



Kingsley without the women

Clive James

::nobreak::

Zachary Leader

THE LIFE OF KINGSLEY AMIS
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In his early role as Lucky Jim, Kingsley Amis declared the awkward essence of his personality: "I'm the boredom detector". That ability, or affliction, qualified all his other propensities, even the one for multi-targeted amorous desire. In Zachary Leader's long, thorough and generally judicious new biography, Amis's spasmodic quest for emotional satisfaction is rarely out of the picture. The novelist, poet, critic, teacher and bibulous clubman we more or less frequently meet, but the man with sex on his mind we seldom escape. Journalists understandably find this material an alluring compost in which to burrow.

But even here they tend to miss the spiritual element, signalled by how easily the universal lover – Roger Micheldene in *One Fat Englishman* was one of these, and clearly a disgusted portrait of his author – could be put off by an ill-considered remark from the object of his quest. In missing that, the critics miss half the secret: it wasn't just an itching id that made Amis restless. The truly dedicated bedroom operator is seldom daunted by a cliché coming from the mouth he longs to kiss. With Amis it was otherwise. A word out of order from the fair face on the pillow could set him reaching for his trousers. It was touch and go.

The man who feared the dud phrase as he feared the dark night is now beyond the first threat, if not the second. But if he could hear himself being talked about in his absence, he would find, to his horror, that his very name had become a cause of boredom. Dunces are hopping in a circle around his tomb, singing their tiny songs. One can only hope that this condition will be

temporary. Great literary reputations quite commonly lapse for a while after death, but it is mercifully uncommon that a great literary reputation should be entirely replaced by impertinent gossip. A number of the earliest reviewers of this book were so caught up in its anti-hero's supposed moral turpitude that they seemed to forget how far his literary achievements outstripped their own. The most eminent of them, John Carey, who reviewed *The Life of Kingsley Amis* in the *Sunday Times*, seemed to forget that there had been any literary achievements at all.

In his time, Professor Carey had called *Lucky Jim* a funny book; or had at least implied that it was, by saying that its author's autobiography, *Memoirs*, was his funniest book since the one that made his name. Carey, a wit in his own right, is well aware that a funny book is always an achievement. But in his review of this biography – a review that amounted to placing a corpse under arrest and charging it with a misspent life – no books, funny or otherwise, were mentioned. At least that omission left room for a scrupulous critic to remind himself, at some future time, that there might be beginners listening, and that the starting point of a critical essay should therefore always be the subject's gifts, and not his crimes. If the subject did not possess the first, there would be no point discussing the second. Another reviewer managed to do even worse than not mention Amis's work. He presumed, in the yellow light of all this sulphurous information about the author's moral transgressions, to reassess the work, pointing out that Amis's poetry, in particular, was a glacial reflection of his heartless attitude towards women.

This reassessment was so fatuous that it wasn't even boring. The general assumption among the reviewers that the man was more real than what he wrote was just the sort of platitude that drove the choleric latter-day "Kingers" back to a bottle already three-quarters empty. But it was beyond boring, it was bizarre, to suggest that the cold view of women in some of Amis's poems reflected a view that Amis actually held. In the Dai Evans poems, Amis finds Evans reprehensible both in his behaviour and mentality. We can tell that just by the way those particular poems are written, even if there were not so many others by the same author ("A Bookshop Idyll", for example) to prove that he valued the integrity of women, and that he thought any man in physical thrall to his mental condition as a roué was in no shape to lead a worthwhile life.

Amis's poems about sexuality reveal that the obligation to behave well, as against the challenges to doing so posed by a libido about whose power he felt equally obliged to be realistic, was one of his abiding concerns. Far from being detached from the question of sexual morality, his poetry has almost no other subject. His depth of thought on the matter, and his capacity to dramatize inner conflict and make it vivid through mastery of phrase and rhythm, would have made him, had his friend Philip Larkin never existed, a strong contender for the title of the most accomplished and least self-satisfied poet of his generation. But of course there is a connection there: self-satisfaction can be defeated only by taking thought, and without thought there is no real technique, only the making of patterns. In Amis's poetry, for all its formal virtuosity, there is not a single instance of a pattern made just for the sake of it, and the same might be said of his best prose. The sure sign of his greatness as a comic writer is that nothing interested him less than mere wordplay. If he ever gave in to it, it was a sign that he was on the ropes, and that his peculiar gift for self-examination had been switched off, perhaps through fear of what it might reveal.

Obeying the rule that we should start from the work, we can start at that very point, and observe that at the height of his art he was always worried about himself, and especially on the level where we might think he was insouciant. In the early part of Leader's account of his life, as a student at Oxford and a lecturer in Swansea, we find him chasing women, and frequently catching up with them. In Princeton he caught up with all of them. If he hadn't got his first wife, Hilly Bardwell, pregnant he might not have married her, but having done both those things he found his appetite for further adventure unblunted. The title of his novel *That Uncertain Feeling* was another way of saying that he found it hard to answer for his actions when there were bright and beautiful women around. In academic life they were always around. Hilly seemed to understand, thereby throwing petrol on the fire. We might disapprove of all this but we should remember that we would have difficulty disapproving as much as he did. Temptation and its consequences are a constant theme of the early novels. In *Lucky Jim*, Bertrand, the high-scoring tail-chaser, is the villain. In *Take a Girl Like You*, Patrick Standish is less repellent than Bertrand but even more dangerous, because in the end he is capable of taking Jenny's virginity while she is drunk: i.e. he rapes her. His urge takes over.

Amis spent a lot of time arguing, in both prose and verse, that an urge should never be allowed to do that. He was against the idea of an artist's privileges. He might have been more persuasive on the subject if he had always behaved well in real life – although then he would have been crucially short of inside information – but here again we have something to remember. In real life, it wasn't just a case of him wanting nearly all the women. In the early days, at least, nearly all the women wanted him. He was good-looking and he was brilliantly funny. In Princeton there were academic wives who didn't realize that they were married to a bore until they found themselves in cocktail-fuelled colloquy with the visiting genius. Over they went like ninepins.

Like most men who have that effect, Amis probably kept a private moral account book in which he gave himself points for all the opportunities he turned down, and used the total to offset how depressingly often he succumbed. There are all kinds of mental tricks such a man can play, but it would be pharisaical on our part to preach as if we could be sure of being abstemious, granted the same advantages. Nevertheless what is true is Amis's belief – evident in all the novels, especially evident in the early novels and vividly evident throughout the poetry – that the ungoverned libido was bound to have a wrecking influence, even if everyone involved had joined the circle by consent. The most startling proof of this is in *The Anti-Death League*, in which Amis creates an otherwise virtuous woman who has a man's promiscuity. She behaves as most men would if they could, and takes on every man she likes the look of. But in the end she agrees to be rescued. We can deduce that Amis thought she needed rescuing. It was a generous conclusion for him to reach. After all, he didn't make himself randy (although men who don't suffer from the same affliction can perhaps be forgiven for assuming, in his case, that a trick of fate was a human failing).

A deeper indication of Amis's capacity for self-analysis on the matter of sexual attractiveness is that he was capable of making a subject out of what it might be like not to be attractive. In *Take a Girl Like You*, Jenny Bunn is the fully articulated version of Christine in *Lucky Jim*. Those who thought Christine unreal would have twice the reason to think that of Jenny, but in both cases, the combination of beauty and goodness is surely not impossible. You might even say that the beautiful find it easier to be good. It is certainly true to life that Jenny, with her looks, her practicality and her sense of fun, would touch the heart of

any man, and especially a man like Patrick, who is heartless and knows it. But in the figure of Graham, the decent type who yearns for her hopelessly, Amis pushed analysis into a new area. There had been radiant young lovers in English novels before, from Tom Jones and Sophie Western onwards. And there had been stumbling, hopelessly yearning dim bulbs before: Dickens is full of them. Graham is not even the first of these to bare his soul: Leonard Bast in *Howards End* shows us what it might be like to be a loser. But Graham is the first to bare his soul with eloquence. The scene in which he tells Jenny what it is like to be a man who has no chance with a girl like her is like nothing else in literature before it, and would alone be enough to establish Amis as the moral writer that F. R. Leavis said he wasn't. (I was at the lecture – on Dickens – when Dr Leavis, asserting that Amis had no interest in describing the behaviour of a gentleman, inadvertently defined Amis's central literary interest as exactly that.)

Jenny doesn't want to hear about Graham's despair, and then despises herself for not having wanted to hear. She has perfect moral pitch, but no intention of letting her life be ruined by a quest for justice. In a just world, she would have married Graham. But she wants Patrick. She just doesn't want to sleep with him before they are married. So Patrick, exercising his charmer's privilege, gets in early. To believe that Amis does not condemn that privilege would be like believing that he actually approves, in *Girl, 20*, of Sir Roy Vandervane's urge to seduce women who get younger twice as fast as he gets older. You would have to believe that Amis, when he gives us portraits of men who regard the individuality of women as merely the temporary disguise of a common object, actually endorses that attitude. In fact, he loathed it.

He probably made a line out of saying so, but his scorn of the rampant clod was genuine. Leader is good at bringing out how Amis's sensitivity on the subject was one of the very things that made him attractive. Women were interested in him because he found women interesting. Hilly would probably never have left him had he not forced her into it. She knew all about his weaknesses but adored him anyway. And he, despite everything, at heart was uxorious and thought she was the one woman who counted. He thought that early and he thought it late, but late was too late (though in his last years he found a haven with Hilly and her second husband Alastair, Lord Kilmarnock). Much that we find truly disturbing in his life story happened in the stretch between his two *ménages* with Hilly, on the path which at long last led him back to

that fateful fork in the road.

The philanderer often has a better chance of staying married than the man who is so bowled over by love that he not only marries on the strength of it, he wrecks his first home when love strikes again. A measure of how hard Amis was hit by his love for the elegant and accomplished Elizabeth Jane Howard is that he behaved like an honest man and changed his circumstances. Finally we don't know the secret of what brings two people together and keeps them there: if it was sex, the chances were extremely slight that Amis had run into something he had never met before.

What he had run into was romance. The coarse language in his letters might seem to indicate the opposite of a romantic propensity, but to indicate it so strenuously that it would be wise to suspect a cover-up. Jim Dixon's interior monologue when he dances in Christine's arms for the first time (it beats even Larkin's phrase "the wonderful feel of girls") is surely a better testament of Amis's true feelings. There are good reasons for thinking that sex with nothing else to it was foreign to his nature, and this time there was a lot else to it. The history of the British Establishment can scarcely be told without taking due account of the way it is continually replenished by people born outside its walls, but Jane was an insider: she was the gifted interloper's glittering reward. On the evidence presented by *Leader* we can conclude that the increasingly illustrious Amis, a scholarship boy who had escaped the south London "suburban middle class" of his upbringing, had reached the standard climacteric where the ascending cultural figure is ready to leave the vagabond life he has led so far, and become a toff.

Not that he wanted to become a Tory: not yet. His politics had always been on the Left. In fact he started out as a Communist, but his dislike of authority guaranteed that he would not remain in the Party long. His dislike of authority in the army shows up in his short stories: the title story of *My Enemy's Enemy* is only one example. In the universities that employed him he abominated the prospect of being presided over by an unfeeling hierarchy. (The abomination is incarnated in Professor Welch, and the precedents for it are outlined by *Leader* in convincing detail, to the extent that you marvel at Amis's conscientiousness as an academic: how could he have borne the drudgery?) Amis was a natural Labour voter. But he was always wistfully responsive to the prospect of an elect tribe of upper-order males confidently at their ease. (He once told me that he admired the way they

were “not bothered”.) Gore-Urquhart in *Lucky Jim* is one example, and Julian Ormerod in *Take a Girl Like You* would be the moral centre of the book if Jenny were not; it is Ormerod who tells Patrick that he has not behaved like a gentleman. Amis had a soft spot for a gent. Jane was a female gent: noblesse oblige on a well-turned pair of legs. She had everything, and she could do everything. While independently busy with her own career, she also knew how to look after him. He liked that idea. It was unfair on Hilly, who had travelled with him over some hard roads. (There are moments early in the book, as Hilly cleans up the widely dispersed kiddy food while Kingsley marks a towering pile of exam papers, when you wonder if Leader might not be getting it all out of George Gissing.) Hilly was elected by fate to incarnate Cyril Connolly’s cruel principle about the woman with whom we share our early struggles rarely being the same woman with whom we wish to share our later successes. Or rather, she was elected by Amis. He might have done otherwise. He could have stayed, and kept Jane for a mistress (according to the evidence here, Jane loved him enough to have settled for that). But he was too moral. Or perhaps he was bored.

A book of this length can have few hidden texts, but there is at least one, and it starts with the break-up of Amis’s first marriage. The alteration distorted his life, but he lacked the steel to be unworried. All his subsequent troubles, and a lot of the art still to be accomplished, flowed from his reluctance to be a complete swine. The born scoundrel never causes more trouble than when he turns sincere. Against his convictions, Amis had taken an artist’s privileges, and like most men who unleash such damage he tried to save his conscience by convincing himself that he was facing facts. The disintegration of his family had consequences for the children which Leader explores with tact, but there is enough to make you shake your head. (His predecessor as a biographer, the late Eric Jacobs, though rather better than Leader at evoking anything funny, was less sensitive about anything that wasn’t, and departed the scene pursued by the curses of the entire family.) But you might say that Amis’s new glory became punishment enough for his having reinforced its outward show with a conspicuous change of wives.

Superficially his circumstances were now ideal, and Leader gives ample evidence that the couple were creatively fruitful both separately and together. At the end of the day’s work they would read each other what they had written. Jane, who had a history of accepting burdens and being treated badly, seemed easily capable of getting on with her writing while doing all the other work as well.

Cosseted by a heaven-sent helpmeet-cum-soulmate, Kingsley lived a king's life: nothing was allowed to disturb his concentration.

Amis had always been suspicious of the artist who demanded ideal conditions, but he knew what they were and was glad enough to accept them when they came. One of his ideal conditions had always been plenty to drink. Jim Dixon dreamed of being able to smoke as much as he wanted. His creator had dreamed of being able to drink as much as he wanted. In his role of squire, Amis made sure that this wish was fulfilled as never before: there was a keg of upmarket scotch in his study. All on his own, he had the weekly drinks bill of a whole table at the Garrick Club even before he was elected. After he was, he would get so tight there that he could barely make it to the taxi. And this was a man famous for never showing the effects. Visiting him for a long lunch, those of us who were famous for showing them blessed our frailty. With a light head instead of a hollow leg, he would have lasted longer.

The depths of his drinking were achieved after Jane left him, but the bathysphere was well on its way down while she was still there. The low point took time to reach, but the steady descent is hard to miss. We don't have to look for it in what seemed to confuse him. We can find it in what he seemed sure of. Though he continued to turn out novels with clearly defined themes, the prose in them – once the initial attraction – became less and less clearly defined, and eventually, as it was bound to do, this deficiency eroded his comic invention. John Carey was right to say that Amis's style became an instrument for evading meaning instead of conveying it. He might have said "Amis's style, of all people's". All his life, Amis was a stickler for correct English, but the time came when he turned correctness into a kind of spiked truss: his prose could hardly walk for its attention to its own detail. And his attitudes hardened to match the progressive sclerosis of his style. This stylistic petrification did not show up so much in his non-fiction, but that was often because the opinions conveyed by his journalism had become wilfully simplistic. His anti-Communism, for example, became a hunt for reds under the bed. The perpetual dimwit-Left consensus will disgust any liberal eventually, but the aim should be to reclaim the democratic centre, not to take refuge in the illusion that right-wing prejudices were a system of thought all along.

Once, Amis had been an effective polemicist, made more so by his winning capacity to disclaim expertise in

advance. Now he became an over-confident dogmatist, an advanced instance of what Jean-François Revel identified as the tendency of those who had once believed in the wrong thing to claim a monopoly of rectitude on the grounds that those who had never believed in it could not be serious. It was as if Amis had come to find a reasonable position so boring that mania was more interesting. In his long-running friendship and verse-trading double-act with Robert Conquest, the zealot was Kingers, not Conkers. Conquest, whose book *The Great Terror* probably did more than any other publication from either side of the Iron Curtain to bring down the Soviet Union, was unfailingly polite in controversy. Amis accused honest men of bad faith. Leader's book does not record how thoroughly he managed to alienate Karl Miller – who had long before given *Take a Girl Like You* one of its most thoughtful notices – by calling him a Communist sympathizer. It might usefully have done so. Miller was only one among many admirers of Amis who was forced to conclude that his public stance had become explicable only by pathology.

Amis the erstwhile enchanter developed a strange capacity to alienate anyone, almost as if he wished to. The occasion when he managed to drive Julian Barnes and his wife Pat Kavanagh from the dinner table is recorded here. Pat Kavanagh, who had spent most of her life in protesting exile from her home country and its apartheid regime, was not disposed to hear Amis's late-festering opinions about how the blacks were ruining South Africa. He even developed similar opinions about Jews, though he must have known that this was a form of intellectual suicide. Proof that he knew this was provided by Martin Amis's story, told in his book *Experience* and duly rehearsed here, of how, after reading aloud from the passage in Primo Levi about the deportees drying their babies' nappies beside the train tracks, Martin turned around and found his father in tears. To tell this story was a decisive intervention, on the son's part, in the father's legend: and was no doubt meant to be. Without it, a saving grace might have been lost to history.

The anecdote gives some much-needed evidence for what must surely have been the truth: that Amis had turned against himself deliberately. A drunken man may speak with a brutality towards nuance that the same man sober wouldn't put up with. Amis's plain aim was to attain that condition even between drinks. Since a civilized mentality consists entirely of nuance, for its possessor to attack his own subtlety is the sign of a war within. What was the war within Kingsley Amis all about?

With due allowance for the requirement that we should be fair to Jane – she never stole him, he made a free choice – it seems fair to guess that the troubled grandee came to disapprove of his own conduct. The artist who invented Sir Roy Vandervane well understood how a figure of achievement could be propelled into stupidity by the anguish of passing time. But Amis, in his second marriage, was no philanderer. There could have been several reasons for that. As any man can note by keeping an eye on the divorces in his generation, the second marriage has to work. But Amis's anxieties with Jane were not to do with the strain of being faithful. They were to do with the loss of desire. The fiction told the truth, and nowhere more conspicuously than in *Jake's Thing*, where the former cavalier ends up wearing a dinky little rubber ring to measure the flaccidity of the lance he had once followed into action.

For Jake's creator, the consequences of blaming himself for that indignity would have been drastic. He would have had to admit that he had come to such a pass all for the sake of a passing fancy. The answer was to blame the woman, a message he wrapped up by blaming women in general. In the strict sense, this was a turn-up for the books. Attacking one of his own best qualities, he produced, in the later novels from *Stanley and the Women* onwards, passages that made you wonder whether he was the same man who wrote the earlier ones. Surely the answer was that he wasn't. In matters of love, the man who goes out of his mind says that he is being true to his heart. Love having vanished, Amis was left with memories of folly, and no feelings left to steer by, except the one that underlay most of his life and all of his art. What could be more boring than marriage? A wrecked marriage. What could be more boring than a wrecked marriage? Another wrecked marriage. Time for a drink. Long after the husk became impossible to live with, Jane left him. She had been noble to stay.

Leader's book ends with the resurrection that preceded death. It was a blow for Amis when Jane left him, but also the end of an agony, because now he could go back home. Home has been defined as the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in, but Leader's closing account reminds us that Amis's unconventional arrangement was not a case of *Hilly*, now *Lady Kilmarnock*, graciously allowing the washed-up ex-husband to crawl in through the cat-flap of her castle. Those who need reminding, or telling for the first time, will have swallowed the impression put about by the media

that Hilly was exercising a retributive generosity. The facts reveal that there was a lot of generosity on the part of Amis. Lady Kilmarnock and her husband were broke. Amis, now Sir Kingsley, with an earning power that not even he could convert entirely into alcohol, was in a position to help. There was a lot in it for him – fearing the lonely dark above all other things, he was able to end his days in the crowded light – but he could distribute the seigneurial largesse only because of his commanding position. In his last phase he was no less the grand figure, and to underline the fact he produced a book that brought much of his subtlety back into play.

The Old Devils marks an artistic recovery not just because the humour is funny again but because something of his tenderness returns – the quality with which he is seldom credited, but which underlay all his literary powers, humour not excepted. In the cast of aged characters, the lovable woman has lost the bloom of Christine or Jenny. In fact she has gained a complete set of false teeth. But Rhiannon is still, or once again, the authentic Amisian love object. She is the proof that while lust might once have mattered too much, it was always love that mattered most. In life, even in his terminal misogyny, the one thing that never bored Amis was romance: the adventure that was still there at the end, in his mind if nowhere else. What was true for Larkin was equally true for Amis: the love of beauty was high on the list of all the things that made death so terrible. Both men had been sustained all their lives by the ideal of love, and when they spoke coarsely, either separately or to each other, it was to stave off fear of the oblivion that would take all that beauty from them.

In the journalistic aftermath of both these lives, evidence of their inner torments is viewed as the sure sign of their defeat. Viewing it as part of their triumph will take time, but it is bound to happen, because finally art wins out. If it hadn't already won out, there wouldn't be any journalistic aftermath. The typical purveyor of Ted-and-Sylvia stories to the broadsheets must be excused for trafficking in the marketable theme of reputations unravelling, but the only reason such a journeyman can't hear the all-pervasive voice of Larkin and Amis is that he is speaking with it. Together, Amis and Larkin gave the next generation the schooled yet bewitchingly conversational tone with which to talk about art as an everyday event, and about artiness as its enemy.

Their combined effect is omnipresent, and of the two it is a nice question which one resounds the most.

Quantitatively it has to be Amis: not just because novels reach more people than poems can, but because he was so funny. The last step, and the hardest to take, in assessing any comic writer, is to assert what should be an obvious truth, but one which always shyly hides: humour is not an overlay to seriousness. Humour is the thing itself, compressed and intensified into a civil code. The reason that Amis, when he failed, failed so catastrophically, was the same reason that a jet pilot stunt-flying close to the ground has no negligible version of getting things wrong. Comedy has to be astonishing or nothing, and Amis was astonishing often enough to make even the obtuse realize that there are truths which only comedy can state.

Unless we laugh at nothing, we laugh at truth to life: life in all its complexity, where people, even created people, are not just characters, but individuals. In the full flight of his comic depiction of Margaret Peel in *Lucky Jim*, Amis still pauses to remind us, at the moment of her true tears, that all the false tears were products of her neurosis, and that she was a figure of sympathy even though she drove everybody nuts. She was alive, and people are alive one at a time. At which point it is time to revisit all those academic wives at Princeton who threw themselves beneath the visiting Englishman in the splendour and promise of his energy and invention. They weren't really ninepins. They were individual women, and they fell for him because they knew he knew they were.

Clive James's *The Book of My Enemy : Collected verse, 1958–2003*, appeared in 2003, and the fourth volume of his *Unreliable Memoirs, North Face of Soho*, was published last year.

HAVE YOUR SAY

I was pleased that Clive James (TLS Feb., 2007) showed no mercy to Amis' critics. He put it very eloquently when he said: "If the subject did not possess the first [gifts] there would be no point discussing the second [crimes]." To see Amis merely as the sum of his sexual conquests is an appalling travesty to visit on a talented poet and writer. Amis, however politically incorrect he may have been, has left a body of work, ideas and mores that we keep biographers happy, active and remunerated for decades.

It would seem, according to some critics at least, that the women in Amis' life played no part whatever in their own seduction. Their ready consent as "falling like ninepins at Princeton" attests, meant they not only knew where they were going but that they were as anxious to get there as Amis.

Most women, quite rightly, like charming, attractive, intelligent and humorous men. Who can blame them? What's the alternative?

Yours

Ed Hart

Ed Hart, Glasgow, Scotland

A welcome corrective to all the lurid revisionist tripe that's been splattering certain newspapers (the low point being an interview, late last year, with an obviously unguarded Hilly); too bad it's just a drop in the bucket...as common sense and mercy often are. So well-written that it very nearly came to Larkin's rescue, too.

Steven Augustine, Berlin, Germany

Didn't Amis talk about 'bullshit detectors' instead of 'boredom detectors' in Lucky Jim?

Yeppity yep, Holyoke, MA

[Read all comments \(11 \)](#)

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