Koba the Dread: laughter and the twenty million

by Martin Amis

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Overview

From Follett

Includes bibliographical references and index. British novelist Martin Amis describes the harsh realities—including slave labor and famine—of the Soviet Union in the early and mid-twentieth century, and examines the beliefs of Communist apologists of the West, including his father and his own peers at Oxford.

From the Publisher

Koba the Dread is the successor to Martin Amis's celebrated memoir, Experience. It is largely political while remaining personal. It addresses itself to the central lacuna of twentieth-century thought: the indulgence of communism by intellectuals of the West. In between the personal beginning and the personal ending, Amis gives us perhaps the best "short course" ever in Stalin: Koba the Dread, losif the Terrible. The author's father, Kingsley Amis, though later reactionary in tendency, was "a Comintern
dogbody” (as he would later come to put it) from 1941 to 1956. His second-closest, and then closest friend (after the death of the poet Philip Larkin) was Rovert Conquest, our leading Sovietologist, whose book of 1968, The Great Terror, was second only to Solzhenitsyn’s The Gulag Archipelago in undermining the USSR. Amis’s remarkable memoir explores these connections. Stalin said that the death of one person was tragic, the death of a million a mere “statistic.” Koba the Dread, during whose course the author absorbs a particular, familial death, is a rebuttal of Stalin’s aphorism.

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Reviews & Awards
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Full-Text Reviews

Kirkus Reviews (May 1, 2002)
The accomplished English novelist follows his memoir Experience (2000) with another nonfiction book that, loosely defined, may also be called a memoir, and it is absolutely riveting. Amis is the son of novelist Kingsley Amis, and Amis fils recalls his father's affiliation with communism in the 1930s and, along with his "Oxford comrades," their ignorance of Stalin's "domestic cataclysms," namely the Soviet dictator's massacre of anyone who could possibly be thought to be a dissident-the total of which numbered in the millions. Such recollections lead the younger Amis to ponder Stalin's life story; the title of this book refers to a Stalin nickname. Amis's provocative book, the majority of which is given over to the Stalin profile, proves to be difficult reading-not for the style, to be sure, which is rich without being dense ("An additional ten IQ points in Kerensky might have saved Russia from Lenin"), but more for the dark subject matter ("Corpses-disposal was a national tribulation throughout the hard Bolshevik period that ended in 1953"). This extended essay presents, in no uncertain terms, the misguidedness of the Western intelligentsia's seduction by the manically secretive Stalin in the years before the cold war.

Library Journal (June 1, 2002)
This passionate and intensely personal book by novelist Amis (London Fields) evokes a terrible crime, in fact several million crimes. Koba is Joseph Stalin, the 20 million his victims. Intertwined with his impressionistic narrative (which owes much to Alexander Solzhenitsyn and the Anglo-American historian Robert Conquest) are details of Amis’s family history, along with his sparring with the memory of his late father, Kingsley, and a close friend, the English journalist Christopher Hitchens, both one-time defenders of Soviet rule. Amis cuts to and from these and other personalities, throwing in details of the appalling horrors of Stalinist misrule, in a microscopic narrative flow. Who was to blame: the Little Mustache (Hitler) or the Big Mustache (Stalin)? Why is the latter's evil not as widely acknowledged as the former's? Amis concludes his book with a single family death, contrasting its pathos with, in Stalin's celebrated expression, the “mere statistic” of the death of millions. A personal and polemical reaction to human and historical tragedy on both a small and a large scale, this is not an easy read. While the book reveals nothing new historiographically, it will appeal to admirers of Amis’s literary panache, Robert H. Johnston, McMaster Univ., Hamilton, ON Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information.

Publishers Weekly (May 20, 2002)
Everyone knows what the Holocaust was, but, Amis points out, there is no name for and comparatively little public awareness of the killing that took place in the Soviet Union between 1917 and 1933, when 20 million died under a Bolshevik regime that ruled as if waging war against its own people. Why? The U.S.S.R. was effectively a gigantic prison system that was very good at keeping its grisly secrets. Too, communism had widespread support in the rest of the world, as Amis reminds us. Not quite a memoir, this book satisfies a lengthy treatise on the horror of life in Leninist and Stalinist Russia between Amis's brief personal touches on his gradually dawning awareness of Soviet atrocities. In his first and final pages, he deals with three
generations of dupes who supported Soviet rule: that of H.G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw; that of novelist Kingsley Amis, the writer's father and member of the Communist Party in the 1940s; and that of leftist contemporaries of Martin Amis himself, notably the writer Christopher Hitchens. Throughout, Amis snipes at Hitchens in particular (What about the famine? I once asked him. There wasn't a famine,' he said, smiling slightly and lowering his gaze. There may have been occasional shortages...'). Alexander Solzhenitsyn tried to tell the West about Stalinism in the '70s, but this grim patriarch had no appeal for the New Left, a generation interested only in revolution as play, Amis says. Most readers won't be interested in the author's private quarrels, but in the bulk of the book he relates passionately a story that needs to be told, the history of a regime that murdered its own people in order to build a better future for them. (July) Forecast: Guaranteed review coverage thanks to Amis's reputation should mean strong sales. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information.