

## KINGSLEY AMIS - A COMIC WORLD

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*Abstract: He was the most prominent literary figure among political, cultural and social polemicists, appealing to the shifting tastes of elite and popular audiences alike. Widely remembered as a compelling person, a man of alarming appetites and energies, or as one of the funniest, cleverest or rudest men that most people had ever met, Amis enjoyed the status of a "celebrity" quoted in newspaper and periodicals, during a time when the devilish machinations of mass media had not yet given rise to the term's present-day negative or at least pejorative connotations. His work is of vital importance not only for its influence, but for the pleasure it affords, and the breadth and depth of its achievement. As for Amis the man, he was in life as he was on the page: commanding, invigorating, sparkling, and full of esprit.*

*Key words: crisis points, compromise, humorous tone, national novelist, autobiographical experiences*

Detached from political causes and progress in their own lives, the protagonists of Amis's first novels *Lucky Kim*, *That Uncertain Feeling* and *I Like It Here* are partly rebels, partly victims, and partly clowns who seek a life of compromise with, or of escape from boredom, hypocrisy and ignorance. Although each novel carries a serious moral interest, the heroes generate laughter instead of tears because the reader is allowed to believe that through all this chaos there is an ordering of events which will bring security and happiness. "The reader is left with picture of Amis as a conventional moralist whose characters, fly in the face of that morality." (Salwak, 1992: 60) That is the source of much of his irony and his comedy. "It has been said", Malcom Bradbury wrote in 1987, "that few contemporary comic writers can get free of the intonations of Amis..." (Bradbury, 1998: 206) The first sounding of those intonations would come from a hapless but lucky hero.

Amis's second novel *That Uncertain Feeling* has revealed traits familiar to readers of *Lucky Jim*, one of these being the humorous tone which is not as striking as in Amis's earlier novel. When *Lucky Jim* was published, Amis had reached page 40 of his second novel, *That Uncertain Feeling*, a practice that he followed with his novels ever since. This was finished by the end of the year and came out in July 1955. Throughout 1954 Amis was doing fortnightly reviews and articles, mainly for the *Spectator*, travelling regularly to London for interviews and continuing to fulfil his demanding commitments at the university.

Like many other writers, Amis had kept notebooks of ideas for many years. In his notebook for *That Uncertain Feeling*, dated September 1953, we come across a virtual dialogue between the author and his novels, doubled by plans and parts of the book. Amis wrote the first draft in two years, read it, made corrections, reviewed it, and started work on another draft. He worked hard to make his writing exact and allotted special attention to the sound of his prose so that there would be "no successive sentences that rhyme or boring succession of words that end with 'ing' or the like". As he explains, "What makes something readable is a ceaseless attention to very small points that the reader isn't aware of." (*Economist*, 9 March 1991: 89)

When the novel appeared in August 1955, most reviewers agreed that it represented a step forward in Amis's career. John Betjeman said that the novel made him laugh "even more than his first book". (Betjeman, 26 August 1955: 8) While Philip Oakes wrote: "What Mr. Amis did is to break new ground, rather than trade on a gilt-edged reputation". (Oakes, 1955:177-178) Amis later wrote about these pitfalls of "the second novel":

Why is a writer's second novel so often inferior to his first, so that a second novel that turn out to be, if nothing more, no worse than the first one is a cause for congratulation? Answer: because most 'second' novella were written earlier than the 'first', and after the successful appearance of the 'first', are pulled of the drawer, given a freshly-typed title page and bunged off to the publisher. (Salwak, 1992:88)

The plot is relatively simple. As Salwak Dale affirmed, the novel is "the Faustian struggle of the flesh versus the spirit, temptation versus man's better nature." (Amis, 14 July 1967) On the one hand there is John's instinctive desire for loyalty; on the other hand there is a desire for infidelity and disorder. John Lewis, aged twenty-six, works in the library of Aberdarcy, a small

southern Welsh town, making enough to support his wife, Jean, and their two young children in a dingy low-rent second-floor flat. His life takes a radical turn when he meets Elizabeth Gruffydd-Williams, whose husband, Vernon, is very rich, very influential and, fortunately for John, a member of the Town Council and the Libraries Committee. Most of the novel concerns John's entry, with Elizabeth's help, into the quasi-aristocratic world of Aberdarcy, and the degrading effect that this experience has on his character. He spends the greater part of this novel time considering the attraction and consequences of adultery with Elizabeth. In the end John's experience has taught him to prefer the simple but safer pleasures that spring from his father's warning: "Sobriety and decorum, let these be your watchwords." (Amis, 1985: 162)

As in *Lucky Jim*, the first hints about the protagonist are given in an opening comic scene. Some of the contempt that John feels towards his job comes from the description of his resigned and diligent performance and frustrating tasks, including for example, dealing with an expired library card:

"The Bevan ticket," I said. "has expired, and will have to be renewed".

The middle-aged woman put a hand to her mitre-like hat and frowned across the counter at me. After sometime, she said: "Mrs. Bevan said she just wanted one like the one she had out last time".

I was used in this sort of thing, as indeed to every sort of thing that could go on here. "The Bevan ticket", I repeated in the same tone, or lack of one, has expired; and will have to be renewed."

My gaze, slightly filmed by afternoon drowsiness, swam, round the square, high room, fixing idly on the etching, or daguerreotype, or whatever it was, of Lord Beaconsfield's face which hung over the Hobbies and Handicrafts Section, Lord Beaconsfield had some connection with the founding the Library, which took place a long time ago. At the moment his likeness was glowing in a cloudy beam of late spring sunshine, and looked as if it wanted to be sick but knew that this would be wrong. I nodded imperceptibly to it. (Amis, 1985: 19)

Amis himself argued that "Like Jim Dixon, Lewis is involved in the business of learning that it is what you do that matters. Like Jim Dixon, he cares very much, even if he can't quite

make the grade.” David Lodge describes the similarity in somewhat different terms: “Like Jim Dixon, John Lewis is trying to reconcile his inner life with his outer life, but an opposite direction. Whereas Jim struggled to make his outer life realize his inner life of protest and romantic self-fulfilment, John Lewis seeks to discipline his outer life by the moral principles of his inner self.”(Amis, 23 January: 1973)

Larkin liked the new novel in part, because it was so exclusively Amis’s own. Amis, too, was an adulterer who loved his wife and family but in his former role he was far more calculating than Lewis. Amis had met Robert Conquest in 1952 at a party in Chelsea, on the occasion of the launch of a new PEN anthology of poems in which they both featured. However their friendship had much to do with a shared taste for boozing. Just as frequently, after *Lucky Jim*, Amis would visit London on his own, to see publishers, to promote his own writing, or to fulfil tasks related to his regular work for the *Spectator* and the *Observer*. By the time he wrote *That Uncertain Feeling*, he had also sent letters to Conquest with the request to borrow his other residence for adulterous relationships. Lewis plans his liaisons with Elizabeth with far less tactical precision.

In the previous year, 1956, marital relationships between the Amises had reached crisis points. He could never hope to keep his entire affairs secret, and Hilly found out about most of them. This had been happening during the completion of *That Uncertain Feeling* and the penultimate chapter of the novel is an accurate prediction of what happened with the Amises in October 1956. At the end of the novel, Lewis and Jean are reunited and this, too, was a prediction of what happened with the Amises by the end of 1956. There were further problems, but they managed to stay together. Finally we find the Lewises’ back in the mining village where Lewis was born. They are happy, and the inhabitants are apart from the Elizabeth’s “Anglicized upper classes.”(Amis, 1985:10)

The novel is not only about adulterous relationships - Amis’s experiences of the class structure of south-west Wales were also the basis for Lewis’s own account. Lewis’s flat is a version of several dwellings rented by the Amises from November 1949 until Hilly’s legacy when they afforded to buy a new house in The Grove in 1951. They were primitive places with shared bathrooms. For a while, Hilly, like Jean, had no other option but to bathe her youngest children in a kitchen sink. For the first six months of 1950 they shared a house with Amis’s English Department colleague David Sims. He became one of the Amis’s closest friends in

Swansea and provided him with some of the background material for the character of Lewis. In the summer of 1951 Amis and Sims spent a week in New Tredegar making 800 school examination papers for the Joint Welsh Board. Amis needed the money, and liked the place, which also became Lewis's home town to which he retreats with Jean at the end of the novel.

During these years, Amis and his colleagues at the university were paid less than many employees of the National Coal Board. Hilly, like Jean, had to find part-time jobs, the former washing up at a fish and chip café in the Mumbles. Amis had never been well-off, but his background in London, the home counties, Oxford and the army had been middle class and this was his first real encounter with working-class.

Margaret Aaron-Thomas was the social worker who, as Amis had convinced Larkin, might be cited as the real model for Margaret Peel of *Lucky Jim*. She was a friend of Hilly's, who would become Betty in his short story "Moral Fibre", a spin-off from *That Uncertain Feeling*. Her husband, John, owned the Newport Argus and a successful business in Swansea, and they were certainly in Amis's mind when he invented the Griffith-Williamses. On one occasion the Aaron Thomases were invited to the Amises' house in the Grove for drinks and food. Lewis plays a similar game with his own experience of Swansea lifestyle, mocking the habits of the Griffith-Williams and contrasting them with the rough, but admirably transparent manner of the ordinary people of the area.

When *Lucky Jim* transformed Amis from a provincial academic into a national novelist, his credit with the sophisticated people from the region increased significantly. Jo Bartley, his colleague who had exchanged a Chair in India for a lectureship in Swansea, introduced Amis to the Swansea Yacht Club, and while he had no interest in sailing he certainly enjoyed being talked about, and introduced to people in the club as a controversial author. Lewis plays a similar role. He is not a writer, but he is someone who enjoys existing on the margins of a comfortably exclusive social network. In chapter 3 Lewis and Jean are invited to a Gruffyd-Wiliams house party surrounded by local representatives of what he calls "anglicized Aberdarcy bourgeois" (Amis, 1985: 10) a phrase he uses four times in the novel.

At the Yacht Club Amis met Eve and Stuart Thomas. Stuart Thomas and Amis became friends, and remained so during the Swansea years and after Amis's departure. Amis had long abandoned Communism, but he still voted Labour. At election time his house was full of posters, and Hilly used the family car to ferry elderly, infirm electors in hope of securing a gratitude vote

for Labour. In *That Uncertain Feeling*, Dylan Thomas becomes Probert, a figure who threatens Lewis's fragile relationship with Jean.

Like in his first novel, *Lucky Jim*, where many of the characters and situations were drawn from Amis's personal experience, in his second novel he created John Lewis as an "experiment, as someone who was a version of himself but whose background and circumstances were different, differences which enabled him to become the person that Amis could never be." (Bradford, 2001:130) Amis's left-wing affiliation began as a rebellion against his family background, particularly his father. John Lewis is a socialist, but he demonstrates that his commitment is partly hypocritical and partly irrelevant to the things that trouble him, specifically his marriage and his ambitions.

Rubin Rabinovitz sees in *That Uncertain Feeling* strong parallels with the eighteenth-century novelist Samuel Richardson's long-suffering heroine in *Pamela*. John Lewis, he says, "Yields his virtue, but at the end of the novel, tries to salvage his integrity". Like Pamela, John:

must choose between virtue and worldly goods, and both of them have trouble making up their minds because they are sexually attracted to the people who tempt them. In both *Pamela* and *That Uncertain Feeling* the protagonist makes the conventionally moral choice in the end, though their experiences leave them somewhat tarnished. (Rabinovitz, 1967: 44)

When Lewis returns to the valleys, the conflict between his left-wing attitudes and the people he lives with is no longer an issue. Lewis's is a lifelong struggle against that uncertain feeling, a continuing battle between integrity and human weakness.

The typescript of *That Uncertain Feeling* had been sent to Gollancz in early 1955. At that time Amis had no plans for his next novel but at the end of March received a telegram in Swansea from Hilary Rubinstein informing him that *Lucky Jim* had won the Somerset Maugham Award of 500£, and reminding him that "If you don't travel you can't have the money". And so Amis took the entire family to Portugal. Amis would be able to fit the three months into the Swansea summer vacation, but he had no interest in foreign travel and no contacts abroad. The Amises had never been on a proper holiday since their marriage and Hilary was more enthusiastic

about the prospect than Amis. John Aaron–Thomas said he would contact Signor Pintos Bassos, a businessman whom he and his wife had stayed with in Portugal.

They did not stay with Pintos Bassos but with one of his employees, a senior clerk called Billy Barley. In *I Like It Here* he became C.J.P. Oates. Barley's wife and children, his Anglo-Portuguese background, his accent, appeared in the novel with autobiographical verity. The novel was written after Amis's return to Swansea in September 1955, but there is no evidence that he had originally planned his period abroad as the basis for a work of fiction. Before he left Portugal, he had written a review article for the *Spectator* on Laurie Lee's *A Rose for Winter* and Peter Mayne's *The Narrow Smile*, as well as literary travel books, about their respective author's experiences in Spain, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Amis wanted to write a non-fiction travel book that would undermine the assumptions. He abandoned the project because he realized that if it were to be taken seriously it would have to be based on personal experience of realities abroad. In the end, the only piece of non-fiction writing to be salvaged from the summer was a brief contribution to the *Spectator's* 1956 travel supplement. Instead of a travel book he wrote a novel and used these real events to craft another story, entirely fictional, throughout which Amis puts forth opinions on literature and identity, which would have been central to his original project.

Garnet Bowen's trip to Portugal is sponsored by the publisher, Hyman, and in return for a free holiday, Bowen is asked to elucidate a literary detective mystery. Hyman had recently received a manuscript from a person claiming to be the Wulfstan Stretcher who had published five acclaimed modernist novels in the 1930s and the 1940s. Along with his children and his wife Garnet Bowen travels to Portugal, but his family is unexpectedly called back to England to care for his mother-in-law. By this time Garnet has located the mysterious Stretcher and stays in his house as a guest. In his wife's absence Garnet has a relationship with a beautiful Portuguese woman named Emilia. He also solves the question of Stretcher's authenticity and finally, he returns home, because he "likes it here", making a permanent resolution to remain in England. Bowen is an "abroad-hater"(Jacobs, 1995: 214) and like Amis, prefers the relative safety of his home. Like John Lewis, Bowen abandons the adulterous life and returns to a comfortable marriage, firmly believing that he is the same man that he was before.

English and American reviewers were not too impressed with the novel's achievements. They criticised the plot and characterisation. G.S. Fraser called it "less a novel than a series of farcical incidents loosely tied to a travel narrative."(New Statement, 18 January 1958) Twenty



years later Amis himself referred to it as “by common consent my worst novel” and explained that it failed because he had tried to “put real people in paper.” In a 1975 interview for the Paris Review, Amis said that *I like It Here* “was written partly out of bad motives. Seeing that *That Uncertain Feeling* had come out in 1955, and it is 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.”(Barber, 1975:48) David Lodge calls the novel:

A most interesting example of a special genre; which perhaps begins with *Tristram Shandy*, and which is particularly common in our area. I mean the kind of novel which is not so much turned outwards upon the world as inward upon literary art and upon the literary artist himself. I am thinking of such novels as Evelyn Waugh’s *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* and Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*. It is characteristic of such novels that the central figure is himself a writer, often with an autobiographical reference, that there is a lot of parody, many literary jokes, and much discussions of literary questions, and that in this way the author is able to get a surprising distance on his own literary identity.(Lodge, 1966: 261)

When he began *I Like It Here* in late 1955, Gollancz had just agreed to publish *A Case of Sample*, his first volume of poems appeared under an establishment imprint. In early 1956, the Fabian Society had commissioned Amis to write a pamphlet, which the following year would be published as *Socialism and the Intellectuals*, a skeptical assessment of the British labour government and its advocates.

Amis, as Richard Bradford said, toyed with the idea of bringing back Jim Dixon who would be sent to Portugal by his employer, Gore Urquart, and there meet an author called Kingsley Amis. Fielding was in his thoughts. He, too, had used his own name, yet had been both himself and a version of himself in a work which mixed fact with fiction. Amis abandoned this idea because its twentieth-century manifestation would probably be viewed as a concession to modernist self-consciousness. Instead, Amis produced a book that was both a tribute to Fielding’s narrative technique, and a pretext to interweave elements of his own life.(Bradford, 2001:140-141)



*I Like It Here* became a novel that Amis wanted to forget. He talks of it in his self-critical 1973 essay, but more significantly, that summer in Portugal is not mentioned in his *Memoirs*. The weakness of the novel is not the result of a temporary decline in Amis's abilities as a serious writer. They mark a stage of growth in which he was searching for themes of deeper implication. Beginning with *Take A Girl Like You*, Amis will leave behind light-hearted social comedy in favour of more pronounced realism, formal complexity and a more obvious moral concern. To many critics, his next novel seemed to be a departure from the light fiction that they had come to expect from him.

In the same year of publication of *I Like It Here*, Amis arrived with his family, including his widowed father, in the United States as a visiting fellow in creative writing at Princeton University. He describes the experience as "one of the best years of my life, perhaps the most enjoyable, and crammed with incident". (Amis, 1991:193) His class, for example, gave him "a lot of pleasure and also taught [him] about America and about literature". (Amis 1991:197) In the house he rented in Edgerstone Road, Amis researched and wrote *New Maps of Hell*, began work on *Take a Girl Like You*, wrote four poems, and made notes on his American experiences and observations.

While at Princeton he delivered the Christian Gauss Seminars in Criticism on science fiction, a task he was well qualified for, since from the time he was a boy he had read every American science fiction magazine he could lay his hands on. Knowing that his audience would be a distinguished one, including Mary McCarthy and Dwight McDonald, he decided to research and compose his lectures. By the time he had found enough material for a book, he asked Hilary Rubinstein to publish it, and it appeared in the United States in 1960 and in England in 1961 with the title *New Maps of Hell: A Survey Of Science Fiction*. Amis develops an "analogy between science fiction and jazz" (Mosely, 1993:54) pointing out, that both developed in America in the 1930s:

Both have strong connections with mass culture without being, as I have to show in the case of science fiction mass media in themselves,

Both have thrown up a large number of interesting and competent figures without producing anybody of first-rate importance" and "both jazz and science fiction have in the last dozen years begun to attract the attention of the cultural diagnostician, or trend-

hound, who becomes interested in them not far or as themselves, but for the light they can be made to throw on same other thing. (Amis, 1960: 17-18)

Because of that uncertainty, the moral seriousness in *That Uncertain Feeling* is not readily discernible here. Its true merit, as David Lodge suggests, is its being a “gently comic explanation of why travel will not serve the literary purposes it is supposed to serve, of broadening the mind and opening new areas of experience.”(Lodge, 1966: 267)

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