

## THE ART OF FICTION NO. 59

# KINGSLEY AMIS

Kingsley Amis, the former Angry Young Man, lives in a large, early-nineteenth-century house beside a wooded common. To reach it, one makes a journey similar to that described by the narrator of *Girl*, 20 when he visits Sir Roy Vandervane: first by tube to the end of the Northern Line at Barnet; then, following a phone call from the station to say where one is, on foot up a stiff slope; and finally down a suburban road. But instead of being picked up en route by Sir Roy's black chum, Gilbert, I was intercepted by Amis's tall and imposing blond wife, the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard.

Amis's study was a picture of bohemian disorder. Scattered across the floor were several teetering piles of poetry books and a mass of old 78 r.p.m. jazz records, while the big Adler typewriter on his desk was almost hidden behind a screen of empty bottles of sparkling wine which he'd recently sampled in his capacity as drink correspondent for *Penthouse*. A more sober note was struck by some shelves containing a complete *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, a thirteen-volume *O.E.D.*, and various other authoritative tomes, but this was quickly dispelled by the sight of a small sherry cask in one corner, full, I was told, of whiskey.

For someone whose only regular exercise is strolling to and from the local pub, Amis at fifty-three is well preserved, with just a modest paunch hinted at beneath the light blue pullover and brown slacks he was wearing when we met. Early photos show him with thick, wavy hair; it's gray now, but there's still plenty of it, conventionally styled, and only a little longer at the back and sides than it was twenty years ago. He has a mobile face that lends itself to the impersonations for which he is famous (and of which I caught a tantalizingly brief glimpse), and an educated but far from affected voice that reminds one at times of the actor Kenneth More. The interview did not take place in his study, but in a pleasant, book-lined sitting room with a prospect of the back lawn through lofty French windows. We talked for about two hours, from eleven-fifteen until one-fifteen, Amis perched on the edge of a sofa rather than sitting back in it so as not to aggravate a troublesome disk. He chose his words carefully, sometimes pausing to think things out, but rarely needing to rephrase an answer. At about midday he had a Scotch, which was replenished shortly before the interview closed.

—Michael Barber, 1975

#### INTERVIEWER

You've said that "until the age of twenty-four, I was in all departments of writing *abnormally unpromising*." This suggests that you *were* trying to write before this.

#### KINGSLEY AMIS

Oh, indeed yes. I've been trying to write for as long as I can remember. But those first fifteen years didn't produce much of great interest. I mean, it embarrasses me very much to look back on my early poems—very few lines of any merit at all and lots of affectation. But there were quite a lot of them. That's a point in

one's favor, I think, to work these poisons out of one's system on paper: bad influences, like Dylan Thomas and Yeats—I'm not saying they're bad poets, but I do think they're bad influences, especially on a young writer. As regards prose, that was even worse. My first novel, which will never see the light of day, was really affectation from beginning to end—well, it did have a few jokes which I lifted for later stuff, and some bits of background from the town I was living in at the time, Berkhamsted, that were usable in *Take a Girl Like You* many years later.

INTERVIEWER

Have you always had the capacity for making people laugh?

AMIS

I was the, or a, school wit at twelve years old. Well, not wit exactly—someone who could imitate the masters. I've always been a fair mimic; one of my party pieces is FDR as heard by the British over shortwave radio in 1940. This perhaps has something to do with writing fiction; a novelist is a sort of mimic by definition.

INTERVIEWER

Did the fact that you were an only child have any bearing on your development as a writer? Either the amount of reading you did, or the fact that you had to use your imagination more?

AMIS

I think it's . . . well, writing for me is to a large extent self-entertainment, and the only child is driven to do that. For example, I'm an expert whistler—I won't give you a sample—but that takes hours of practice, the sort of thing one hasn't got time for if one's part of a large family, I imagine. And as for reading, well, of course I got a lot done. Again, totally heterogeneous material, what we would now call very bad literature: the boys' comics of those days—which were, of course, compared with today's comics, positively Flaubertian in their style and Dickensian in their

character portrayal—all the way up through hardbound books of adventure stories and such, and taking in real writers like Dickens himself, Shakespeare, and so on, in much the same sort of spirit. I think it's very important to read widely and in a wide spectrum of merit and ambition on the part of the writer. And ever since, I've always been interested in these less respectable forms of writing—the adventure story, the thriller, science fiction, and so on—and this is why I've produced one or two examples myself. I read somewhere recently somebody saying, "When I want to read a book, I write one." I think that's very good. It puts its finger on it, because there are never enough books of the kind one likes: one adds to the stock for one's own entertainment.

#### INTERVIEWER

Did you draw on your childhood memories for *The Riverside Villas Murder*?

#### AMIS

To some extent. None of the events: I wasn't lucky enough to be seduced by the pretty next-door neighbor, nor did I find a corpse in the sitting room. But the feeling and the adolescent attitudes were as close as I could remember to my own. The attitude to sex, to girls, to parents and school—that was all out of my emotional experience.

#### INTERVIEWER

You served in the Royal Signals in the war. Did *My Enemy's Enemy* owe anything to this?

#### AMIS

Well, as you know, there were three stories of army life. And the shortest one, "Court of Enquiry," was based on an experience of my own. I was the unfortunate Lieutenant Archer who was given a bad time by his company commander. But the other two stories were total fiction.

INTERVIEWER

Archer describes his vision of an acceptable postwar England as “as full of girls and drink and jazz and books and decent houses and decent jobs and being your own boss.” Was this your England, too?

AMIS

Oh, yes, that’s very much how I felt. And when I voted Labor by proxy in 1945, this is what I had in mind. I didn’t expect the Government to bring me girls, but I did share in the general feeling of optimism and liberty abroad at that time.

INTERVIEWER

Did you publish anything before *Lucky Jim*?

AMIS

Right at the end of my Oxford stay I coedited *Oxford Poems 1949* with James Michie, and naturally got some of my own poems into that. But apart from poems and a review or two, I don’t think there was anything.

INTERVIEWER

There still seem to be misconceptions about the origins of *Lucky Jim*. Am I right in saying that it wasn’t based on Swansea University, where you were lecturing at the time?

AMIS

Yes. It was conceived, if that’s the right word, way back in 1946, when I happened to visit Philip Larkin, who was on the library staff at Leicester University. The young man surrounded by bores whom for various reasons he doesn’t dare to offend—that was all there. The contribution of Swansea, so to speak, was just to give me information about how things were run: What the faculty is, who the registrar is and what he does, what classes are like, what exam responsibilities are like, et cetera. But there’s no

character in the book, however minor, who was actually there at Swansea.

INTERVIEWER

Why was *Lucky Jim* such a long time coming?

AMIS

Well, being busy and being lazy, which so often go together, my first year at Oxford after the war was spent celebrating not being in the army. Then I had to work hard for my final exams. At Swansea it took me some time to get to grips with the heavy workload, and meanwhile there were also domestic responsibilities in the form of a wife and two young children who turned up very fast, one after the other. And another point was lack of a possible place to write in. The only requirement, I think, is a room to oneself, however small. Fortunately my wife received a small legacy and we got a house in Swansea which had such a room in it and *instantly* I began *Lucky Jim*. But that was a slow process: I had to redraft the whole thing. The first draft was very feeble, so I showed it to friends, particularly Philip Larkin again, who made very constructive suggestions. And then I started again from scratch, a thing I haven't done since. So it was not only delayed by external circumstances, but also, I think, by inexperience.

INTERVIEWER

I think it's difficult for anyone under thirty today to see Jim as a true rebel, despite what he may have appeared then.

AMIS

Yes, well, rebellion escalates, doesn't it? My father thought that he, my father, was a rebel. Though of course by the time I was taking any notice of his views, he was as stolidly conservative, not to say reactionary, as anybody I've ever met. And it's true that Jim's rebelliousness is by any standards mild, certainly by today's standards. But then I think the degree to which he was intended to

be seen by the author as a rebel has been exaggerated. He didn't want to change the System. He certainly didn't want to *destroy* the System.

INTERVIEWER

He wanted to be his own man?

AMIS

Yes. He didn't like the bits of the System that were immediately in his neighborhood, that was all. If he had happened to be in the music department, the professor of which is sympathetically portrayed, I think he'd have had a very different time.

INTERVIEWER

What was your reaction to being called an Angry Young Man?

AMIS

Mixed. I mean, no writer, especially a young and unknown writer, resents publicity of any kind—whatever he may say. I'm sure I didn't. But the other side of that was being lumped together with some very strange people. Again, not that I'm denigrating them. But all of us in that nonexistent movement—which is really only a string of names—felt that, I think. But this is what literary journalists have to do, don't they? Discern trends and groups even when there isn't much of a trend, and nothing in the way of a group.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think it's ironic that many of the so-called Angries like William Cooper, John Wain, John Braine, and yourself were writing in a traditional style?

AMIS

Yes, there was certainly no rebelliousness at all of treatment or presentation. And we were, in that sense, reactionaries rather than

rebels. We were trying to get back, let's say, to the pre-Joyce tradition, really—but not very consciously. It's always dangerous to suppose that what looks in retrospect like something planned, something willed, was actually planned at the time. This is all a matter of instinct, of feeling. But there was a general resemblance to that degree.

INTERVIEWER

What are your own feelings about experimental prose?

AMIS

I can't bear it. I dislike, as I think most readers dislike, being in the slightest doubt about what is taking place, what is meant. I don't want full and literal descriptions of everything, and I'm prepared to take a hint from the author as well as the next man, but I dislike mystification. Part two about experiment, I'd say, is that it's usually thought of as entirely to do with style and intelligibility. But there are other forms. I mean after all, can't one have experiments in mixing farce and horror, comedy and seriousness . . . ?

INTERVIEWER

As you've tried to do?

AMIS

Yes, though I wouldn't call myself an experimental writer, because it has this other connotation. But *The Green Man*, for example, in its modest way, was a kind of experiment. I mean, "Can a ghost story be combined with a reasonably serious study of human relations, in this case the problem of selfishness?" The alcoholism is part of that, but the central figure there, Allington, finds himself becoming more and more insecure because he doesn't really take any notice of other people. And the result is that by undergoing these harrowing experiences he at last notices his young daughter, and talks to her in a way that he hasn't done before. So at the price of losing his wife and making an utter fool



11th April 1975

*Best photo of each*  
*Where is John III buried, and when?*

*Paraphrase*

Hubert Anvil's voice rose above the sound of the choir and ~~the music~~ full orchestra, reaching the vertex ~~of the loftiest dome~~ of the loftiest dome in the Old World and the western doors of the longest nave in Christendom. For this was the Cathedral Basilica of St George at Coverley, the mother church of all England and of the English Empire overseas. That bright May morning it was as full as it had ever been in the three centuries since its consecration, and it could scarcely have held a more distinguished assembly at any time: the young King William V himself; the kings of <sup>Portugal</sup> Castile, of Naples, of Sweden, of Lithuania and a dozen other realms; the Dauphin and the Crown Prince of Muscovy; the viceroys of Brazil, India and New Spain, here after weeks of travelling; the brother of the Emperor of <sup>Primo High</sup> <sup>Emperor</sup> <sup>Belgium</sup> ~~Almaigne~~ the Christian Delegate of the Sultan-Caliph of Turkey; the incumbent ~~Archbishop~~ <sup>the Vicar of the Holy Sepulchre of Constantinople</sup> and ~~Primate~~ <sup>from</sup> of United England, ~~and~~ no fewer than ~~seventy~~ <sup>more besides</sup> cardinals, ~~and~~ <sup>more besides</sup> less ~~than~~ <sup>solemn</sup> ~~eighty~~ <sup>official</sup> clergy from all over the Catholic world—these and hundreds of ~~other~~ had congregated for the official obsequies of His Most Devout Majesty, King John III of England and her Empire.

*1975 311*  
*Government pre-eminent*

He had been a good ~~mutually-respectful~~ <sup>mutually-respectful</sup> ~~enjoying excellent relations~~ <sup>held in tender affection</sup> with both Convocation and the Papal Curia, ~~and~~ <sup>by</sup> ~~many~~ <sup>A large number</sup> of those attending his Requiem Mass would have been moved as much by a sense of personal loss as by simple duty or the desire to assist at a great occasion. Just as many, perhaps, were put in awe by the size <sup>and</sup> ~~and~~ <sup>renowned</sup> majesty and richness of the setting. Apart from Wren's magnificent dome, the most ~~impressive~~ <sup>in commemorating</sup> of the sights to be seen was the vast Turner ceiling ~~decorating~~ <sup>decorating</sup> the Holy Victory, the fruit of four and a half years' <sup>there was nothing like it completed</sup> ~~of~~ virtually uninterrupted work. The western window by Gainsborough, beginning to blaze now as the sun caught it, showed the birth of St Helena at Colchester. Along the south wall ran Blake's frescoes depicting ~~the progress of~~ <sup>the progress of</sup> St Augustine's progress through England. Holman Hunt's oil painting of the martyrdom of St George was less <sup>still brilliant</sup> ~~celebrated~~ <sup>celebrated</sup> for its merits than for the ~~story~~ <sup>story</sup> of the artist's journey to Palestine with the <sup>hope</sup> ~~intention~~ of securing authenticity for his setting; and one of the latest additions, the Ecce Homo mosaic by David Hockney, had attracted downright adverse criticism for its excessively traditionalist, almost archaizing style. But ~~working~~ <sup>only</sup> ~~but~~ admiration had ever attended--to take a diverse selection--the William Morris spandrels on

of himself, he's at last made contact with another person, so one feels in that sense hopeful about his future.

INTERVIEWER

Why are you so unhappy with your third novel, *I Like It Here*?

AMIS

Well, it was written partly out of bad motives. Seeing that *That Uncertain Feeling* had come out in 1955, and it was now 1957 and there was no novel on the way, I really cobbled it together out of straightforwardly autobiographical experiences in Portugal, with a kind of mystery story rather perfunctorily imposed on that. The critics didn't like it, and I don't blame them really. I had a look at it the other day and parts of it are not too bad. But it's really a very slipshod, lopsided piece of work.

INTERVIEWER

There's one passage in the book that I'd like to use as a cue: the reference to Fielding as "the only non-contemporary novelist who could be read with unaffected and wholehearted interest." Why do you dismiss the vast majority of the classics like this?

AMIS

Well, this is a hard one. I mean, I know that I should read them more, and I know enough about the classics to know what I'm missing. But . . . it's a question of what one is reading for. And if I read the classics that I haven't read, it would be out of a sense of duty. It's not that I don't admire many of the classics, but it's a distant and rather too respectful admiration.

INTERVIEWER

Did having to teach English literature exacerbate this?

AMIS

No, in a way it had the opposite effect. Being forced by the syllabus to read all those unread people was good—I got a lot of entertainment out of it, and I found out a lot. Again, one can't say this had any direct effect on what I wrote.

INTERVIEWER

What is it about Fielding that you like?

AMIS

Well, I describe it to some extent in the passage you mention. Apart from his wit, and, I think, attractive though sometimes heavy irony, he seems to be very concerned not to bore the reader, to keep the narrative going along. And he was great enough to transcend the conventional love story current at his time—well, not transcend exactly, but to write very well and understandably and very deeply within that set of conventions, and I can't think of any other writer who could do that.

INTERVIEWER

Which twentieth-century writers have influenced you?

AMIS

Well, there's the early Joyce, P. G. Wodehouse, Evelyn Waugh, Anthony Powell, Elizabeth Taylor, and early Angus Wilson among novelists. And poets . . . oh, Hardy I admire, but don't feel very warm to—A. E. Housman, Philip Larkin, John Betjeman, the early R. S. Thomas, parts of Robert Frost, parts of Robert Graves, some poems by Yeats. It's not a complete list—in fact I was once worried by this, that I couldn't name more than a dozen admired contemporaries. But I mentioned it to Robert Graves, and he said, "Nonsense. You ought to be concerned if you admire *more* than that number. It shows you have no discrimination." Which is a good point!

INTERVIEWER

Waugh was quoted in *The Paris Review* as saying that writing for him was an exercise in the use of language rather than an attempt to explore character. How do you react to this?

AMIS

I've come to see it in that way more and more. I certainly feel that this is what I'm trying to do. But I think this is connected—and trying not to sound too somber here—with growing older. Because the world that seemed so various and new, well, it does contract. One's burning desire to investigate human behavior, and to make, or imply, statements about it, does fall off. And so one does find that early works are full of energy and also full of vulgarity, crudity, and incompetence, and later works are more carefully finished, and in that sense better literary products. But . . . there's often a freshness that is missing in later works—for every gain there's a loss. I think it evens out in that way.

INTERVIEWER

You've described the creation of characters as “a mysterious process.” Can you enlarge on that?

AMIS

Yes, well, the whole thing *is* mysterious, and it's interesting that writers with very different approaches all say this as soon as you ask them. They say: “The thoughts that I have are not mine. My works are not my own.” And so on . . . The development of character is a sort of by-product of the development of the central idea. I always start with a situation that may occur to one. Or you may see an example of it in what's around you, and things grow out of that. With *Lucky Jim*, for instance, the situation was this young man surrounded by all these hostile powers, and there was a ready-made setting which seemed to fit this situation. And as soon as one has got this far, a lot of options become closed. With a woman who is a sort of sexual bore, who covers about a third of

Jim's life, we're on the road to the kind of person that the character Margaret has got to be. And since the story would be finished if, in the second chapter, Jim said, "Look, leave me alone. Go away," we can't have him say that, he must have reasons for not saying that. And so that develops the cowardly, or if you like, decent side of his character. And this happens all the way along in my experience. When you think you're inventing, what you're really doing is following up the implications of your original idea.

#### INTERVIEWER

I think Waugh said he used suddenly to find his characters taking to drink, or surprising him in other ways.

#### AMIS

Yes, well, this would fall into place later. Graham Greene said he would find an episode or a character turning up after the first ten thousand words which he had no idea how to use. But then thirty thousand words later it would come up. And experience had taught him never to destroy what he had written, because it would always be fitted into the design later.

#### INTERVIEWER

Do you keep a notebook?

#### AMIS

Yes, but it's not a very fat notebook. It contains things like scraps of dialogue that one overhears or thinks of . . . very short descriptions of characters . . . comic incidents seen, or conceivably invented. But I don't write synopses. I used to at one time. I mean, I kept a very thick and detailed notebook for *Take A Girl Like You*—about a hundred pages. But I think that was partly nervousness, because I knew that its theme, and using a female protagonist, was going to put a severe strain on my resources. And I was limbering up, as it were, to write that.

#### INTERVIEWER

I came across an echo of Graham's speech to Jenny on the barrier between the attractive and the unattractive in a recent article about Joe Ackerley.\* Apparently, E. M. Forster once made the same complaint to Ackerley, who was very handsome as a young man.

#### AMIS

Really? Yes, well, that idea—the division into two nations of the attractive and the unattractive—had been in my mind, as it were independently, for many years. And then the time came, quite suddenly, without realizing it: here was the moment to put these ideas into a character's mouth.

#### INTERVIEWER

Roger Micheldene, the hero of *One Fat Englishman*, describes America as “a semipermanent encampment of a nation of parvenus.” Was that your own reaction?

#### AMIS

[*laughs*] No, not at all. I think the pro- and anti-American stuff hasn't, if I may say so, been properly understood. What I was doing was knocking British anti-Americanism, and I thought, Put all the usual tired old arguments into the mouth of a very unsympathetic character. I thought this was quite a good way of showing up all those British attitudes. But I must have muffed it somewhere along the line because American reviewers fell into two classes: one lot said, “Mr. Amis makes some shrewd hits on the deficiencies in our culture.” And they were meant to be very unshrewd hits. Others said, half rightly, “Mr. Amis's objections to American life are very old hat. If they were ever accurate, they no longer are so. It's all been done better by American writers.” Well, that's true, except that they got the name wrong. Roger Micheldene's objections were all of those things.

\* J. R. Ackerley was literary editor of the *Listener* from 1935 to 1959.

INTERVIEWER

Roger really is a shit of the first order—in the same league as Bertrand Welch and Bernard Bastable. Do you enjoy creating such characters?

AMIS

Yes. Well, it's very hard to dislike them. I think it was Christopher Ricks, reviewing *One Fat Englishman*, who said, after listing Roger's appalling deficiencies, "Nevertheless, one can't help feeling that the author liked the character. I did too." Of course I like him. After all, life tells us all the time that it's possible to like the people that you violently disapprove of—not only from a moral pinnacle—but would hate to find yourself involved with. But nevertheless, I can't help feeling that I'd quite enjoy a couple of drinks with Roger.

INTERVIEWER

Irving Macher, the young novelist, is a pretty nasty piece of work, too.

AMIS

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

I'd like to use him as a cue for a digression on American novelists. You've said, "Not one of them has succeeded in establishing an oeuvre." Isn't that rather a sweeping statement?

AMIS

[*aggressively*] Yeah? . . . Well, I'd like to hear your candidates for that position.

INTERVIEWER

Well [*pause*] how about Gore Vidal?

AMIS

Yes, well, it may be laziness, but on the rare occasions when I do pick up Vidal, whose early books I enjoyed before he was as celebrated as he is now, he seems to me to suffer from American cleverness: the fear of being thought stupid, or dull, or behind the times. I think that's a very bad attitude for the novelist to adopt. He must not mind being thought boring and pompous from time to time—let's hope he avoids it, but if he runs too far in the opposite direction, he's heading for disaster.

INTERVIEWER

Perhaps we should concentrate on the phrase “establish an oeuvre,” which does at least allow that there might have been some very good American novels written.

AMIS

Oh yes, indeed. Individual books, and two or three books or more by many American novelists. But the enemies are smartness, and in many cases, the desire to be American. And being American is, I think, a very difficult thing in art, because all the elements are European, and to give them a distinctive American stamp is something you can't *try* to do—it can only be hoped that in the end this will emerge. The lure of the Great American Novel—it's no longer, perhaps, the Great American Novel, because that sounds like the dull, or traditional, American novel—but the Important, the Significant, the New, the most American American Novel . . . I think that marsh light is still burning hard.

INTERVIEWER

By the time *One Fat Englishman* came out, you'd shifted from Swansea to Cambridge. Was it Dr. Leavis who said that Peterhouse had given a fellowship to a pornographer?

AMIS

So I was told, yes.



INTERVIEWER

But wasn't that all wrong? Because in fact you're not at all explicit about sex.

AMIS

I wouldn't have thought so. I mean, I have to follow my own rule of always letting readers know what's taking place. But with regard to sexual matters, not in detail. The reader should know whether it took place or not, whether it was a success or not, and what they felt about it. But anybody who can get sexual titillation out of my sex scenes must be very easily stimulated. I shy away from explicit sex mainly because it's socially embarrassing. The comparison I usually draw is with being told these things by an acquaintance—and after all, the novelist is only an acquaintance, isn't he, as far as the reader's concerned?—and to be told in detail what he's been up to for over half an hour—the equivalent of a chapter, say—would be embarrassing, wouldn't it? I would find it embarrassing.

INTERVIEWER

Your next novel, *The Anti-Death League*, was something of a watershed. I think you announced that you were no longer content just to do straightforward social comedy. Was this because, as somebody suggested, you weren't being taken seriously because you were funny?

AMIS

Who knows? When starting to think about any novel, part of the motive is: I'm going to show them, this time. Without that, a lot of what passes under the name of creative energy would be lost. It's an egotistical self-assertion, if you like—the mere act of writing a book is that. And it may well be that my feeling when thinking of *The Anti-Death League* was, to some extent, I'm going to show them that I can be overtly serious. And this did mystify some of the critics. One rang up in some agitation and said, "Can I come see

you? I've just read your new book, and I'm not happy about it." I thought, Oh, dear. So I said, "Come along by all means." I wondered what he wanted—and he had to do this by a series of hints, clearing his throat a great deal—and what it turned out to be was: Was I serious? Or was it all an elaborate farce or irony, couched in the form of some supposedly serious story? So I reassured him: I said, "It's all right. Don't worry. The serious parts in that *are* serious." "Right," he said, and gave the thing a favorable notice. The idea that what's funny can't be serious dies hard, but I think it's dying because of *Catch-22*, Evelyn Waugh, and so on.

#### INTERVIEWER

I wondered whether *The Anti-Death League* might have owed something to the changes in your own life at that time.

#### AMIS

I think that alterations in your own life *may* have an immediate effect on a book. But I think much more usually these things are delayed. What happens in *The Anti-Death League* had been brewing inside me for a long time, the result of realizing that one isn't going to be young forever, and noticing more and more that there is pain and sorrow in the world. And again, ceasing to be young, that there are certain fundamental questions to be answered. I mean, the answer to them all may be "No. Nothing." But they've got to be answered, and the novelist naturally answers them for himself in fiction.

#### INTERVIEWER

Doesn't *The Anti-Death League* contain some of your favorite characters: James Churchill? Brian Leonard?

#### AMIS

Yes. Max Hunter, Ayscue, and Moti Naidu—

INTERVIEWER

Oh, him too?

AMIS

Yes, in fact he's the favorite of all of them. The novelist always has favorites, and often he's a minor character, as in this case. And Naidu is the one I admire most. He's the one who has the right attitudes. I'm no mystic. I'm certainly no Buddhist or Hindu thinker, because being a Westerner I don't understand any of that. But when Naidu makes his plea to Churchill, saying that Churchill's withdrawal is a selfish escape, and he's *not* thinking of his girlfriend but of himself; and that his enemy is, as he puts it, "bad feelings of all descriptions" which he must try to put away; and that everybody must try to become a man, he is as near to being the author's voice as anybody usually is in one of my novels.

INTERVIEWER

You also kill off L. S. Caton.

AMIS

Well, I was running out of things to do with L. S. Caton, and this was a good place to get rid of him because he clearly had no place in that novel at all. So I brought him in and had him shot. I mean, I thought it was a good idea to have somebody shot, and what better candidate than he?

INTERVIEWER

*Colonel Sun* seemed to underline your preference for genre fiction over the mainstream novel. Is this because you believe that, say, writers like Eric Ambler, Gavin Lyall, and Geoffrey Household are achieving more within their spheres than many straightforward novelists?

AMIS

Well, I start from the same place as the genre writers start from: They cannot afford to bore me, and I cannot stand being bored, so we begin at the same place. And they have all sorts of things forced on them: some sort of pace, a feeling of conflict, climaxes, anticlimaxes, suspense, and so on. They have to do that. And having done that, they can then erect other matters.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think it's easier to strip away the facades of characters when they're in situations of suspense?

AMIS

Oh, yes. That's the old, well-tried, and valuable lever that such writers have always used: put people into conditions of extremity of some sort, and you won't find out *all* about them, but you'll get to the inside of them quicker than you would in the "drawing room, gin, and Jaguar" type of novel.

INTERVIEWER

Do you keep an ideal reader in mind when you write?

AMIS

Not really, except as regards clarity. Occasionally I say to my wife, "This is what I mean, does what I've written convey it?"

INTERVIEWER

Can writing—humor particularly—be directed by any sort of formula?

AMIS

No, none. I was going to say, "Be unexpected." But then noncomic writing must do that too. And "Be expected" is an important rule too. It's a letdown if the comedian doesn't finally actually really sit on his hat.

INTERVIEWER

You've mentioned science fiction. What is it about it that attracts you?

AMIS

To start with, as always, something rather simple and perhaps even childish. Because I was attracted to it as a lad on sensational grounds: grounds of excitement, wonder—as they always say—and a liking for the strange, the possibly horrific. That's the beginning. And then of course as science fiction came out of the pure monster-and-robot phase and started to do other things, it became a very efficient vehicle for social satire, and for investigation of the human character in a different way from the straightforward novel: humanity's character considered as a single thing, rather than the characters of individual beings reacting on one another. Of course many science-fiction writers aren't equipped to tackle these rather grand themes, but I think it might well happen. So in one way science fiction is more ambitious than the novel we're used to, because these great abstractions can be discussed: immortality, how we feel about the future, what the future means to us, and how much even we're at the mercy of what's happened in the past. All these things it can do.

INTERVIEWER

Is it fair to see *I Want It Now* as an attack on the rich?

AMIS

[*laughs*] Well, some rich. That's so to speak the vehicle of what the novel is trying to say. It's about power, to some extent, and responsibility. And certain kinds of rich people are notorious for the way they wield power without responsibility. But if you were to ask, "How did you think up *I Want It Now*?" I'd say it began like this: After spending the evening with some very unpleasant rich people in Tennessee, my wife said, "Just think what it would be like to be Mabel's daughter"—Mabel hadn't got a daughter—and I

thought, *Yes*. And so I tried to imagine what it would be like. And then clearly there would have to be a character who was going to come and take her away from this situation, and since he was going to do a kind of Sleeping Beauty operation on her, he must not be at all attractive—at least superficially. So where do we find energetic people who are not at all attractive to all appearances, though with a surface charm and so on? *Television!* And that is what I meant earlier by one's options being closed by the nature of the central situation. "What would it be like to be Mabel's daughter?" Well, that fixes Mabel. That fixes her daughter. It fixes the hero/liberator character. It fixes his environment, and it also fixes his relations with the people alongside him in television. And then the satellites of the rich woman also fall into place. So an awful lot seems suddenly to have been done for you—I mean, you've done it all yourself, but it feels as if it's suddenly emerged.

#### INTERVIEWER

This book also contains another of your favorite characters, doesn't it?

#### AMIS

Oh yes, George Parrott—again a minor character—who switches from being the hero's sworn enemy, to being his unwilling and highly critical ally, rather than his friend. I enjoyed making George up a lot, and had to exercise "artistic restraint" to avoid letting him run away with me. But he began merely as a plot device. Somebody had to give a little bit of help at a critical juncture, and somebody earlier had to appear as a kind of bogeyman and the kind of rich suitor that the heroine was used to receiving. Well, to save on the cost, as it were, those have got to be the same chap. Oh, and he also had to give the hero some information, and it was really that, I suppose, which made him develop. Because if a character is to impart essential information, and to have to spend two or three pages doing so, then clearly to avoid boring the reader if possible, the author's got to take a lot of trouble with that

character's conversational style and try to make it internally amusing, as well as merely a vehicle for conveying the essential information. So Parrott's style of expression had to be eccentric, which again gives the character more depth, I suppose.

INTERVIEWER

As you said earlier, Maurice Allington, the hero of *The Green Man*, is an alcoholic. Can we talk about drink—

AMIS

Sure, anytime—

INTERVIEWER

Specifically, the part it plays in your novels, and, if relevant, the part it plays in your creative life?

AMIS

Yes. Well, as far as my books are concerned, it's a device that corresponds to the thriller writer's lever of being able to strip a character rather bare quite quickly and fairly plausibly. I don't say that the drunk man is the real man, and the sober man merely a shell. But you find out something different about people when they're drunk. Of course, you sometimes find that they're not different at all—that you merely get more of the same, perhaps said rather more loudly and incoherently, but basically the same. Other people change. Allington's alcoholism—or near-alcoholism, because he's still able to run his life and the inn—was a plot detail that occurred to me very early. I don't think it had been done before: ghosts that are seen only by an alcoholic, and so can be dismissed as delirium, or fancies, or even as lies. So it had that function, as well.

INTERVIEWER

I think you've also said that pubs have a special role in your books.

AMIS

This is very much a thing in my own life as well. The pub is the great piece of neutral territory, for which there are rules, as there are in other parts of social life, but they're rather different rules. And of course some kinds of people dislike pubs. Others expand in the most extraordinary way when they find themselves in one. The obligations are different, and the relations between the people are changed. There's one small revelation in *I Want It Now* when there's a pub scene right at the end. It concerns Lord Baldock, whom we've thought of as a very stuffy person and one of the rich up to now. In the pub, it's noted, he seems to be able to find his way to the bar with no trouble at all. Again, a very small, mini-revelation about him, but perhaps the reader feels, well, we would have liked to have known a bit more about him, as seen in a pub setting.

INTERVIEWER

Does drink play any part in your creative life?

AMIS

Well, it may play an adverse part . . .

INTERVIEWER

Presumably you can't write when you've drunk too much?

AMIS

No, there comes a fairly early point when the stimulating effect turns into an effect that produces disorder and incoherence. But I find writing very nervous work. I'm always in a dither when starting a novel—that's the worst time. It's like going to the dentist, because you do make a kind of appointment with yourself. And this is one of the things I've learnt to recognize more and more with experience: that you realize it's got to be . . . next week. Not today—but if you don't sit down by the end of next week, it'll go off the boil slightly. Well, it can't be next Wednesday, because



somebody from *The Paris Review* is coming to interview you, so it had better be Thursday. And then, quaking, you sit down at the typewriter. And that's when a glass of Scotch can be very useful as a sort of artistic icebreaker . . . artificial infusion of a little bit of confidence which is necessary in order to begin at all. And then each day's sitting down is still rather tense, though the tension goes away as the novel progresses, and when the end is even distantly in sight, the strain becomes small, though it's always there. So alcohol in moderate amounts and at a fairly leisurely speed is valuable to me—at least I think so. It could be that I could have written better without it . . . but it could also be true that I'd have written far less without it.

#### INTERVIEWER

Do you have a daily routine?

#### AMIS

Yes. I don't get up very early. I linger over breakfast reading the papers, telling myself hypocritically that I've got to keep up with what's going on, but really staving off the dreadful time when I have to go to the typewriter. That's probably about ten-thirty, still in pajamas and dressing gown. And the agreement I have with myself is that I can stop whenever I like and go and shave and shower and so on. In practice, it's not till about one or one-fifteen that I do that—I usually try and time it with some music on the radio. Then I emerge, and nicotine and alcohol are produced. I work on until about two or two-fifteen, have lunch, then if there's urgency about, I have to write in the afternoon, which I really hate doing—I really dislike afternoons, whatever's happening. But then the agreement is that it doesn't matter how little gets done in the afternoon. And later on, with luck, a cup of tea turns up, and then it's only a question of drinking more cups of tea until the bar opens at six o'clock and one can get into second gear. I go on until about eight-thirty and I always hate stopping. It's not a question of being

carried away by one's creative afflatus, but saying, "Oh dear, next time I do this I shall be feeling tense again."

INTERVIEWER

What are the pitfalls in writing humor?

AMIS

There's one obvious one: you must never make one character laugh at what another says or does. Dornford Yates's "Berry" novels, which are quite good fun in a sedate sort of way, are ruined by everybody collapsing with merriment whenever Berry shows up. The other pitfall is: You must never offer the reader anything simply as funny and nothing more. Make it acceptable as information, comment, narrative, et cetera, so that if the joke flops the reader has still got *something*. Wodehouse understood this perfectly, even better than Shakespeare did.

INTERVIEWER

Do you revise as you go?

AMIS

Yes. A page takes me quite a long time. Two pages a day is good. Three pages is splendid.

INTERVIEWER

Is that foolscap?

AMIS

No, it's quarto more. So it's about a thousand words, probably.

INTERVIEWER

Do you compare notes with your wife?

AMIS

Oh yes, we consult each other all the time. And if neither of us is up against some hideous deadline, we read work in progress to each other at the end of the day. We both find this very valuable. You know: “How should I convey this difficult information? Is it plausible that he should say that?” You can get reassurance, or you can get criticism or other suggestions. But I’m sure reading aloud’s awfully important, anyway. I think both of us get quite as much from ourselves from these readings as we get from the other person. And I was interested to see that Kipling, whom I’ve been working on recently, used to read his work aloud to himself, too. And I would guess—he doesn’t say so—with much the same objective in mind: to find stylistic weaknesses.

INTERVIEWER

Presumably your wife is an exception to your rule about modern women novelists being generally unreadable?

AMIS

Yes indeed she is. I would have put her on my list of modern novelists I read. If she weren’t an exception, I could never have married her—a lot of people fail to see that.

INTERVIEWER

What is it you dislike most about women novelists?

AMIS

Well, I think it’s a little unfair to them and to me to say “women novelists” like that.

INTERVIEWER

*Some* women novelists, then. I think you’ve disparaged the NW1 syndrome.

AMIS

Yes, the NW1 novel\*—I suppose it’s a handy term. Well, it’s dressed-up autobiography, autobiography in fiction that is what I basically object to, because it’s very rare for life to present one with a story, merely a repetitious account of a situation: things getting a little worse—generally a little worse—and sometimes a little better, and conflict seems to be omitted, and there’s no sense of purpose on the part of the characters or the part of the author. I like to feel when beginning a novel that some problem is being presented, some choice is necessary, something’s got to be worked to . . .

INTERVIEWER

The funny way Roy talks in *Girl*, 20 underlined for me the lengths you go to make dialogue sound authentic. All those “sort of’s” and “you know’s.”

AMIS

Well, dialogue’s a very powerful weapon, isn’t it? Again, traditionally the novelist has to characterize people quite quickly by the way they talk: their various idioms, whether they talk plainly, or in a flowery style. But I do find dialogue quicker to write than narrative—narrative I always find rather painful. Dialogue is more fun . . . but I always try over the phrases, fooling the reader into believing that this is how people actually talk. In fact, inevitably, it’s far more coherent than any actual talk. I don’t say I succeed all that often, but when in doubt I will repeat a phrase to myself seven or eight times, trying to put myself in the place of an actor speaking the part. And all these “I mean’s” and “sort of’s” and “you know’s” are important because there are characters who find it difficult to lay their tongues on what they mean the first time, and I think this should be indicated.

\* Amis’s description of the environs of an NW1 novel is as follows: “A postal area of (Northwest) London inhabited partly by intellectuals, trendies, weedies, fashionable journalists, and media men.”

INTERVIEWER

I couldn't help liking Roy in spite of everything.

AMIS

Oh, I'm very fond of Roy. Again, one can't write a whole book about someone one doesn't like. It overlaps a great deal with boredom: the novelist can't write about somebody that bores him. And the fact that he won't bore you, I hope, with what he says, makes him, to some extent, sympathetic immediately. One would hate to fall within the circle of Roy's responsibilities—irresponsibility is what the book's really about—but one couldn't think of a better chap to have a boozy lunch with.

INTERVIEWER

There's a lot about music in the book. I believe it's very important to you.

AMIS

Yes, I would put music slightly ahead of literature. I think a world without music would be worse than a world without books—I don't know whether a world without literature, exactly. But I've always responded to it in an uneducated sort of way—I've done some halfhearted attempts at semi-self-education. And I find it a necessity. I find it—what can one say?—refreshing and uplifting.

INTERVIEWER

Would you have liked to have been a musician?

AMIS

Yes. Of course one always has these fantasies about how if things had been different, what other paths one might have pursued. But music would be the first one I would choose if suddenly set down at the age of twelve. One reason is a sort of personal social one that musicians cannot function on their own—even if they're concert pianists playing a piano recital.

INTERVIEWER

Is this why you like writing for television? The need to work with others?

AMIS

Yes, I think it's probably the main motive. Another motive, of course, is trying to do something you haven't done before. Seeing if you can broaden your talent, which is a thing I've always thought necessary.

INTERVIEWER

Flexing new muscles?

AMIS

Yes. And the other thing, as you say, is working with others. Of course, if it doesn't go well, it's disastrous, and you say, "Why did I ever leave the typewriter to get involved with these people and have my sovereign wishes frustrated?" But when it goes well, it's very exciting.

INTERVIEWER

What do you like about journalism?

AMIS

Well, I like a task. I like being forced to read a book occasionally. And there's still some very, very minor literary critic inside my head, and there's still something of a teacher, too. It's a habit that's hard to get out of. And again, it's a change.

INTERVIEWER

All part of the business of entertaining yourself, as well?

AMIS

Yes. And there are also opportunities for stating some critical point you don't think has been emphasized enough.

INTERVIEWER

I thought your last novel, *Ending Up*, was very bleak.

AMIS

Yes, well, no book is the author's last word on any subject or expresses what he feels all the time. So if I were to walk under a bus this afternoon, then *Ending Up* would be my last novel, and people might say, "Well, he ended in a fit of pessimism and gloom." This wouldn't really be so. Each novel can only represent a single mood, a single way of looking at the world, and one feels bleak from time to time, and takes a fairly pessimistic view of one's own future and chances. But there are other times when one doesn't, and out of that other books would emerge.

INTERVIEWER

I think you've said it was partly inspired by the communal setup you have here, with relatives and friends living in?

AMIS

Yes. The starting point is so often: What would happen if . . . ? In this case, What would it be like if we were all old and all, or some of us, handicapped to some degree? It was a kind of purposeful exaggeration of what is only slightly present or potentially present in existing circumstances.

INTERVIEWER

Did you know that Mencken had had nominal aphasia when you wrote the book?

AMIS

No. That happened because a friend of mine suffered from this mildly. It's cleared up now, and he's a close enough friend for me to ask him, "Do you mind if I exaggerate this?" "Not at all," he said, "if you think you can get a laugh out of it." I'm surprised that nobody's done it before.

INTERVIEWER

What are you doing at the moment? Is there any work in progress?

AMIS

Well, you find me at a time when that dreaded Thursday week, or something of the sort, is on the horizon. I've got quite a lot of a book in my head, yes, and this will be a sort of science fiction of the sort where the author proposes some change back in history, and deals with the results of that change. In this case, if the Reformation had never taken place. Then make the date 1976, say, when the book will probably come out, and show a different England and a different world.

INTERVIEWER

I gather you're also compiling the *Oxford Book of Light Verse*?

AMIS

Yes, I've done a bit of work on that already. It means that I shall virtually have to read the whole of English poetry in a decreasingly ample length of time, but I'll enjoy that because it's something to do in the afternoon.

INTERVIEWER

Could we just close with a summary of what really motivates you as a novelist?

AMIS

Well, as I've said before, self-entertainment is one thing. Another is feeling—I'm sorry, I can't help sounding pretentious here—feeling that this is what I've been designed to do . . . that I'd be failing in my duty to who knows what if I didn't go on producing writing of certain sorts. I don't feel any particular duty to the public. But a different matter, really, is duty to the reader, which determines not whether you shall write, but *how* you write. I don't think I've ever written anything that is designed purely as a sop to



the reader: I don't put in bits of sex to increase sales. But I always bear him in mind, and try to visualize him and watch for any signs of boredom or impatience to flit across the face of this rather shadowy being, the Reader.

*[I was busy packing up my gear when Amis said he would like to add an important postscript to his final answer.]*

AMIS

And then of course there's always vanity. You remember that Orwell said, when he was answering his own question, why I write, that his leading motive was the desire to be thought clever, to be talked about by people he had never met. I don't think he was being arrogant, I think he was being very honest.

