

KINGSLEY AMIS: THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE YEARS

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Abstract: In the following novels Kingsley Amis moves away from the board scope of a society plagued by trouble to examine instead the troubles plaguing one of that society's most fundamental institutions: relationships. The 1980s saw Amis returning to a very high level of accomplishment, with such novels as Stanley and the Women (1984), which created great controversy over its alleged misogyny: The Old Devils (1986), and Difficulties with Girls (1988). In 1986 he won the Booker Prize-McConnell Prize, the most prestigious literary award for British fiction, for The Old Devils, and he had been a Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1981. In 1990 he published The Folks That Live on the Hill and The Amis Collection: Selected Non-Fiction 1954-1990.

Keywords: madness, relationships, uncertainty, alcoholism, anxiety

As Amis began a new decade, he was well past middle age, as Anthony Burgess remarked entering into a new triumphant phase of his writing. One of the universal themes which has most engaged him, and about which he has a variety of things to say and show, is the relationship between men and women, both in and out of marriage. In his next four novels "Amis moves away from the board scope of a society plagued by trouble to examine instead the troubles plaguing one of that society's most fundamental institutions: relationships." (Salwak, 1992, 225) He takes up the conflicts, misunderstandings and drastically different responses of men and women to the world in *Stanley and the Women*, *The Old Devils*, *Difficulties with Girls*, *The Folks That Live on the Hill*. Something had been lost, and lost is at the heart of all of Amis's novels, so that he is, as Malcom Bradbury calls him, "one of our most disturbing contemporary novelists, as explorer of historical pain." (Bradbury, 1988, 216) His characters are not going to regain the old secure sense of meaning that their lives once held, and Amis does not pretend that they will. The question that Amis's characters in his next novels tried is: What in the absence of an informing faith or an all-consuming family life could provide purpose for living?

In the summer of 1981 Kingsley Amis was a man alone. His second wife Elizabeth Jane Howard had left him after a long period of mounting disagreement, while the sixteen-year marriage had begun in trouble. Amis had ignored the signs, preoccupied with his writing and reading and perhaps distracted by speaking engagements and other demands on his time.

Among his activities, from 1984 to 1985 he would edit a poetry column in the *Daily Mirror* focusing on a different poet and poem five days a week, publishing a collection of verse, and edit a science fiction anthology.

His search was slowed when in early 1982 he broke his leg in a fall inside his home. He ended in Royal Free Hospital, Hampstead for three weeks. This, along with a commitment neither to drink nor to smoke, a lot of antibiotics, led him to hallucinations in the night in his empty hospital ward. About this time the idea for *Stanley and the Women* drifted into his mind. "One moment I knew nothing: the next I knew it would be about a man with a mad son who breaks up his marriage." (Spark, 1988, 13) Writing it was in part for him a matter of regaining his lost confidence, in part an escape from the outward and inward pressures of his

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life. The novel took eighteen months and by autumn 1984 his new manuscript had grown to over 300 pages; a year later it was published as *Stanley and the Women* and was dedicated to Hilly (and in 1991 his *Memoirs*). With the exception of *Lucky Jim*, nothing in Amis's career would provide such an outpouring of intense reaction reviewers. Amis had had something to say in earlier novels, but never so provocatively as in this dark comedy.

At one level *Stanley and the Women* is about madness, a subject that has always fascinated Amis. In most of his novels there is at least one example of an abnormal psychological state, and genius madness, acute mental illness, it is an issue in three of them one in each of his three novels: *The Green Man*, *The Anti-Death-League*, and *Jake's Thing*. It is known that for many writers as for Amis, it is the time when they are afraid of going mad, and he has occasionally consulted a therapist. To lose the use of this faculty, in Amis' view, is to fall prey to excessive and irrational reflection upon the discrepancy that inevitably develops between hope and reality. (Salwak, 1992. 229)

Amis distinguishes between "pseudo-madness", which he calls "a fashionable defence against difficulties", and real madness, which he considers "a good subject for fiction just because it is so intractable". Of *Stanley and the Women*, he said:

Steve's illness can't be made to correspond to anything that's going on in other people's lives. It's a hopeless thing. It doesn't tell you anything about sane people except how sane they are. And the effect schizophrenia has on other people's lives interesting too. It's pure, in that it doesn't arouse difficulties of nursing: there are no physical consequences. It's just that somebody suddenly becomes impossible, and I mean 'suddenly': the onset of schizophrenia is sudden and extreme... So the insanity of schizophrenia makes it useful as a fiction device. (Barber, 1984, 13)

"Being mad includes laughing at things the rest of us don't think are funny-the death of a parent for instance", he says. (Salwak, 1992, 229) In his portrayal of Steve's madness and the violent, unpredictable and very sad effects it has on those around him. Amis illustrates the depth of his understanding of abnormality.

In a BBC profile of the author, for example, reminisces by his first wife and by long-time friends Edward du Cann, Claire Tomalin and George Gale, as well as Amis himself, helped to trace the development of his career from *Lucky Jim* to *Stanley*. The subject of women came up and Tomalin observed:

Kingsley Amis has always been fascinated by women. But they're always mysteriously lovable, mysteriously to him. In his early books, they're mysteriously lovable, mysteriously desirable. And he circled around them, trying to pat them, trying to reach them. And as he's got older, as this novel have progressed, they have become mysteriously hateful, frightening, horrible... There seems to be sort of obsession with the nastiness of women. There is a sense of a man with a real problem, a man who really doesn't know how to deal with women, but can't stop worrying about them and wondering about them. (Bakewell, 1984, 1092)

In the first week of the publication of the novel, several outstanding reviews appeared in the major London dailies. John Carey write in *Sunday Times*: “If you are a middle-aged male chauvinist alcoholic you will enjoy this novel, and its narrator... will strike you as a perfectly normal and reliable chap”.(Carey, 1984, 16) J.K.L. Walker in *The Times Literary Supplement* called the novel “perhaps the most skilfully written of all Amis’ novels, and for much of its length the most overtly serious... [It] reveals Kingsley Amis in the full flood of his talent and should survive its ritual burning in William IV Street unscathed.”(Walker, 1984, 571) *Stanley and the Women* found its way on to the bestseller list, and was later named in two-year end surveys of the best books one by Anthony Burgess (“sharp courageous or audacious, very honest, and needless to say, very funny”) Bernard Levin (“implacably misogynist and hideously funny”)

(Burgess, 1984) With the exception of *Russian Hide and Seek*, all Amis’s novels had been placed with an American publisher, usually six to nine months after the English edition had appeared. Now it seems to Hitchens that American readers were to be “cheated of a chance to get hold of a good book. Is there no publisher who will step forward to save the honour of the trade?”(Hitchens, 1984, 1310) The reason for not publishing Amis’s novel was that the Americans considered it “too English”, “too right-wing”, “too anti-woman”, “not good enough”.(Hitchen, 1984, 445) Articles in *New York Times Book Review* reported that British literary circles suspected that the apparent misogyny of Amis’s hero made American publishers timid about issuing a novel that might provoke feminist protest and therefore hurt sales. Jonathan Clowes, Amis’s long-time agent, confirmed this suspicious when he reported that he had shown the novel to three American publishers, all of whom had tried it down:

At fits they were rather vague about the whole thing. It took a while to finds out, but when I pressed them on it, I was told that certain women on their boards were unhappy with the book. And I saw that as a form of censorship. (Saturday Review, 1985,19)

Stanley and the Women found a home, a full year after its British debut, with Summit, a division of Simon & Schuster. Asked why they had the courage to publish it, the associate editor Ileene Smith said that her decision to publish was “not so much a matter of courage... as sound literary judgement.”(Smith, 1985) Summit published the book that Jane in an attractive four-color cover with quotes from the very strong British reviews by Malcom Bradbury, Anthony Burgess, and Auberon Waugh. The unprecedented prepublication attention in both Britain and America ensured that the novel would be reviewed, read and talked about. Amis commented: “If the novel got a lot of hype in the press, it really doesn’t matter to me. I only wanted it sold. I don’t think there was any national change of heart in America. There were just some smart people who knew how to get it through.” (Salwak, 1992, 240)

His last novels included some figures who were uncertain, anxious, ambitious, and for whom the future was a blend of possibilities. *The Old Devils* is a novel comprised mainly of characters of Amis’s age, one of whom attempts to live as though he is still in his thirties. The novels are set in Wales where Amis had lived for fourteen years. Jane was unenthusiastic about her husband’s provincial Welsh connections, partly because she found Swansea dull, ugly and provincial and, understandably, because the region and the people were exclusively associated with Amis’s life before he met her. Consequently, his visits during the late 1960s

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and 1970s were infrequent. After he moved in with Hilly and her third husband he made an arrangement with Eve and Stuart Thomas that every year in late August – early September he would spend three to four weeks with them in their bungalow on the outskirts of Swansea. During this period the Garrick was closed, (the pub where he went frequently), and he transported some of his London habits to Swansea. It was during the first of these Swansea excursions in 1984 that the idea for *The Old Devils* occurred to him. His nightmarish vision of an old age in *Ending Up* had been created when he was fifty. Twelve years later he was finding that things were not quite as bad as he had imagined they might be. *The Old Devils* described the lives of four couples. They are all about the same age as Amis, retired or semi-retired have known each other since their university days and are spending their decline years in the town where most of them grew up. The town is unnamed but it is undoubtedly Swansea. The truth is that the novel is about himself and Hilly before their break up.

Amis started the novel in 1984, but an event the following year contributed significantly to its presentation of Wales and Welshmen, more specifically their hypocritical embodiment in Alun Weaver. In 1985 Amis was made an Honorary Fellow of the Swansea University, as he wrote to Larkin, “pleased to get it, as I dare say you felt over the first half dozen of your hon. degrees”. This was the first time he had been back to the university since he resigned his lectureship twenty-three years before. He had been awarded the CBE in 1981, inspired, he knew, by his support for Mrs Thatcher, and in 1985 Swansea University had given him an Honorary Fellowship. But apart from these, official and public acclaim was slight. No university had offered him an honorary degree. Larkin had five, but Larkin was a serious poet, and Amis wondered if popularity plus his tendency to mix comedy with virtually everything had caused the establishment to regard him as low-brow. As Eric Jacobs said, “Amis was not much admired in academic circles where he was seen as having committed several vulgar errors: he was popular, he was politically incorrect, he wrote too much.”(Jacobs, 364, 1995)

On the evening of 22 October 1986 the BBC televised from Guildhall the nineteenth annual presentation of Britain’s highest literary award, the Booker-McConnell Prize. The selection committee had settled on six novels which they “hoped[d] and trusted[d] would still be read in twenty years, with “a strong chance” of being read in a hundred years’ time. (Thwaite, 1986, 1218) Amis had been a finalist for the award in 1974 for *Ending Up* and in 1978 for *Jake’s Thing*. This time he was expected to win. *The London Standard*, for example, called the book “prophetic...full of sombre horror of the present and fear of the future”, and lauded “the devastating accuracy of Amis’s passionate, compressive and childishly uncompromising rudeness”. (Spurling, 1986, 21) *The Daily Telegraph* praises it as “by far the best novel Amis had written for many years, “a superb slow read... full of richly drawn characters.”(Holloway, 1986, 7) Anthony Burgess found it “a brilliant novel of great honesty [that] moves without contrivance...It is sadly comic and comically sad, but in the wonderful paradox of art, both consoling, and stimulating. There is one old devil who is writing better than he ever did.”(Burgess, 1986, 17) No doubt, with *Stanley and the Women* in mind, most reviewers agreed that *The Old Devil* was also Amis’s most humane novel next to date.

In many ways *The Old Devil* typifies Amis’s fiction of the last twelve years or so of his life in that its evocation of the present is always conditional upon something else, another place and time, emotions and events that are remembered. Martin Amis considered it his father’s best novel, or at least the one he feels closest to. Malcom Bradbury points to this guarded optimism when he observes that at the novel’s end, Amis’s:

Mannered rage against the modern world is mediated and made part of the sadness of what has been lost, and the present even summons up some striking notes of moral maturity in several of the characters. Wales itself becomes less a comic issue than a state of mind that has to be accepted, and the story comes to a compacted, symbolically appropriate, even hopeful end. This troubling but strong book contains the most painful kind of anger, against the moral human condition itself, for which none of us has the cure. The Angry Young Man may feel a Bitter Old One, the moral seriousness of the early novels opens to defeat; but his writing can still contain a moral desire, a sharp, self-challenging honesty. (Bradbury, 1988, 217-218)

At the end of *The Old Devils* Amis described for the first time since *I Want It Now* two attractive people who show promise of living and working together peacefully, using their energy to make a new world instead of destroying an existing one. He will work with this theme again in his next novel, as he examines the marriage of Patrick and Jenny Standish.

In *Take a Girl Like You* Patrick Standish fell in love with the innocent Jenny Bunn. Now she reappears in Amis's next novel, *Difficulties with Girls*. In a 1974 interview, when asked what the lives of Jenny and Patrick would be like after *Take a Girl Like You*, Amis answered, "He'll marry her and bugger off". (Clive, 1974, 24) Patrick has given up teaching and now works in publishing, and Jenny disposes compassion as a part-time teacher in a children's hospital. Patrick is, as he had declared in 1960, genuinely in love with Jenny but, as Amis has caused us to suspect, he would not give up his infidelities. The couple are an extension of *The Old Devils*, in which Alun and Rhiannon were elderly, present-day version of Patrick and Jenny. And of course projections of what Amis's and Hilly's relationship would have been like. By reinventing Hilly as Jenny, Amis was again exploring his sense of regret and offering another long delayed note of apology. For *Difficulties with Girls* Amis writes, as Karl Miller explains, "as he has written in other books, about the distance between men and women: here, too, is the trouble that awaits the rational hedonist who would undertake to send his talent into such painful places." (Miller, 1988, 78)

One of Amis's best-known poems, "Nothing to Fear", was in his mind and very likely on his desk when he wrote the novel.

All fixed; early arrival at the flat
Lent by a friend...
Drinks on the tray; the cover story pat
And quite uncheckable...

The poem is a compressed short story. It is autobiographical, based on those occasions in the 1950s and early when Conquest would arrange locations for Amis's frequent adulterous activities in London. It was written around the same time as *Take a Girl Like You* and was later reprinted in a collection of Amis's verse, ironically in 1967. Its speaking presence is Amis but could just as well be Patrick Standish.

The next four novels produced by Amis in the 1990s refract his life in a different manner. Two of them are autobiographical. *The Folks That Live on the Hill* (1990) is about his world in Primrose Hill and the ménage of acquaintances and family with whom he shared

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it. He wrote alongside his *Memoirs* (1991). The novel combines the honesty of a letter to a friend with the blend of thoughtful omission and creative indulgence that such letters frequently involve, while the *Memoirs* are simply selective. *You Can't Do Both* (1994) covers the four decades from his childhood years of the 1930s to his break-up with Hilly in the 1960s. "It is his most transparent piece of life-based fiction, candid and apologetic." (Bradford, 2001, 395) The other two, *The Russian Girl* (1992) and his final novel *The Biographer's Moustache* (1995), offer much more perspectives upon his experiences, but feeling of remembrance and competition resonate through both.

Harry Caldecote, the central figure of *The Folks That Live on the Hill*, is retired, twice married and spends a good deal of his time in the King's public house and in the Irving, a decent London Club. The Queen's was Amis' local pub and the Garrick, had been regularly attended by Henry Irvin. The specific detail of the novel tells us little more about his life than could be found in interviews or book launch profiles. Harry is the central figure, but the third-person narrator is his niece Fiona. With her, Amis creates for Harry a similar role sage and helper. Throughout Amis's, fiction booze is treated as an almost compulsory indulgence. Fiona is the first of his characters for whom alcohol addiction is a serious problem. She tries every day to remember the horrible events of the day before and the inevitability of more alcohol as mental antidote to this. She suspects that her condition is an irreversible genetic inheritance, her cousin when drunk killed herself in a car crash maybe that is why his mother had featured that might be prone to a family tendency – two of her aunts had died of alcohol illness.

Fiona is based upon Amis's daughter Sally, who drinks a lot too. According to Martin Amis, his father care more about Sally than the rest of his children. There is a photograph in Jacobs's biography, of Amis in the Queen's, glass in hand smiling, seated at the centre of an assembly of eight other people, friends and family. Hilly is at his right shoulder, and Sally his left. They seem happy. It is one of the most accurate equivalents of a novel in existence. (Bradford, 2001, 395)

The Russian Girl presents Dr Richard Viasey, a lecturer in Slavonic Studies, and Anna, a visiting Russian poet. When planning the novel Amis must have had in mind an incident that had occurred three decades before and which he records in the essay "Kipling Good". In 1962, while still Fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge, Amis hosted a visit and reading by the Russian poet Yevtushenko. Amis's record of their conversation centres upon Yevtushenko asking him what he thinks of Dr Zhivago. Amis affirmed that he has not read it because "an interest in the paraphrasable content of literature [is] an anti-literary interest." (Amis, 1991, 237) *The Russian Girl* begins with a return of the same conversation. This time Richard's head of department, Hallet, is trying to convince him that it would be better for students to read Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* in English than not at all. The novel is about translation but not in the most obvious sense. It is about Amis's long-established use of literature as media. His customers will appreciate, understand, be amused by what they have bought, but someone else in particular will read through the words on the page to a very private mood or experience.

Amis produced a work which is on the whole an epitome of post-World War II era presented at first in a writing tradition similar to the one initiated by Henry Fielding; this work nevertheless turned out to be protean and versatile like Kingsley Amis himself. (Ciocoi-Pop, 1999, 65)

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