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Kingsley Amis was a drunk who hated me, but he was no racist, says his second wife

by CORINNA HONAN

Even now, 27 years after she crept out of the house with just two suitcases, Elizabeth Jane Howard tortures herself with regrets about the end of her marriage.

Should she have stayed? Could she have made a difference to Kingsley Amis's final years, when he was drinking a whole bottle of Macallan single malt by mid-morning before progressing to tequila, gin and Campari?

What made it worse was that the novelist never forgave her. Meeting Jane - as she is known - and leaving his first wife, Hilly, was the most disastrous thing that had ever happened to him, he said later.

And he twisted the knife with a series of bitter, misogynous novels (which Jane has never read) while successfully convincing himself that he had never really loved her at all.

For Jane, the pain of this denouement was utterly crushing. She never responded to Kingsley's public attacks and saw him only twice in the 15 years before his death.

"Once, we happened to turn up at the same party," she recalls. "He hunched his shoulders and said: 'My wife has come - I'm leaving.' The second time I saw him by chance was in a restaurant. He deliberately turned his back on me and I felt my knees giving way."

By the time he was clearly on his death bed, purple-faced and clinically obese, he was a grotesque parody of the goodlooking author of Lucky Jim who had seduced the most stunning woman novelist of her generation.

Desperately hoping to make her peace with him, Jane asked her stepson, Martin Amis, if Kingsley would like to see her one last time. But she was gently told that her presence would be unwelcome.

"I would have liked to have comforted Kingsley at the end," she says now, her low voice dipping with emotion.

"I would have known he looked awful and was wearing nappies and I don't think that would have made any difference to me. I did love him very much, you know."

It is love and her inbuilt sense of fair play that lies behind Elizabeth Jane Howard's surprise intervention in a literary dispute that has been raging through the columns of British newspapers over the past month.

The protagonists are her stepson Martin, once regarded as Britain's most promising young novelist, and Terry Eagleton, a balding Marxist professor of cultural theory at Manchester University.

Just as Amis was taking up a post as professor of creative writing at the same university, Prof Eagleton took issue with some remarks that he had made a year ago about Muslims.

"There's a definite urge - don't you have it - to say the Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order," Amis had said in a magazine interview. He went on to suggest that Muslims should be subject to deportations, strip-searches, curtailing of freedoms and bans on travel.

All of which, said 64-year-old Eagleton, was reminiscent of "the ramblings of a British National Party thug".

He went on to attack Martin's father, Kingsley, as "a racist, anti-Semitic boor, a drinksodden, self-hating reviler of women, gays and liberals".

And he jeered: "Amis *fi*ls has clearly learnt more from him than how to turn a shapely phrase."

Insults have continued to fly between the two heavyweights - though if imaginative use of language were the test, then Martin Amis would undoubtedly be ahead on points. "Ideological relic," he cried. "Slovenly!" "A disgrace to the profession!" "Deluded flailer and stirrer!"

Into this maelstrom sailed the stately Elizabeth Jane Howard, with a letter sent to a newspaper that refuted the accusation that her ex-husband had been a racist or an anti-Semitic boor. At the same time, her brother, Colin, who is gay, pointed out that he had lived with Jane and her husband for 17 years and regarded Kingsley as a close friend.

End of story? Well, not quite. Elizabeth Jane Howard, whose own novels - including *The Cazalet Chronicles* and *Falling* - are justifiably acclaimed, has plenty more to say. And not all of it will make comfortable reading for her 58-year-old stepson, Martin.

It is week three of the row when I arrive at her mid-18th century cottage in Suffolk. Now aged 84, Jane is a tall, majestic figure whose face retains signs of the beauty that once toppled a series of luminaries, including the poet Cecil Day Lewis and the writer Laurie Lee.

Although she can still walk, she is now so afflicted by arthritis, asthma and osteoporosis that she uses a motorised buggy to help her get around the luscious meadow that meanders down from the house to a river.

This summer, after having successfully seen off cancer, she suffered two mini-strokes while at home on her own - "a horrible fright" - but they appear to have left no ill-effects.

With such reminders of mortality nibbling at her heels, she seems to have shed any remaining inhibitions about speaking the truth as she sees it, even if it may not always be welcome. And her first target, naturally, is Professor Terry Eagleton.

"Two nights before I wrote my letter," she says, "there was a startling clip on a television programme of a cobra pouring out venom - not just once but four times. I was amazed at how much there was. And I suddenly thought that Terry Eagleton is a bit like a spitting cobra.

"I can't see the point of being him - that's really what I think. What he seems to do is just go on about what he thinks isn't any good rather than what he believes in.

"That seems to me pointless. I'm bored by what Terry Eagleton doesn't think is any good. I do rather pity his poor students - a very jaundiced view of life they must be getting."

I point out that even Martin Amis has admitted that Eagleton got one thing partly right - that Kingsley was mildly anti-Semitic, by his own confession. And the novelist Julian Barnes and his wife, the literary agent Pat Kavanagh - who grew up in South Africa - are unlikely to forget a mid-Eighties dinner at the Garrick Club with Kingsley.

What was needed in South Africa, he informed them, was "to shoot as many blacks as possible".

Pat is said to have fled to the loo in tears.

Ah, says, Jane, she can only speak for the 18 years that she was with Kingsley. And, as for the dinner with Julian and Pat - "I think he was taking the mickey out of them a bit to see what they'd say, because I know that Pat toed a fashionable, liberal line, and he never liked that in people.

"I wasn't there, but I know that they had a major row which resulted in no-speaks. He always enjoyed provoking people, particularly if he thought they didn't have a sense of humour. It was even more fun when they didn't, really. He was rude about everybody. No holds were barred."

Even racist remarks, then? "I know he despised people who were racist. But, after I left him, I should think he probably *did* make racist and anti-Semitic remarks. Drink made him very nasty and capable of presenting a behaviour you wouldn't recognise."

In all likelihood, she reflects, he wouldn't have meant his comments to be taken as racist or anti-Semitic, any more than he meant people to take him seriously when he talked about "a bloody Frenchman" or someone's "filthy dog".

She has to admit, though, that his playful rudeness could be offensive. "One of the worst times, when I was still with him, was at a lunch party in Scotland, when he told the conductor Claudio Abbado that Abbado didn't know anything about Mozart.

"That was extremely embarrassing. I don't know whether Kingsley did it because he was in a bad mood, but he was extremely drunk."

It was Kingsley's stupendous alcohol consumption that made their once-happy marriage untenable. In their last years together, he would seldom drink before 6.30pm, but then he would down a whole bottle of Scotch before turning in.

His libido plummeted - he blamed Jane - and he simmered with resentment over practically anything she said or did.

"Even Martin said it was a pity that his father had dishonoured me so outrageously," she says. "He was offensive to me. He said I never told the truth, lied my way out of every situation. He not only didn't love me but stopped liking me."

After her departure, he was plagued by intense and deeprooted phobias - of the dark, of being alone, of Tubes, trains and planes - which could usually be assuaged only by yet more alcohol.

Not until Jane read Zachary Leader's recent biography of Kingsley did she understand quite the extent to which he was gripped by these neuroses.

"Whether knowing then would have made any difference, I don't know," she says. I feel I've grown up a lot since those days, so I could probably have coped with it all so much better now. But it's unlikely I could have coped with it successfully. He was fairly hellbent on destruction. He was on a kind of motorway, and there weren't any exits.

"But I do know that afterwards, a lot of the spite and malice and hatred of me was put on. He felt very angry with me for leaving him, and very frightened. It wasn't actually necessary to turn me into a completely despicable person - but he did."

Her relationship with her stepson, on the other hand, somehow survived both the jolt of his parents' divorce (after infidelities on both sides) and all his father's unhinged rantings about Jane.

It was she who had taken on most of the responsibility for Martin's upbringing from the age of 13, introducing him to the works of Jane Austen and later arranging for him to go to a crammer to prepare for the Oxford University entrance exam.

And it wasn't long after leaving Oxford that he was being hailed as the new *enfant terrible* of English letters. He was also definitely left of centre, which made his remarks on Muslims all the more surprising. However, in the past couple of weeks, he has been carefully dampening them down, saying they were the product of a passing mood.

His stepmother, though, has no qualms about fanning the flames a little higher with her own views on Islam. Having read the Koran in a reputable Penguin translation, she says, she has been amazed at the amount of "revenge and spite that would leave the average set of Greek gods gasping".

Also, she adds, "there's something very unrealistic and unpleasant about those 72 virgins that are supposed to be waiting in Paradise. Where are they coming from? What do their parents think about them being prostituted for martyrs?"

It is a very Kingsley-ish remark - deliberately provocative and teasing, an ember that might well set a Hampstead dinner party alight.

I wonder if she thinks that Martin has much in common with his father? No, she says, they are very different people - "and I think Kingsley is a better novelist".

KOBA The Dread, Martin Amis's 2002 polemic about Stalin, was in her view "an admirable condensation that would be very useful to a 16-year-old for seeing what happens when you have an autocracy. But I don't think it's a good book about Stalin because it was really taken from a lot of other people's very serious work on the subject.

"Martin's brilliant with language but it's what he uses it *about* that I'm more concerned about. He takes risks and he's brave in his writing - that's good. And there's no knowing where someone like that might go.

"What worries me is that I don't think he's quite interested enough in human nature. They are the two weapons you have as a novelist, language and an interest in human nature, and they need to be in balance."

She remembers being astounded once to see a large poster plastered over a wall in Paddington station that contained only two words: Martin Amis. Since then, however, her stepson's reputation has taken a series of knocks - particularly for Koba and his last full-length novel, *Yellow Dog* ("not-knowing-where-to-look-bad", according to one reviewer).

Amis speculated in a recent interview that the unusual hostility generated by these books must be something to do with the fact that he is Kingsley's son.

"I'm like Prince Charles," he said. "He is reviled for where he comes from, with some reason."

His stepmother thinks this is nonsense. "I don't think it's anything to do with Kingsley. If it were, there would have been a lot of unfortunate comparisons made - 'hasn't lived up to his father', and so on. I can see, though, that thinking this is a salve for Martin if he's feeling wounded.

"What Martin's suffering from is the very British syndrome of people being knocked off their pedestals if they've been fashionable and successful. You've just got to weather it. He's been extraordinarily lucky - everything went his way with amazing ease. I'm sure it's very painful now, but this phase will be no more lasting than the first was.

"And I think that [the backlash] may also come from Martin having taken himself a bit too seriously. That's a danger with people who've been very successful. They take themselves at everyone's estimate of them - and if you're a serious practising artist, it's your own view of yourself that you've got to worry about, not other people's."

Kingsley, for all his faults, never behaved like a great novelist, she feels. "That's one of the things that I loved about him. All the serious artists I've known are really quite humble. They just get on with the job, and try to do it better each time, and recognise that they're never going to do it as well as they hoped they would."

As for Jane herself, she continues to write each morning and hopes soon to finish her 14th novel, *Love All*. It will be about how to give love, how to receive it - and what the consequences are when love is absent. On this last theme in particular, she is likely to have penetrating insights.

Like the heroine of Jane Austen's classic novel *Persuasion*, she can truly claim the privilege "of loving longest when existence or when hope is gone".

"I always hoped Kingsley would forgive me for leaving him," she says. "Always. The second parting, when he died, was more painful than the first because there could never be a resolution."

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