BOOKS

Drinking and Driven

The author of 'Lucky Jim' and 'Jake's Thing' was all too familiar with the hungers and misgivings immortalized in his dark comedies

The Life Of Kingsley Amis

By Zachary Leader
Pantheon, 996 pages, $39.95

By JACK L.B. GOHN

THE writings of Kingsley Amis—the British poet, novelist, science-fiction writer, humorist, journalist, amateur linguist, professional drinks columnist and relentless sender of letters to the editor—show how hard it is to grasp the full point of a joke or argument or fictional scene without knowing the full context. It has always been obvious that certain large themes in Amis's work—among them infidelity, drink and aging—were attempts at working out matters important in his life. And yet, for most readers and even for scholars, the life beneath the writing was slightly out of reach.

I ought to know. As a graduate student in 1974, writing a dissertation on Amis, I tried to plumb the personal history underlying the opus as tactfully as I could. Amis and I exchanged several letters; and I saw him in London more than once. After vetting me, he could hardly have been more cordial or more willing to show me parts of his world. And yet somehow he deflected my efforts to learn the personal details that mattered to his work. I can hardly complain about a man protecting his privacy—even an author. But his guardedness was a barrier to critical understanding. Early efforts to write about him (and not just my own) suffered as a result.

It was a barrier certain to fall, as Amis clearly knew. He had spread evidence of his literary wellsprings everywhere—in letters, autobiographical writings and interviews, and in his conversations with friends, wives, lovers, children and colleagues. It has become ever more clear, in recent years, that the whole corpus of Amis's 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 "The Life of Kingsley Amis," the forces that shaped Amis almost always shaped his fiction and his poetry.

Kingsley Amis and his second wife, novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard, at their wedding reception in 1965.

ZUMA Press

The notable exception was "Lucky Jim," Amis's 1954 debut, a romantic comedy that had next to nothing to do with Amis's own life, though its irreverence toward postwar British society mirrored its author's. Heavily revised in response to the poet Philip Larkin's suggestions—Larkin was a lifelong friend of Amis's, dating from their days at university—the novel was more generic and less Amisian than anything else that Amis did, at least in plot and character. (Mr. Leader does a fine job of breaking out Larkin's contribution to the creative process.) The language alone was pure Amis. Of one of Jim's dreary hangovers: "His mouth had been used as a latrine by some small creature of the night, and then as its mausoleum."

Most of the time, though, Amis wrote about what he lived. And his life was built around the pursuit of drink, sex, companionship and literary expression. The rage for alcohol in particular was prodigious. Over time, his drinking rituals controlled his schedule and choice of friends and fueled his increasingly erratic behavior. He compensated by making drink a subject of his writing, most memorably in "The Green Man" (1969), a ghost tale in which the narrator's dipsomania is a plot device as well as the focus of what were obviously Amis's guilty ruminations about the effect of his own hedonism on his children's lives.

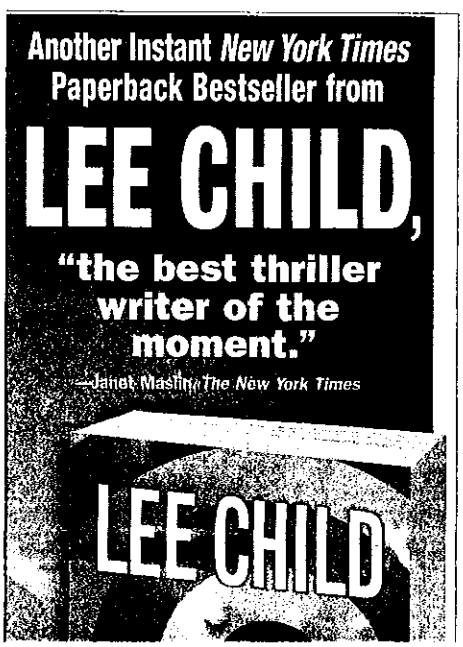
Throughout his first marriage—to Hilary Bardwell, from 1948 to 1965—Amis looked for sex everywhere he could, seemingly making passes at almost every woman who crossed his path. His pained awareness of the irresolvable doubleness that this behavior created in his heart and his marriage inspired a number of his early novels, such as "That Uncertain Feeling" and "Take a Girl Like You." (His philandering 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, Amis was apparently faithful, but he 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).

If Priapus deserted him, Bacchus did not. Increasingly, Amis built his life around mostly male drinking companions—at his local pub, at the Garrick Club, at Bertorelli's restaurant, where he met weekly for extended lunches with a group of right-wing wits. The desire to 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. The conversation in these circles helped to inform the semi-reactionary political writings for which he became well known in later years. His fairly early anticommunism was guided by Robert Conquest, the poet and Russian scholar, who remained a confidant until Amis's death in 1995.

And then there was the writing compulsion itself. Over his career he penned 25 novels, plus poetry, criticism, polemic, radio dramas and belles lettres. Most Amis readers would say they preferred his achingly funny earlier works to his later productions, whose style seemed almost Jamesian in its complexity. But even toward the end he was able to write accessibly enough to win the Booker Prize, for "The Old Devils" (1986), and to 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.

Mr. Leader edited Amis's "Letters" (2000), a huge volume throughout which Amis unburdens himself of all sorts of prejudices (often about the folly of modern literature, including that of his son, Martin), complaints, anecdotes and comic commentary. Mr. Leader's grounding in that work enables him to provide more detail on the interplay of the life and the books than did worthy biographies by Richard Bradford (2001) and Eric Jacobs (1995). Respectful of Amis and of all who became part of the story through their association with him, Mr. Leader fulfills his mission: honestly telling the history that explains the books.

Mr. Gohn now writes about and practices law in Baltimore.



To: Emailers Subject: Etiquette

FIVE BEST

These fictional tales rooted in history are British author Anne Perry's favorites

1 I, Claudius

By Robert Graves
Smith & Haas, 1934

One of the most extraordinary accomplishments in fiction based on history is Robert Graves's "I, Claudius." Graves wrote the "diaries" of the physically awkward and bookish Roman emperor Claudius in such a way that reading them is like spending the last hour of the evening listening to one's eccentric uncle talking candidly about how his day has been. Claudius speaks of the great figures of the Roman world 2,000 years ago as if we know them as well as he does. They are reduced from legend to humanity: immediate, vulnerable and very real. Claudius's forays into military tactics on the frontiers, political reform at home, and architecture and philosophy in general are the interests of an uncle we would never interrupt, for fear of hurting his feelings. Ultimately we become fascinated as well.

2 Full Dark House

By Christopher Fowler
Bantam, 2004

On the surface this is a detective story set during the World War II bombing of London. The destruction—not only of the city but of what previously had been the certainties of life—is painted in a hundred intimate touches. We taste the constant dirt, hear the sirens, bombs and the whine of aircraft. There are shortages of almost everything, and there is a tireless inventiveness to "make do and mend." Against this backdrop in 1940, two young detectives in the Peculiar Crimes Unit investigate the Palace Phantom, a killer who is stalking the cast of a London stage production. But "Full Dark House" is really a novel about the lifelong friendship of two very different men and the qualities that survive time and disaster: tolerance, kindness, good humor and courage.

3 The Scarlet Pimpernel

By Baroness Emmuska Orczy
Putnam, 1905

The language is a trifle dated, but the strength of the plot has never been surpassed. The time is the French Revolution, the setting both England and France. A Frenchwoman named Marguerite St. Just is married to Sir Percy Blakeny, a wealthy British nobleman whom she has come to see as a shallow fop. Like everyone else, she admires passionately the mysterious "Scarlet Pimpernel," who with his small band of friends risks his life rescuing French aristocrats from the steps of the guillotine and bringing them back to England, always pursued by his nemesis, Citizen Chauvelin. Chauvelin captures Marguerite's brother, and the price of his life is that Marguerite should find and betray the Scarlet Pimpernel. She has a heart-rending dilemma, and only after she has betrayed the Pimpernel—and then discovered that he is in fact Sir Percy—does she set out to save him, willing to pay with her own life. It is courage, choice, daring, invention, conflict and love—all perfectly woven together toward a tremendous climax. Wouldn't we all wish to be so loved, so brave, and to have a second chance in which to redeem our misjudgments?

4 To Say Nothing Of the Dog

By Connie Willis
Bantam, 1998

How can a modern American capture so perfectly the lyrical beauty, the tumult of thought, the arrogance, prejudice and charm, the sheer Englishness of Oxford in 1888? This is a tale of time travel from a rather bleak future to a past where matrons are irascible and beautiful girls fall in love at the drop of a hat—a straw boater, naturally, worn by young men drifting downriver past old churches and flower-deep meadows. The Oxford dons are brilliant and hilariously eccentric, absorbed in arguments about history, Darwin, God and the universe. Our hero, time-traveler Ned Henry, who specializes in 20th-century history, needs recuperation from too much shuttling from era to era. He has jumped from 1940s England to Victorian Oxford in search of the mysterious "bishop's bird stump," an urn needed for a perfect re-creation of Coventry Cathedral after its bombing in World War II. His Oxford respite would be idyllic were it not that a fellow time traveler has brought a cat along, causing a change in the future and disturbing the time continuum for centuries. It is all a journey of wit, humor, love and the sheer joy of life.

5 The Ballad of The White Horse

By G.K. Chesterton
John Lane, 1911

This is the story of the English King Alfred's desperate stand against invading Danes in 878. England is conquered, and Alfred is a fugitive when he sees a vision of the Virgin Mary that bids him call together the remnants of his people for a final battle. "The Ballad of the White Horse" is an epic poem of courage, passion and unsurpassable beauty. When Alfred asks the Saxons to join the battle, the dismaying reply is: "Friend I will watch the certain things, / Swine and slow moons like silver rings, / And the ripening of the plums." Left to fend for themselves, Alfred and his followers are strengthened by a faith in God and a love of England that are as deep as the bone. It is the meeting of history and myth, a song of undying hope and faith in mankind. "Being what heart you are, / Up the inhuman steeps of space, / As on a staircase go in grace, / Carrying the firelight in your face, / Beyond the loneliest star."

Ms. Perry's "We Shall Not Sleep" (Ballantine), the fifth and final novel in her World War I series, has just been published.