

Philip Larkin's women

When it comes to women, I give you up, Kingsley Amis wrote to Philip Larkin. Although the poet – bald, peevish and apathetic – had several romantic relationships, most enduringly with the indomitable academic Monica Jones, his private life was ultimately a failure, reflects Martin Amis

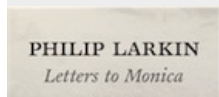
Martin Amis
The Guardian, Friday 22 October 2010
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Philip Larkin and Monica Jones at the memorial service for John Betjeman at Westminster Abbey, June 1984. Photograph: Daily Express/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

The age of the literary correspondence is dying, slowly but surely electrocuted by the superconductors of high modernity. This expiration was locked into a certainty about 20 years ago; and although William Trevor and VS Naipaul, say, may yet reward us, it already sounds fogeyish to reiterate that, no, we won't be seeing, and we won't be wanting to see, the selected faxes and emails, the selected texts and tweets of their successors. [Philip Larkin's *Letters to Monica*](#), published by Faber, covers the period 1945-70, and passively evokes it: digs and lodgings ("I have put in for a flatlet!!!"), pre-decimal currency ("I owe you 21/1d I think – 24/11 plus 1/2 minus 5/-"), *The Archers*, Pickford's Movers and myxomatosis; its settings are remorselessly provincial, mainly Leicester and Hull (and Belfast, true), with so-called holidays in York, Sark, Lincoln, Poolewe, Bournemouth ("I hope you got my card from Pocklington"). The volume will be of vital interest to all admirers of Larkin's work, and to all students of the abysmal mystery of Larkin's life, with its singularly crippled eros. Much of the time, though, readers will be thinking that the "literary correspondence" is something we're well shot of – a postwar embarrassment, like child labour, meat rationing and outdoor toilets.

Letters to Monica
by Philip Larkin, edited by Anthony Thwaite



Sexual intercourse, as everyone knows, began in 1963 (which "was rather late for me"). But what preceded it?

Up to then there'd only been
A sort of bargaining,
A wrangle for the ring,

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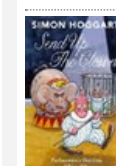
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A shame that started at sixteen
And spread to everything.

Larkin got to know Monica Jones in the late 1940s, at which stage he was wrangling over a ring with Ruth Bowman, who was a 16-year-old sixth-former when they met. The wrangle with Ruth lasted eight years; the wrangle with Monica would last for 35, leading to the same outcome. Ruth's frail yet defiant homeliness can only be described as quite extraordinarily *dated*. Monica was a robust and comparatively worldly blonde, with well-shaped bones (but ogreish teeth). A lecturer in English at Leicester, she was a small-community "character": she wore tartan when she discussed *Macbeth*, and in general favoured dirndl skirts, low-cut tops and markedly

cumbrous jewellery. But her defining characteristic was her voice – or, rather, her overpowering idiolect.

This is an extract from the most memorable letter in the book (October 1952): "Dear, I must sound very pompous & huffy . . . It's simply that in my view you would do much better to revise, drastically, the amount you say and the intensity with which you say it . . . I do want to urge you, with all love & kindness, to *think about how much* you say & *how* you say it. I'd even go so far as to make 3 rules: One, *Never* say more than two sentences, or *very rarely* three, without waiting for an answer or comment from whoever you're talking to; Two, abandon *altogether* your harsh didactic voice, & use *only* the soft musical one (except in special cases); & Three, don't do more than *glance* at your interlocutor (wrong word?) once or twice while speaking. You're getting a habit of *boring* your face up or round into the features of your listener – don't do it! It's most trying."

Larkin's tone is wholly unmalicious; it is affectionately, even pleadingly protective. And he at once retreats, explaining that those "3 rules" are merely "simple points of technique". We may take it as significant that the word "boring" is used here in an unexpected application – as a verb rather than a naked adjective. The person this letter describes is not just an individual but a familiar and fearsome type: the congenial, and unstoppable, windbag.

This collection qualifies as inside information; so it is not indecorous, I hope, to add some inside information of my own. Although the trajectory of Larkin's relationship with Kingsley Amis was already evident in the 1992 *Selected Letters* (edited, as is the current volume, by Anthony Thwaite), *Letters to Monica* adds substance and detail: undergraduate infatuation, measured disaffection, growing irritation, unregulated envy (envy being best understood as empathy gone wrong), a bourgeois distaste for bohemianism ("Patsy says [so-and-so's] house is *filthy*. I pressed her: 'As filthy as Kingsley's?'"), and finally a settled ill-will, occasionally tempered by nostalgia. Kingsley's feelings were more constant. But there was a Larkinian peculiarity that filled him with almost lifelong incredulity and dismay: Philip and the women. And, most especially, Philip and Monica.

In 1948 or 1949 Kingsley spoke slightly of – or quite possibly to – Bowman. What followed was an alarming froideur. ("Kingsley was *petrified*," my mother later told me. "He thought he'd never see Philip again.") But Larkin extended no such chivalric shielding to Monica Jones. This is from an Amis-Larkin letter of the same period: "It doesn't surprise me in the *least* that Monica is [studying George Crabbe, 1754-1832, poet and parson]; he's *exactly* the sort of *priggish, boring, featureless* (especially *that*; there isn't *anything* about him, is there?), *long-winded, inessential* man she'd go for; if she can see beauty in a derelict shit-house, she must have more [sensitivity] than you. Talking of [shit-houses] . . ."

In addition, as is well-known, Larkin acquiesced and indeed connived in Amis's merciless portrait of Monica (as Margaret Peel) in *Lucky Jim* (1954). Margaret is not only plain, theatrical, garrulous and of course boring; she is also a lying manipulator bent on entrapment. And Larkin would continue to regale Kingsley with grimly jovial asides about Monica's affectations – and, for instance, about her facial resemblance to Stan Laurel (an improvement, one supposes, on Oliver Hardy).

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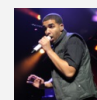


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Ruth and Monica shared a certain trait: a restless self-importance unaccompanied by the slightest distinction (Monica, for all her strong opinions, published not a single word in her entire career). Two of the other three women in Larkin's life were similarly "superior": the aggressively "permissive" Patsy Strang (who drank herself to death at the age of 48); and the virginal, religious and implausibly naive Maeve Brennan (who claimed, in her maturity, not to know the meaning of the word "wank"). Only Betty Mackereth, Larkin's "loaf-haired secretary", seemed cheerfully content in her being. When it comes to women, as Kingsley wrote (in a style not to everyone's taste), "I fucking give you up". My mother, who revered Larkin, used to say, "Well, don't forget he went bald in his 20s. And he had a stutter. I think women frightened him." Then why, one wonders, were the women he chose so frightening?

And why was it Monica he always ended up with – Monica, the most frightening of them all? To describe Larkin's half of it as "love-hate" is perhaps too bold. On the positive side we register an urgent warmth, a snug intimacy of jokes and whimsies, and Monica's courageous acceptance of Larkin's intense melancholia – melancholia not as a mood or a susceptibility, but as a besetting Jonsonian humour ("black bile"). Larkin could be frightening too (and without much provocation): "No, I really can't do anything at all – it really is *disgusting*, I feel tearful with rage – why must [the landlady] leave her door open so that her filthy radio *floods the whole house?* . . . It really affects me strongly: a kind of spiritual claustrophobia – I can't get out, & can't get away, there's no way out, I can't stand it! Oh *hell*. How long will this go on, wasted time, wasted wasted wasted . . ." All this Monica shouldered and palliated. Still, on the negative side, we register Larkin's solemn exasperation, and his suppressed hostility and contempt. As early as 1953 Larkin told Strang why he was abandoning *The New World Symphony* (his third novel and his last attempt at fiction): "You know, I *can't* write this book: if it is to be written at all it should be largely an attack on Monica, & I *can't* do that, not while we are still on friendly terms, and I'm not sure it even interests me sufficiently to go on."

It is hard to construe this singular blend of animus and apathy. Even the "attack" on her bores him. So why did he cleave to Monica for another 32 years – till death did them part? He knew why. The reasons he gives Monica for not marrying her (often rehearsed) are the same reasons he surely gave himself for not leaving her. Failures of energy and courage, and a vast inertia.


Well, there was sex, too. Or was there? No indication is given, in the early letters, of the transition from friendship to romance. Turning to Andrew Motion's biography, we learn that Larkin "had come to me", as Monica quaintly put it, by the summer of 1950. (What would be the male equivalent of this phrase? "It was in August that I first took her"?) But such brooding cadences seem inapposite. "If it were announced that all sex would cease on 31 December," writes the hot 32-year-old on 15 December 1954, "my way of life wouldn't change at all." Evidently, though, they fumbled along. "[O]ften I'm quite uncertain whether you are feeling anything . . . you rarely *seem* to like anything more than anything else"; "I'm sorry our lovemaking fizzled out . . . I'm sorry to have failed you!" Larkin seeks a kind of safety in portraying himself as the omega male. Anyway, "taking care of business" (to paraphrase Aretha Franklin) was definitely *not* this man's game.

But these are turbid waters, thick with suspended matter, and go far deeper than Larkin's admittedly preternatural indolence. I defy any man – even the most self-sufficient poodlefaker – to read the following without a twinge: "I think . . . someone might do a little research on some of the *inherent qualities* of sex – its *cruelty*, its *bullyingness*, for instance. It seems to me that *bending someone else to your will* is the very stuff of sex, by force or neglect if you are male, by spitefulness or nagging or scenes if you are female. And what's more, both sides *would sooner have it that way than not at all*. I wouldn't. And I suspect that means not that I can enjoy sex in my own quiet way but that I can't enjoy it at all. It's like rugby football: either you like kicking & being kicked, or your soul cringes away from the whole affair. There's no way of *quietly* enjoying rugby football."

"In bed," the poet Ian Hamilton once told me, "you don't want to be too clear-headed about what you're doing." Larkin's clarity, his almost clinical over-sensitivity (naturally vital to his genius), could not be muted or muffled. This was his curse.

Or one of them. In Dostoevsky's *Demons* (1872) Varvara Petrovna


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accuses a portly valetudinarian bachelor of being "an old woman" – a verdict she promptly refines to "an old bag". Larkin, in his daily dealings (haircut, train ticket, utilities bill, new pullover, salaried employment), had a fair bit of the old bag in him ("I think there's a lot of infection about these days," he typically quavers, "upsetting one's insides: with all these foreigners about [in Hull, in 1966], one is never completely well, as when abroad"). There was, of course, a prominent old woman in his life – his mother, whose solitary widowhood lasted 30 years: "For her the daily round is hideous with traps, and dangerous with hidden ambush, and calamity: it is all she can do to creep through it unscathed. She . . . spends the time thinking about next summer's thunder-storms, gas taps, electricity switches, dark clouds, and I don't know what." Eva Larkin, then, in combination with the long-deceased Sydney (clever, cynical, despotic and pro-Nazi even after the outbreak of the second world war), might be expected to leave her son a heavy legacy.

"[M]y mother seems to be resuming her normal whining panicky grumbling maddening manner," he writes, perhaps self-revealingly. On the whole, though, Larkin tries to resist Freudian entendres and psychological determinisms: "[I]f one starts blaming one's parents, well, one would never stop! Butler said that anyone who was still worrying about his parents at 35 was a fool, but he certainly didn't forget them himself, and I think the influence they exert is enormous . . . I never remember my parents making a single spontaneous gesture of affection towards each other, for instance."

And the instance certainly hurts and connects. In an unpublished memoir (quoted in Motion's biography), Larkin wrote: "When I try to tune into my childhood, the dominant emotions I pick up are, overwhelmingly, fear and boredom . . . I never left the house without the sense of walking into a cooler, cleaner, saner and pleasanter atmosphere." Feelings of guilt, and possibly a desire for utter self-immolation, subjected Larkin to a recurrent temptation: that of setting up house with Eva. On this question Monica was impressively firm: "don't be robbed! don't be robbed of your soul!"

Monica Jones had many other virtues, chief among them her kindness and gentleness; she was stoical and unshockable, and could stand her ground under the awful searchlight of Larkin's candour and truthfulness. Thwaite quotes sparingly but tellingly from her letters (some of which were two or three times the length of this review), in which she also emerges as a tenacious literary critic, and an exceptionally close reader of Larkin's works in progress: it is startling to see how hard and how gingerly he struggled with poems that we now regard as etched in flint ("Church Going", say, or "The Whitsun Weddings"). From Larkin's viewpoint, of course, her main strength was her toleration of meagre rewards: "I accept, don't I, & *without* private reservation or grudge," she wrote in 1962, "that you don't like me enough to marry me." She accepted much else: his emotional sluggishness, and his morbid dread of effort in any sphere except poetry.


The fact that Larkin made little effort with Monica is everywhere apparent in these pages. His *Selected Letters* constitutes a literary event of the first order (alongside, for example, the imminent *Saul Bellow: Letters*). But the present book will remain a literary curiosity. Here, Larkin's prose is habitually perfunctory and pressureless: "Sun still shining here, but 'not for long' I fear"; "Of course, I might have been peevish anyway. More than likely!"; "Sheldon [the new sub-librarian] has started: seems all right, but nothing to write home about"; "Oh dear. I don't seem to be able to write you the interesting sort of letter I should like to . . ."

"Aren't I writing badly," he writes – and quite rightly. "The day didn't get off to a very good start by my reading some stories by 'Flannery O'Connor' in the bath – horribly depressing American South things." American South "things"? Larkin would never have written so exhaustedly to Amis, or to Thwaite, or to Barbara Pym, or to Robert Conquest (the world-famous historian whom he monotonously belittles: "a cheerful idiot", "the feeblewit", "what an old bore Bob is"). An old bore is what Larkin becomes, all too often, when he writes to Monica. But this too was no doubt salutary: a regular collapse into the unadorned everyday.

"It seems to me that what we have is a kind of homosexual relationship, disguised . . . Don't you think yourself there's something fishy about it?" What I take this to mean is that Larkin wasn't very masculine and that Monica wasn't very feminine. They lived, or subsisted, in middlesex. The process was far advanced, if not complete, by 1982, when I spent a long evening in their company. Larkin was demurely diffident (though he

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retained his "impeccable attentive courtesy: grave, but at the same time sunlit," as Kingsley would say in his funeral address, four years later). As for Monica – well, despite her clothes (brown trousers of crushed velvet, wifebeater blouse, plus earrings the size of hula hoops), she resembled an all-in wrestler renowned for an indifference to the norms of fair play. She also dominated the evening, despite the presence of my father, as host. Larkin had clearly ceased to urge her to revise, drastically, the amount she said and the intensity with which she said it.

Still, one way or another, Monica enabled Larkin to cherish his crucial essences – and to turn them into immortal poetry. "I am sure you are the one of this generation!" she wrote in 1955. "I like your poetry better than any that I ever see – oh, I am sure you will make yr name! yr mark, do I mean – really be a real poet, I feel more sure of it than ever before, it is *you* who are the one . . ."

Many a muse, no doubt, has murmured these words to many a poet. But Monica happened to be right. Larkin's life was a failure; his work was a triumph. That is all that matters. Because the work, unlike the life, lives on.

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Parisa
23 October 2010 02:11AM

Really interesting article. Heard so many different things about Philip Larkin.

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Parisa
23 October 2010 02:13AM

Oops - pressed the wrong button & hadn't finished - heard so many things about Philip Larkin - some good some bad. He looks like an uncle of mine - enuf said.

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calumlaw
23 October 2010 03:25AM

[Recommend \(4\)](#)



23 October 2010 08:29 AM

'wifebeater blouse'!

You're gonna get it for that Mart...

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TimFootman

23 October 2010 08:39 AM

...and we won't be wanting to see, the selected faxes and emails, the selected texts and tweets of their successors.

Pity. So, 30 or 40 years down the line, we won't be able to read Louis Amis (one of Mart's sprogs) opining on the psychosexual agonies of Barnes, McEwan, Rushdie et al?

Recommend (10)

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CJUnderwood

23 October 2010 09:34 AM

That blend of animus and apathy isn't quite so singular.

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ClaireA

23 October 2010 10:00 AM



I find the Larkin-Amis relationship fascinating and am particularly intrigued by the final line:

Larkin's life was a failure; his work was a triumph. That is all that matters. Because the work, unlike the life, lives on.

Strikes me there's a lot to unpack in this.

It's worth reading this piece alongside Rachel Cooke's Observer feature: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/jun/27/philip-larkin-love-hate-women>. Both excellent in very different ways. Taken together, I think they demonstrate the complexity of responding to even the most diarised life.

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snark1

23 October 2010 10:24 AM

Entertainingly written article but thin on content, it seems to me. "I can't understand what they saw in one another." Well, no, but that's a very common phenomenon.

CP Snow, to whom Mr Amis would *not* like to be compared I imagine, put it much more succinctly and sensibly in one of his long-forgotten novels, when he has a character say of a marriage, "I have never found the views of outsiders on this topic to be worth listening to."

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pinkroom

23 October 2010 10:42 AM

Good piece Martin; especially the point about Larkin's clarity of thought getting in the way of successful love-making. His poem XXXII from The North Ship (sort of) Waiting for Breakfast... gives a real - and early - sense of this.

In his auto-bio John Sutherland is positively glowing about Monica Jones; he presents her as an inspirational and nurturing teacher at Leicester. He writes almost to the point of love- perhaps he was the undergrad she was writing about? That she didn't publish is perhaps an indication that her priorities were firmly fixed upon her students.

I was intrigued by the glimpse you gave of Larkin (from personal experience?) being frightening; would really love you to expand upon that.

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anytimefrances

23 October 2010 10:54 AM

The person this letter describes is not just an individual but a familiar and fearsome type: the congenital, and unstoppable, windbag.

I can never understand what this Larkin thing is all about, and the Larkin-Amis thing. Why such obsessiveness I ask myself. So much digging in to someone's every thought and moment. To what purpose? There doesn't seem to be much mystery there at all, and too much made of some pictures he had somewhere...a man who

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looked at piccies of the naked form, goodness me! What revelations, what scandal.

But my main point is the above sentence. I had difficulty with it and read no further. The word 'describes'? Who is 'describe/d' ? Are saying that the lady is the windbag or does the letter show that Larkin is being that? I think the letter doesn't 'describe'; it addresses. It would be plainer if it was 'addresses'. I wouldn't think there are many people who are 'congenital' windbags...surely it means from birth and surely being a windbag is a socially learnt thing?

I know that some people are a little garrulous but surely that's just an irritation and not 'fearsome'? I don't know about 'unstoppable' either; I think that type of person is usually very easily turned into a dummy.

I think this in parts is grossly overwritten :)



anytimefrances
23 October 2010 11:01AM

I also meant to say (sorry, pr, for contradicting ur views but you weren't there when I was dipping my pen!) that in all the stuff I've read about Larkin it just seems to me that he was a fairly ordinary English bod who worked as a librarian in a university and rode a bike and used clips - which millions of cyclists did but his were made into the apocalypse - and wrote grammatical poems expressing his views about life and place with a sensibly cynical tone in the wake of an England that was once furiously industrial - nothing very dense. I'm sure there were many millions like him who thought and did the same things but didn't write poems.

WHAJAECSPECT OF DAMAN???

sorry for the caps.

these opinions are offered gratis.

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PaulBowes01
23 October 2010 11:14AM

The age of the literary correspondence is dying, slowly but surely electrocuted by the superconductors of high modernity.

Superconductors don't electrocute; electrocution doesn't happen 'slowly but surely'; 'an age' cannot be electrocuted.

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nottingberry
23 October 2010 12:02PM

I just knew that Martin would again trot out his tedious anecdote about meeting Monica Jones over dinner, and his nasty comments about her clothes, physique etc etc - at the time she was not far off 70. He has forever repeated it on radio too. It gets boring Marty! Like another commenter, I observe that John Sutherland gives a far more generous and rounded portrait of Monica, as in his obituary of her in this organ:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/2001/mar/15/guardianobituaries.books>

She was an inspiring teacher with a "flamboyant extravagance in dress" even if Marty didn't find her crushed velvet brown trousers a tumon. Actually I didn't find the once-devastating Kingsely all that physically appealing as he got older either.

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CrewsControl
23 October 2010 12:28PM

A Venn diagram would tell me precisely that the only Martin Amis I read is when he writes about Philip Larkin. I'm cutting off my nose to spite my face because I always learn something from Amis. Words, some of which I've not encountered before (e.g. poodle faker, is it one word or two?), are always used with the precision of a poet (like Larkin). Usually the only voice that comes into my head is the sneering idiolect (another new one for me) of Martin Amis. Except in this review that I greatly enjoyed.

Needless to say teeth (ogreish) flash in the piece, which is fair enough given Amis' acquaintance with the protagonists. The Larkin/Jones relationship is indecipherable to those of us of a more conventional disposition but whatever its nature we have to be forever indebted to Monica Jones for her support of Larkin. And Monica, I think, was the only person to whom he dedicated a volume of his poetry.

Her obituary in 'The Times' observed that "Her devotion to Larkin never failed, though perhaps he had failed her" although it is only fair to point out that he did show a great measure of compassion for Monica when ill-health severely incapacitated her and he took her to Hull for hospital treatment and to nurse her thereafter in his home.

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smpugh
23 October 2010 03:25PM

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What in the name of God does a "wifebeater blouse" look like? I can't even begin to picture one!

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MeltonMowbray
23 October 2010 03:41PM

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Clarity of thought is a good one. I must remember it. Sorry, darling, I don't know what the problem is - it must be my clarity of thought.



MeltonMowbray
23 October 2010 04:13PM

[Recommend \(0\)](#)
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Something along these lines, SMP:
<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Wife-beater>



PaulBowes01
23 October 2010 04:28PM

[Recommend \(5\)](#)
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A *wife beater* is US slang for a sleeveless athletic top, worn on the street by overtly macho men who want to emphasise their muscular shoulders, upper chest and arms - hence the other common name for this garment, the *muscle shirt* or *muscle T*. Since I doubt whether Martin Amis is unaware of this, it seems likely that the phrase wifebeater blouse - otherwise a contradiction in terms - is simply another dig at Monica Jones:

she resembled an all-in wrestler renowned for an indifference to the norms of fair play.

Probably Mck McManus is intended.



oldfeet
23 October 2010 06:43PM

[Recommend \(0\)](#)
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Perhaps "The person this letter describes is not just an individual but a familiar and fearsome type" is a reference to anytimefrances.



anytimefrances
23 October 2010 10:28PM

[Recommend \(3\)](#)
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Perhaps "The person this letter describes is not just an individual but a familiar and fearsome type" is a reference to anytimefrances.

I doubt if a huge literary figure like MA would think me worth his while referencing, although I spent many happy years at Manchester uni being tutored there in extra-mural studies. The world has changed since I left there; my tutor said that Hughes would never accept the PL if it were offered, but he did a few years later, and my tutor was chucked out for teaching the 'canon'. A changed and a disgraceful world. Martin casts too far and wide for his epithets. I might be a stupendous hypocrite and transmogrified whore or somat, who knows. Good on you Martin!



Parisa
23 October 2010 10:40PM

[Recommend \(0\)](#)
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his parents didn't seem too happy.....



redlib
23 October 2010 10:47PM

[Recommend \(12\)](#)
[Responses \(0\)](#)
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[Clip|Link](#)

Martin Amis is one of English' (current) great stylists and doesn't recognize the verb "to bore"?

We may take it as significant that the word "boring" is used here in an unexpected application - as a verb rather than a naked adjective.

Dude. Come on.



Semioclastm

23 October 2010 10:49PM

bending someone else to your will is the very stuff of sex, by force or neglect if you are male, by spitefulness or nagging or scenes if you are female

That quote just crystalised something in my head. The feeling that Larkin may have actually been rather proud.

Symptomatic of pride, I think, is an unwillingness to join in - or get the hands and fingernails dirty. He wouldn't get involved - maybe because in some peculiar way he didn't find anybody he considered to be his equal. So stooping to the level a world infected with all those foreigners, getting all sweaty with someone beneath you - it wouldn't do for Phillip. The self loathing would be more than he could bear. Yet there would have been a lot of self-loathing that followed from that - sticking to the same dead end salaried job in a dreary province in so Spartan a fashion. Like he was punishing himself for not being able to bridge the gap between his inner life and other people. I get the feeling he was painfully self-aware. I'm an armchair reader and analyst of other people - but that mixture of slightly English puritanical contempt and raw longing - it comes across in brief flashes of clarity, whenever I happen to read his stuff.

I've got a lot of time for Larkin, and he could be very funny. I no longer have the book in my possession so I could be wrong - but I think that one of the last things he ever wrote was a bit of doggerel which they printed on the inside dust jacket of the first book of letters in his own handwriting (at least I think that is how it ended up in my head) It goes something like this:

Goodnight world, your toils I flee,
Send no importunate greetings after me.
Days I resign, nights leave to you
You will come too. Too true, too true!!

It goes without saying, but that was a beautifully written article.

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pinkroom

23 October 2010 10:56PM

Hi PaulBo

I rather think (hope) Marty foregrounded that piece of scientific illiteracy to intentionally establish a boring old fart tone. It worked for me.

If he was writing to impress it is indeed pitiful, but give the chap the benefit of the doubt. Letters are indeed a dying/dead form. Cannot remember the last time I wrote or received a personal letter and a good thing too perhaps. When published, people seldom seem to come across well in them.

Poems are a better way to be remembered.

Hi smp

I always thought a "wife-beater" was a string vest. The sort of thing your loveable cockney w***** revealed on a day trip to Margate before dishing out what was once (unbelievably) termed "lawful chastisement". I believe premium strength lager also has the same charming soubriquet.

Let us not forget Martin has already charmed the world with his extensive knowledge of such outre terms in his novel, "Yellow Dog" so we should not be surprised.

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niknarb

24 October 2010 04:53PM

Why are poets miserable ?

[Recommend \(1\)](#)

[Responses \(0\)](#)

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hazlitt

24 October 2010 06:56PM

Let's hope that Monica Jones wasn't ,at 70, wearing a string vest to soirees.

"wifebeater blouse".

Must confess I've never heard of that before.

Does Martin mean a garment only worn by certain female, feisty stereotypes, such as Elsie Tanner or Bet Lynch, or a garment which would justifiably provoke any right minded husband to violence??

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Kulturtrager

25 October 2010 02:57AM

Martin Amis is one of English' (current) great stylists and doesn't

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[Responses \(0\)](#)

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recognize the verb "to bore"?

We may take it as significant that the word "boring" is used here in an unexpected application – as a verb rather than a naked adjective.

Dude. Come on.

Redlib, what on earth are you talking about?

Amis is pointing out Larkin's rather lovely use of language. What's your point?

And to anyone who complains about Amis' writing style; well, I'm sorry, but you are just trying too hard to find fault where there is none.

The letter does describe the woman. In an indirect, more kindly manner (as Amis points out) than merely baldly stating in a more typically descriptive approach. And 'fearsome' is a perfectly suitable adjective to describe some windbags I've known.



cotillon

25 October 2010 06:17PM

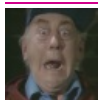
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cotillon

25 October 2010 06:18PM

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arbitrarynight

26 October 2010 08:25AM

The Amis attitude of snobbery has never appealed to me. But is it 'middlesex' or 'Middlesex'? Ye gods ...

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Helen85

26 October 2010 11:07AM

Without doubt a beautifully written article. But like **C1aireA** I'm very interested in this quote:

Larkin's life was a failure; his work was a triumph. That is all that matters. Because the work, unlike the life, lives on.

It's good of Martin Amis to clarify that writers are not immortal... Joking aside, I think this closing statement bears closer scrutiny. Though Amis is at pains earlier in the piece to refer to Larkin's 'private life', leaving out the qualifying 'private' here makes that first sentence something of a contradiction. If Larkin's work was indeed a triumph, who is Amis to condemn his whole life as a failure?

Poets, to a lesser or greater degree, all live for their work. In fact, it isn't too melodramatic to say some see writing as their sole reason for existing and would sacrifice perfection of the life for perfection of the art. That can raise all sorts of moral questions in itself, but if Amis is in agreement that the triumph of the work is truly 'all that matters', why not devote an article to the poetry itself rather than speculation about Larkin's private life?

For better or worse, we are obsessed with literary biography and there's not much point trying to sidle away from that at the end of a piece that fuels our appetite for it..

Er, enough nitpicking I suppose!

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nestahabbeye

26 October 2010 12:31PM

Interesting stuff - I think Larkin is probably my all time favourite poet - probably in part because of his personal turmoil.

As for his sex life, I imagine he blames his mum and dad.

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Haveatye

26 October 2010 10:58PM

Not more about Larkin. Why do we need something else about this dreary old

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codger?



stoneofsilence

27 October 2010 07:06AM

25 Years on

They jump on the bandwagon, like pouring treacle
over a sponge pudding, the latter an ancient temple
of Mrs Beaton's recipe, they plump for the recitation
and the republication, it is Sir John B and his poetry
with jazz and copulation, take a common garden
variety phrase spoken in a bar, and blend it with sarcasm,
For example, when in the 1950's, you went out with a tart,
The reader plays gooseberry to Larkin, and in the 1970's
the reader goes arse over elbow through the high window,
Now, fuck me silly, if the F word is not finally a truism,
I mean evolution was as Ernst Mayr said sex driven
Like Larkin in the library poring over the S & M magazine
In his later years he is a dead ringer for Eric Morecambe,
Though Eric was funnier, Phil was probably wittier,
Like comics everywhere, there is inside a tragedian
So babies and children can be dined upon in modest
proposals, uncle Phil can take out his mortar and pestle
to grind the Victorian into a Saturday walk in the park
to snog and slip the hand under the skirt of history
Have his will with a bird called Jill, to write a novel
bad boy academic style, to play master with pizzle
to whip the bull and cant of the precious middleclass
which he did well with school boy delicious naughtiness
Though his targets sometimes, and his outlook
were from my pov, would not meet my approval
Indeed, those Enid Blyton rhymes in his verse
Gets me thinking of good old Noddy and Big Ears
and then, to the infamous labels on the Robinson's jam
from which one must move to the butty and smutty
to the "Good Old Days when a spade was a
Oh Phil if you were here today, I'd say to you piss
off you silly wanker, but as you are long gone
we think, well your poetry was not that nutty
you were better than Thom Gunn and others
(Really??) and worthy of your own statue,
I'd have Thom any day, and even Sir J B
However, if one takes time and reads his poetry

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and gets beyond the political, forget his take

on women, read Alfred Adler and inferiority

complex, perhaps you can understand Larkin

and his sex problem, his sadness and loneliness

After all, it sums up nicely a whole set of people

Called the English male in State of Eternal Panic.



campasyoulike

27 October 2010 05:36PM

A lot of pedants about today.

I suppose you don't get much hot librarian action in the Guardian these days.

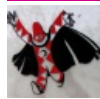
Brilliantly written review - thank you.

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fibmac70

28 October 2010 09:25AM

I can hear Larkin reprimanding his Maker :

Who are *you* to characterise *me* as an *ideolectic poodlefaker* ?

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Perlesvaus

28 October 2010 11:03PM

I hope Stone of Silence recommended his (yes - certainly his) own post? Not prudent to set oneself up in verse as a judge of Larkin - not unless one is very, very good ...

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StevenWaling

4 November 2010 01:44PM

Why are poets miserable ?

I'm a poet. I'm not miserable.

Why was Larkin miserable? would be a good question.

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drabkin

7 November 2010 01:25PM

Larkin's life was a failure; his work was a triumph.

Others have queried the sense here, several have praised the style. As someone might have said, the style should be an echo to the sense. For Amis, style trumps sense. Oh good, a neat antithesis, so let the sense go hang. Always the stylist, Amis often sacrifices clarity for verbal effect. And as for failure, I've had a happy life, someone else said, dying, beside whom Larkin had merry times.

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crsmith

7 November 2010 06:26PM

How can one's private life 'be a failure'? And since when is Martin Amis a reputable judge of someone's private life? I fail to see how this is constructive or even indicative of Larkin's letters. They aren't there to be judged as a failure or success but instead to cast a new light on to a much maligned man whose poetry happens to be some of the best of the 20th Century.

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paulhallam

8 November 2010 08:48PM

so: "Monica, for all her strong opinions, published not a single word in her entire

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career". So, only those who who publish their strong opinions, have any worth?

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