Review of *The Life of Kingsley Amis* by Zachary Leader
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The writings of Kingsley Amis, British poet, novelist and humorist (1922-1995), exemplify the proposition that it's hard to appreciate a joke without knowing the context. It has always been obvious that certain large themes in Amis' work – among them infidelity, drink, and aging – must have been the working out of issues important in his life. And yet, for most readers and even scholars, the life beneath was slightly out of reach.

I ought to know; as a graduate student in 1974, writing a dissertation on Amis, I tried tactfully to plumb the personal history that so obviously underlay what I was reading. Amis put me off beautifully. After vetting me, he could hardly have been more cordial or more willing to show me his world. And yet somehow he deflected my efforts to learn those personal details. I can hardly complain about a man, even an author, protecting his privacy. But it was a barrier to critical understanding. And early efforts to write about him, not just mine, suffered as a result.

It was a barrier certain to fall, as Amis clearly knew. He had spread the evidence everywhere, in his letters, in his autobiographical writings, in conversations with friends, wives, lovers, children, and colleagues, and in long interviews with his chosen biographer. And recently, as the story has inevitably emerged into print, it has become quite clear that the whole corpus of Amis' fiction was, in the words of scholar Richard Bradford, "one of most entertaining and thought-provoking autobiographies ever produced." On the evidence summarized in Zachary Leader's new biography, *The Life of Kingsley Amis*, the forces that shaped Amis almost always shaped his fiction and his poetry.

The notable exception was *Lucky Jim*, Amis' 1954 debut, a romantic comedy that had next to nothing to do with Amis' own life, though its irreverence toward postwar British society mirrored its author's. Heavily revised in response to poet Philip Larkin's suggestions, in plot and character it was actually more generic and less Amisian than everything else he did. (Leader does a fine job breaking out Larkin's contribution to the creative process.) The language alone was pure Amis. (For instance, Amis described hangover mouth this way: "His mouth had been used as a latrine by some small creature of the night, and then as its mausoleum.")

Most of the time, what Amis lived, he wrote about. And his life was built around the pursuit of drink, sex, companionship, and literary expression.

The rage for alcohol was prodigious, and over time, his drinking rituals controlled his schedule, his choice of friends, and his increasingly erratic behavior. He compensated by making of drink a subject of both fiction and nonfiction, most memorably in *The Green Man* (1969), in which the narrator's dipsomania is a plot device, as well as the focus of what were obviously Amis' justly guilty ruminations about the effect of his hedonism on his children's lives.

The sex he found everywhere he could throughout his first marriage. Reportedly he made passes at almost every woman in his path. His pained awareness of the irresolvable doubleness

this behavior created in his heart and his marriage fueled a number of his early novels. (It also provoked similar behavior by his wife, disrupted his children's upbringings, and ultimately brought the marriage down.) In his second union, with novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard, he was apparently faithful, but ironically succumbed to impotence, which, along with his alcoholism, seems to have laid that marriage low. His resulting rage informed more than one savage novel, including *Jake's Thing* (1978) and *Stanley and the Women* (1984).

Priapus may have deserted him, but Bacchus did not. Increasingly, Amis built his life around mostly male drinking circles – at the Garrick Club, at Bertorelli's Restaurant where he met weekly for extended lunches with a group of right-wing wits, at his local pub. The desire to belong to and dominate these gatherings led him to exaggerate a Blimpish and rude persona until it was doubtful whether he knew himself what was his own nature and what was an act. These circles inspired the political writings for which he became well known in later years.

Finally, though, and at times transcendently, there was the writing compulsion itself. Over his career he penned 25 novels, plus poetry, criticism, polemic, radio dramas and belles lettres. Most readers would say they preferred his achingly funny earlier works to later productions whose style seemed almost Jamesian in its complexity. But even towards the end, he was able to write accessibly and compellingly enough to win the Booker Prize, for *The Old Devils* (1986) and produce a late masterpiece, *You Can't Do Both* (1994). Neither drink nor infirmity nor compulsions slowed his literary production, right up to his deathbed.

Leader edited Amis' *Letters* (2000), and that background enables him to provide more detail on the interplay of the life and the books than did earlier worthy biographies by Richard Bradford (2001) and Eric Jacobs (1995). While respectful of Amis and of all who became part of the story through their association with him, Leader fulfills his mission: honestly telling the history that explains the books. Illuminated by this *Life*, those books shine with new luster and interest. Amis readers will forever be in Leader's debt.

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