrecognizability seemed too insistent and oddly self-promotional on Amis' part; "House of Meetings" is successful because it describes that deterioration from the inside.

The narrator has never been able to wrest coherence from the violent demands of his life; there is nothing he can do to make himself recognizable to himself once more. He cannot see a reason to go on, because the person plodding along is no longer him. But, at the same time, the narrator shares Amis' shy humanism: He thinks that his story -- how he ceased to believe that "human society could arrive at something just a little bit better than all that had come before" -- makes for necessary memory.

"House of Meetings" came out in the United Kingdom in October and was generally hailed as Amis' finest novel since "London Fields" (1991). But some of the critics, even the otherwise admiring ones, questioned the point of the book: We have actual memoirs of real gulag survivors, from writers such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn and

Janusz Bardach. Why, then, should a contemporary British novelist take it upon himself to imagine the life of a prisoner, both during his slavery and after his release?

This stupid question betrays a basic misunderstanding of the novel's power as a fictional suicide note. Testimonials by Solzhenitsyn and others reflect the stories of those who have somehow managed to collect the internal coherence required to go on living. The narrator of this suicide note is sufficiently self-conscious to know that to continue his life means to reconstruct some unity. He is unable to find an honest way to square his former self-image -- "the kind of man who drew a shopkeeper's attention to the fact that he had undercharged; the kind of man who gave up his seat for the elderly and infirm; the kind of man who would never read the last page of a novel first, but would get there by honest means" -- with that of a rapist and murderer.

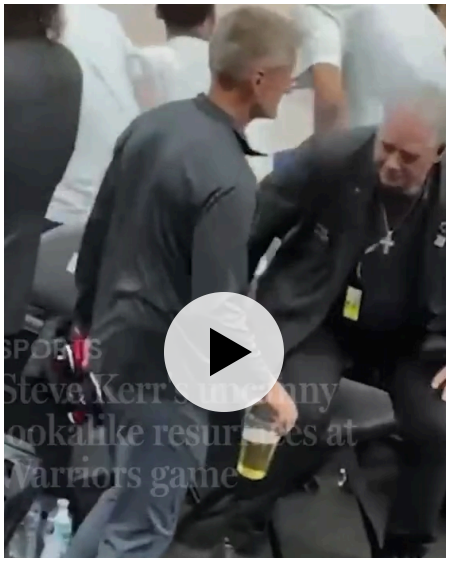
He would not have survived the war or the camps without violent complicity, but such collusion seems to have rendered pedestrian ethics obsolete. All he can do now is offer a suicide note that someone else might one day find important. A suicide note, to Amis, is the most ruthlessly honest genre of writing. All he can hope, not only for himself but also for the world, is that his path to unrecognizability might be remembered.

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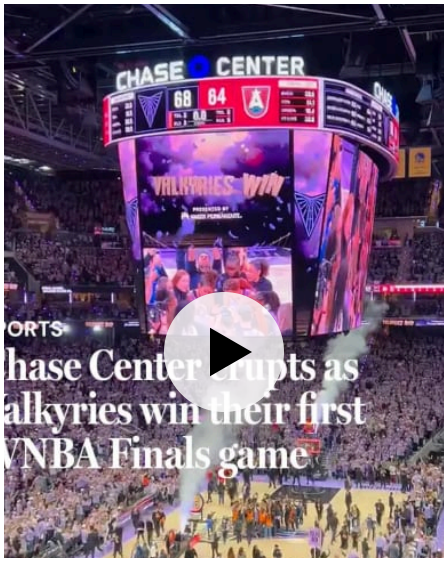
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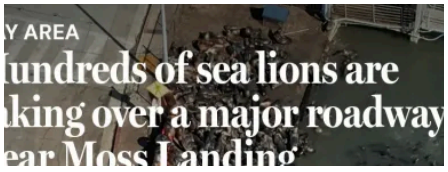


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