

FEB/MAR 2008

Take a Dipso like You

Kingsley Amis's advice on all matters alcoholic may not be helpful, but it is always lively.

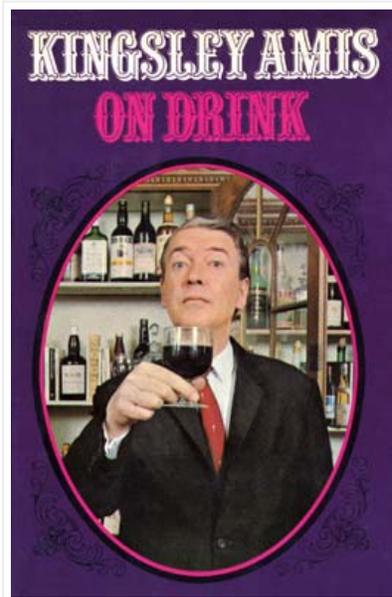
BY ALEXANDER WAUGH

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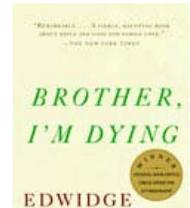
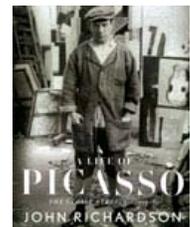
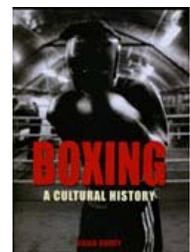
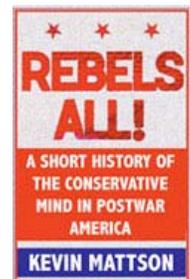
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First edition of Kingsley Amis's *On Drink*, 1972.

Photographs of the novelist Kingsley Amis, taken between his fiftieth birthday in April 1972 and his death in October 1995, sometimes show a resplendent sheen on his forehead, nose, and cheeks. This is what some people call "sweat alcohol," a common problem among heavy drinkers of shorts and beer. On both of the occasions on which I had the pleasure to meet this funny and distinguished man, he drank whisky throughout lunch and by the afternoon was wearing that slightly bewildered, slightly aggressive, slightly penitent expression known as the "Scotch gaze," a look familiar to all who have walked the streets of Glasgow or Aberdeen at closing time on a Friday night. It is an expression curiously unique to whisky drinkers. You can often tell a man's tippie just by looking at him. Beer drinkers have bellies, gin swiggers sallow jowls, and wine, port, and brandy drinkers a "Rudolph conk," formed by a rosaceous labyrinth of tiny, luminous blood vessels assembling itself on the nose.

Amis drank like a proverbial fish from boyhood through adulthood. In his early days, when he was poor and unrecognized, he went for whatever gave the most alcohol for the smallest amount of money. This method is known in England as "drinking the park-bench bottle," because it is by looking under park benches, where the tramps have left their empties, that one may discover, without having to work it out for oneself, which drink gets one drunkest for the fewest pennies. Young Amis discovered for himself





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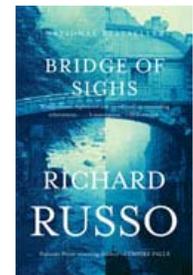
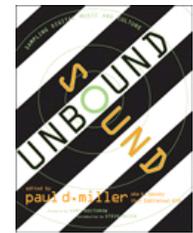
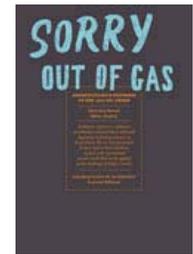
that for twenty-five old pennies he could get himself plastered on three barley wines, a pint of rough cider, and a small whisky. As his means improved, he moved on to beer as his daily tippie and from beer advanced to Scotch whisky, of which he drank so much that by the late '70s, his monthly bill for the stuff was one thousand pounds. "Scotch whisky is my desert-island drink," he said. "I mean not only that it is my favorite but that for me it comes nearer than anything else to being a drink for all occasions and all times of day." Like most writers, however distinguished, Amis was not a particularly rich man. "If I had pots of money," he used to say, "the only thing I would buy is people to carry me around."

In the last decades of his life, he became a stickler for routine, finishing work at twelve noon, when the first Scotch was promptly downed, then to his club (the Garrick) for lunch, where he stayed drinking until five thirty, before leaving to be somewhere else for drinks at six. Every Thursday (or was it Saturday?), he went to dinner with his son, Martin, and daughter-in-law, Antonia, at Chesterton Road, and every Thursday (or was it Saturday?), he expected to be served the same meal—tinned potato salad and pressed tongue. He had no interest in food ("irrelevant rubbish," he called it), but the kitchen cupboard at Antonia's house (Martin now lives in Regent's Park with his second wife) is bursting to this day with old bottles of strong sticky drink that were brought for him to have on his weekly visits, before, during, and after dinner.

He usually managed to get himself into a taxi and back home to bed ready for work the next morning, but not always. There were occasions when drink sent him crashing to the floor, from where he would crawl, on all fours, up the stairs to bed. Once, he broke his right arm not looking where he was going, while a fall in his bathroom in March 1982 left him with a shattered tibia and fibula. This last accident inspired him to abstain from drink altogether—for nearly six months.

By some miracle, he managed through the daily haze of whisky and sweat alcohol to produce a consistently funny and well-written run of novels, poems, short stories, articles, reviews, and memoirs. "Any proper writer ought to be able to write about anything," he used to say, and by forcing himself into committing five hundred words to paper every morning, he succeeded in doing just that. He wrote a book about science fiction, one about James Bond, essays on politics, on Tennyson, on Harold Wilson, on British songs, and three books, needless to say, about alcohol. Two of these *On Drink* (1972) and *Everyday Drinking* (1983)—are collections of columns originally written for the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Express*, while the third, *How's Your Glass?* (1984), is a whimsical quiz on booze.

Before examining them in any detail, it is worth ruminating for a moment on the question of whether a person who drinks as much as Kingsley Amis did is, or is not, a reliable expert on the subject. You would think that someone who had devoted so much of his life to alcohol would know a thing or two about it—and he certainly did—but are the taste recommendations of alcoholics useful to people who drink only moderately? As an immoderate imbiber myself, I am not the best placed to answer this question, though I cannot imagine that the average two-glasses-of-wine-a-day man is going to think very highly of some of Amis's recommendations—Bloody Mary with tomato ketchup and no Tabasco, red wine with lemonade, a pint of Guinness mixed with gin and ginger beer (this he erroneously claims to be



the invention of my grandfather Evelyn Waugh), Scotch whisky with fried eggs. And who but a committed alcoholic could possibly wish for a glass of the “Tigne Rose,” an Amis cocktail made up of one tot of gin, one tot of whisky, one tot of rum, one tot of vodka, and one tot of brandy? Alcoholics have special cravings that obfuscate, warp, and exaggerate their tastes and, like committed sex maniacs, are often prepared to try almost anything. For the most dedicated drinker, when there is nothing else around, any menthylated spirit will do.

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Offered the choice of red or white wine at a stand-up party the other day, I explained that my stomach objected to the acid produced by wine without food, whereas spirits were all right. “Sorry to hear that,” said the host. “I’m afraid there’s nothing else in the house.” My stomach took five minutes to change its mind.

Amis freely admits in all three books that he knows very little about wine, the reason given that his father, a clerk at the Colman’s Mustard factory, was not rich enough to give him good wine as a boy. Nevertheless, he blithely recommends Hock and Moselle over white Burgundy, while enjoining his readers to drink huge amounts of cheap table wine from France, Spain, Portugal, or Austria—“the better it is the worse the hangover.” “Make up your mind to drink wine *in quantity*,” he urges, and elsewhere: “No wine at all goes with . . . strong or ripe cheeses, bacon and tomatoes, sausages.” In fact, he says, “Wine doesn’t go with all food, or even most food.” Really?

No, I do not think that the great novelist’s taste recommendations are particularly good or useful, but his books on the subject are thoroughly worthwhile reading. For one thing, Amis was incapable of constructing a dull sentence. His writing was consistently clear, lively, and precise (surely the envy of any who pursue this exacting trade) and above all very, very funny. Even in these three short lavatory-side booze books, dismissed, no doubt, as hackwork, one finds at least one excellent joke per page. They usually take the form of a simple description, a passing epithet, or a self-deprecating remark. He describes the hangover as “a great restraining influence” on our civilization and Harvey Warbanger as “some reeling idiot from California”; a cocktail of cheap Hungarian wine with vodka and “some sticky liqueur” on ice, he states, will “add interest to even the lousiest leg of the World Cup.” His style is always jaunty and cheerful, with something of a modern Wodehouse about it, even when he is launched on one of his famous tirades:

Alcohol science is full of crap. It will tell you, for instance, that drink does not really warm you up, it only makes you feel warm—oh, I see; and it will go on about alcohol being not a stimulant but a depressant, which turns out to mean that it depresses qualities like shyness and self-criticism, and so makes you behave as if you had been stimulated—thanks. In the same style, the said science will maintain that alcohol does not really fatten you, it only sets in train a process at the end of which you weigh more. Nevertheless, strong drink does, more than anything else taken by mouth, apart from stuff like cement, cram on the poundage.

Of course, “alcohol science” was never quite so full of crap when it agreed

with Amis's own way of thinking. When red wine was declared good for the circulation, he was among the noisiest supporters of the scientists who discovered it, and he idolized two American researchers, or "investigators," as he called them, named Hoyt and Rothes:

These two great men conducted at some time in the sixties a tremendous survey into the affects of alcohol on Western civilisation. After not sparing us endless harrowing facts about the premature deaths, wrecked careers and broken homes, they still came to the conclusion that without it—alcohol—our society would have collapsed from its own internal stresses about the year 1912.

On Drink, the first of Amis's three alcohol books, was published in hardback for one pound with a few cheering illustrations by the late Nicholas Bentley. It sold very well, mainly to men who had followed his columns in the *Daily Telegraph* and needed factual information to assist them while sitting on the lavatory—a common breed, according to recent market research for the book trade. In the opening paragraph of his introduction, Amis sets out his stall. No animal, he says, is capable of laughter. All human societies, past and present, have enjoyed speaking and drinking. "I am not denying that we share other important pleasures with the brute creation, merely stating the basic fact that conversation, hilarity and drink are connected in a profoundly human, peculiarly intimate way."



Martin and Kingsley Amis in the late '70s.

Having thus elevated the role of drink to the highest status in human civilization, Amis proceeds with a series of disconnected essays on different types of alcohol, some dreadful-sounding cocktail recipes (see above), a good piece on the types of glasses and tools for making and drinking different beverages, some not very sage reflections on wine, and some even worse ideas about what should and should not be drunk with what food. All enjoyable to read, of course, but what is best in this book are the author's perorations not on the taste of alcohol, but on its effects. No one who has read his novels could deny that he is the grand master when it comes to describing different levels of inebriation—feeling sober, that first drink, the sensations of getting drunk, blind drunkenness, and, of course, the hangover. His 1954 campus novel, *Lucky Jim*, contains a passage that

is now regarded as the sine qua non of the literary hangover:

Dixon was alive again. Consciousness was upon him before he could get out of the way; not for him the slow, gracious wandering from the halls of sleep, but a summary, forcible ejection. He lay sprawled, too wicked to move, spewed up like a broken spider-crab on the tarry shingle of the morning. The light did him harm, but not as much as looking at things did; he resolved, having done it once, never to move his eyeballs again. A dusty thudding in his head made the scene before him beat like a pulse. His mouth had been used as a latrine by some small creature of the night, and then as its mausoleum. During the night, too, he'd somehow been on a cross-country run and then been expertly beaten up by secret police. He felt bad.

One may question Amis's authority on matters of taste, but his expertise on the hangover is second to none. Some of his hangover-remedy suggestions may appear a little distasteful, especially to teetotaling feminists: "If your wife or other partner is beside you, and (of course) willing, perform the sexual act as vigorously as you can." The key to Amis's definition of the hangover is that it takes two distinct forms. There is the physical hangover, about which we all know something, and there is the metaphysical hangover, which he claims to be more common in older men. This latter form is recognized by depressive delusions. Here, Amis is particularly vivid:

When that ineffable compound of depression, sadness (these two are not the same), anxiety, self-hatred, sense of failure and fear for the future begins to steal over you, start telling yourself that what you have is a hangover. You are not sickening for anything, you have not suffered a minor brain lesion, you are not all that bad at your job, your family and friends are not leagued in a conspiracy of barely maintained silence about what a shit you are, you have not come at last to see life as it really is, and there is no use crying over spilt milk.

How's Your Glass? is neither worth reprinting nor buying secondhand unless for the purpose of completing a Kingsley Amis collection. It consists of difficult and dated quiz questions unlikely to be of use even to men on the lavatory: "Can you define the following: a. Tokay Aszru, b. Tokay Escencia, c. Tokay Szamorodni?" To which I can only answer, "No, and nor do I wish to." In fairness, both questions and answers are often humorous, and Amis clearly enjoyed thinking them up and writing them down. "Compiling this questionnaire suited me down to the ground," he writes in the introduction. "It put together in a unique and pleasurable way my abiding partiality for the subject, the attraction of a kind of writing new to me and an outlet for my starved didactic instinct, and was great fun to assemble."

Later this year, Bloomsbury will offer the trio of books as a single volume titled *Everyday Drinking*. The republished *Every Day Drinking* consists of a series of *Express* articles seamlessly stitched together into one long, discursive essay with lively cartoons by Merrily Harpur. Naturally, some of the old ground from *On Drink* is covered here—praise for Hoyt and Rothes, a few hangover tips, a good rant against greasy English pubs, delight in

hock and impatience with food—but there is plenty of new stuff, too: more disgusting cocktail recipes, a pleasing diatribe against women who ask for white wine before dinner, and an interesting passage in which Amis suggests that you do not need to drink alcohol in order to get a hangover (ginger beer does the trick just as well).

Curmudgeon is the word that is used—perhaps overused—to describe Kingsley Amis. Shallow wags also label him a right-wing reactionary, a misogynist, an anti-Semite, a brute, a pig, an ass, and heaven knows what in between. But from these three little books alone, he emerges as an intelligent, likable, honest, and excellently funny fellow. He had a large and dedicated circle of friends. At his death, he was widely mourned. Few, I suspect, will wish to try out his filthy cocktails, but these books (especially *On Drink*) may inspire some to read or to reread his novels and others to raise their glasses of dry white Burgundy to the memory of this extraordinarily interesting man.

Alexander Waugh is the author, most recently, of *Fathers and Sons: The Autobiography of a Family* (Nan A. Talese, 2007).

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