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Will they survive?

The Back Half

D J Taylor

Monday 29th May 2000



Literary reputation is hard won, and rarely relinquished without a struggle. We look at how the reputations of some of the 20th century's greatest writers have been secured and protected. Starting with **D J Taylor** on the Amises, we ask: will they survive?

I only once saw Kingsley Amis in the flesh: it was ten years ago this August, at a party held at the Savile Club in London to celebrate the 80th birthday of the novelist William Cooper. To enter, guests had a choice of separate staircases. As luck would have it, Amis reached the summit of the left-hand stair at precisely the moment that his second ex-wife, Elizabeth Jane Howard, hove into view from the right. For a second or two, each contemplated the other with a kind of stark horror, after which Sir Kingsley - his face by now a painterly shade of puce - stalked back off the way he had come.

The temptation to convert this brief non-encounter into a luminous metaphor - the novelist failing to confront in life one of the dilemmas he had failed to confront in art - is irresistible. (Amusingly, only 18 months before, Amis had written to Robert Conquest: "I continue to bear a charmed life and never set eyes on the bag. Almost unbelievable that it's now eight years last Nov that I last did.") All the more so when set against some of the letters despatched to the Valkyrie of the stairwell 27 years before. "Dearest Jane," he wrote in December 1962, at the start of the affair that ended his first marriage. "I can't think of anything more wonderful than that first time in room 238, while it was going on I realised that this was what sexual ecstasy was, though I didn't put it to myself like that, not being in much shape for thought."

One shouldn't perhaps be unduly startled by this kind of thing: even outraged elderly gentlemen are entitled to have fallen in love and to have owned up to it in writing. A similar distance is achieved by setting late-period Evelyn Waugh (a figure to whom Amis senior sometimes bears an uncomfortably close resemblance) to the respectful thirtysomething pursuer of the teenaged Laura Herbert. And yet the "Dearest Hoopoe/Dearest Dove" letters - Amis had a fondness for ornithological endearment - are remarkable on two separate counts: first, because they contain exactly the sort of high-octane emotion you can imagine Amis pissing on in his novels; second, because of the material with which they coexist. The writer who keeps his life in watertight compartments is a fixture of the 20th-century literary scene, but surely Amis himself must have been struck by some of the weirder juxtapositions of his correspondence? Here he is, for example, on



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22 January 1963, scribbling a routine note from the current Amis domicile in Cambridge to Conquest: "Bloody awful old life, isn't it? Am cold, have the shits, also catarrh." A few hours later, on the other hand, "My dearest Jane" is being informed that her last "was indeed a lovely letter", and that "I was pleased when you asked me to forgive you for kissing me in restaurants, and you may do so again, but only on condition that you go on kissing me in restaurants." Which won out? The shits or the restaurant reveries? Obviously, it is possible to be violently in love and have an upset stomach. At the same time, dichotomies of this sort - rage/civility; courtesy/frostiness; deference/chippiness - are highly characteristic of the bulky and exceptionally readable *Letters of Kingsley Amis*.

As an editorial guide to his subject's life, work and times, Zachary Leader has done a particularly good job. At the most rudimentary level of the annotator's dungeon, references to "Andrew Sinclair bum" or, in a letter to Karl Miller, "I've looked at the Ballock-High Culture casually and it strikes me as something of a stinkeroo" can't have been easy to decode. Even so, for all Leader's ability to saturate himself in the literary subculture of the Fifties and Sixties, the victims of several chance scurrilities still elude him. If, among the half-dozen or so key associates of Amis's maturity, any well-known names seem under-represented, they are Hilary "Hilly" Bardwell, his first wife (presumably because so very few letters survive), and his old college chum Bruce Montgomery (90 letters in the Bodleian, uninspectable until 2035). Starting with a no-nonsense Oxford lefty letter of 1941, and ending, all too typically, with a weary grammarian's lament to the *Spectator* a month before his death, Leader's 1,200 pages are at the very least a somewhat more reliable guide to Planet Amis than Eric Jacob's rushed 1995 biography.

As for what they may do to retrieve the popular image of Amis as a permanently incandescent right-wing gloom merchant - inevitably the side indulged by last month's newspaper serialisation - you rather feel that any rescue activity will come too late. Cartoon Amis, like Waugh - that comparison again - is more or less ineradicable from the public consciousness. Martin Amis has said that, after his father's death, he hoped it would be possible for the "whole man" to be revealed, and certainly the *Letters* make a fair stab at this. There are the riotous, proto-lad effusions to Larkin, which conceal, or fail to conceal, a surprising amount of emotion (no doubt about it, back in the late Forties dawn, with the postwar world taking tantalising shape around them, Amis and Larkin really loved each other), but there are also some deeply felt expressions of condolence and sympathy, and appreciative letters to fans and, in the decade and a half of his academic career, to students. Being thanked for something by Amis, being taught by Amis, being loved by Amis, looks as if it could be a rewarding experience. Provided, that is, it was one of his good days.

This is a vital qualification. For down beneath the pleasantries of even his matiest communications, something stirs. The genuinely stropy letters, which tend to predominate in the last third of his life (though there are some corkers from earlier on), seem to have been launched at the mildest provocation. One wonders how the American academic Dale Salwak, who had laboured for 17 years to produce his *Kingsley Amis: modern novelist*, felt to be told that "the level of your performance seems to me to be so low as not to earn a place on any serious publisher's list" (the book, once published, was hailed as "mandatory reading for all students of Amis"). Or how the then *Sunday Times* staffer Jane Thynne would have felt had she ever received the apparently unsent note ("Honestly for Christ's sake", etc) composed after some supposedly injudicious sub-editing of a restaurant column, a

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photocopy of which was found among Amis's papers. Thynne, even more strangely, remembers her dealings with Amis as perfectly civil. What had Salwak and Thynne done? Or, perhaps more important, what did Amis think they had done? In each case, the fury seems altogether unmerited by the fault, a carefully hoarded proxy bitterness bearing hardly any relation to the slight.

The testiness of Amis's art was known long before the details of his life came to light, and it would be surprising if the peculiarly personal quality of some of the fiction didn't spring from some equally embattled raw material. Sure enough, Leader produces a shrewd letter to Larkin from 1959 - and Amis was always shrewd about himself, far too shrewd for us to let some of the public statements pass - in which, contemplating the end of some adulterous episode or other, he reflects: "Trouble is it's so hard to give all that up, habit of years and all that, and such bloody good fun, too . . . But being walked out on by H (and kids), the sure-fire consequence of any further discovery, is a rather unwelcome prospect, too. You can't have it both ways, you see."

And yet, as Amis's aptly titled penultimate novel (*You Can't Do Both*, 1994) presupposes, you can try. Boiled down to their essence, Amis's novels have a habit of turning into variations - immensely skilful variations, mostly - on the theme of having your cake and eating it. Like many of his heroes, the younger, pre-1960s Amis was caught up in the same dilemmas of randy inclination and outraged *amour propre*, not much liking Hilly's affair with the journalist Henry Fairlie, while a year or so later regretting to Larkin the loss of "the most splendid busty redhead in an ideal location". Other letters manage to make equally important points about their author with less obtrusiveness: a particularly good one to the American academic William Van O'Connor, for example, about Jim Dixon's social origins. The last few - Larkin dead, Amis quartered on Hilly and her third husband - are weary despatches from the life of the Garrick-lounging, purple-faced literary knight. It's necessary to look back to the deferential correspondence of the Fifties with people such as Anthony Powell and Edith Sitwell ("It is very kind of you to want to arrange a lunch party for me . . . PS *I do hope the indisposition you mention is now completely at an end*") to gain an idea of the distance travelled.

With Amis junior, the journey was of a wholly different kind: plenty of obstacles, certainly (*Experience* has some well-chosen words on this subject), but those of expectation and overexposure, rather than people simply not knowing who he was. As a contender, literary or otherwise, the young Amis knew he was made (if not quite from the start, then certainly from the time he was able to see Dad in action), and he used - quite justifiably, given his talent - some of Dad's connections. The middle-aged Amis, conscious perhaps of that immortal *MS* competition for unlikely sounding book titles in which the victor was his own "My Struggle", is winningly candid about this. It would be unfair of me to reveal which Oxford English don used to remark, in the late 1970s, "Oh yes, we had young Amis apply here a few years back, and it gave me the greatest possible pleasure to turn him down", because Amis junior's role in the proceedings was on much the same level as Salwak's - innocent bystander caught up in the bewildering crossfire.

Oddly enough (or not so oddly, given his habitual shrewdness), it was Powell who first foresaw the writing of *Experience*. "I wonder if Martin is planning an Amis Father and Son?" he confided to his journal on 14 September 1986, adding that it "might not be a bad

theme". He was right. *Experience*, sometimes because of the paternal shadow, sometimes for other reasons, is an edgy book: candid, occasionally defensive - a quality hitherto absent from Martin Amis's work - mildly dogged in its endeavours to set records straight or burnish up defiled pieces of silverware. More to the point, it comes at a time when Martin's reputation has lost something of its once Olympian sheen. As a case-hardened Amis-watcher and admirer, I would maintain that the rot (defined as inability or unwillingness to advance from previous position) set in during the later stages of *London Fields* (1989), continued through *Time's Arrow* (1991) and became seriously, disablingly apparent in *The Information* (1995). *Night Train*, the 1997 US police procedural, had a slack, laboured feel, even for a novel of 150 pages. And yet Martin is still capable of springing the odd surprise. Reading "State of the Nation" for the first time (collected in *Heavy Water*, 1998), I can remember literally breaking down with laughter at the celebratory disdain, or the disdainful celebration, that Martin contrived to attach to the exploits of a couple of wheel-clamping bouncers. Still, somehow, despite the aimings and the blamings, despite the deaths and the tragedies, despite the teeth and the tittle-tattle - all covered here in huge and unrelenting detail - our man shapes up.

Whatever the peaks of candour, defensiveness and doggedness (and also, it should be said, sympathy, generosity and humour) scaled in *Experience*, it is nevertheless an extremely odd book. It has an impetus: the mad mid-Nineties of Kingsley's death; the finding of his lost daughter; the discovery that his adored cousin Lucy Partington had been butchered by Fred West. It has a grudge: the press and one or two, or perhaps three or four, of its envoys. And it has a fixation: the dentist's chair. Side by side, though, runs a pack of other stuff: Bellow and Nabokov, just in case anyone had any doubts where Amis came from, or where in the last resort he wants to go; a series of droll, callow and highly self-conscious letters written by the teenaged Amis to his father and stepmother in the late 1960s - "I just want to be comfortable, to have a sense of establishing my own discipline by doing certain things myself, and to fuck girls (a litotes I couldn't resist and not to be given unfair emphasis)". All of this is undercut and garnished by some seriously irritating footnotes (justified by Amis on the grounds that we can see the ulterior mind working in parallel), which are either an excuse to settle personal or professional scores or to flatter old friends. Faced with half a page on John Gross's advice to apprentice reviewers (Vladimir and Saul called in as expert witnesses, naturally), or with a description of John Bayley and Iris Murdoch as "genuinely eccentric, genuinely dreamy, while also being vivid physical presences: tousled, humid, intimate" and so on, the reader gets a sudden, awful sense of minor personal baggage gratuitously unpacked.

To make this point is perhaps to give some idea of the many levels - some complementary, others sharply opposed - on which *Experience* functions. One reads the sections about Kingsley - Kingsley's alleged anti-Semitism being politely but devastatingly rebuked, Kingsley's lethargic decline - and the elegies to sweet-natured, cruelly used Lucy with an awareness of something deep within the writer sincerely and courageously revealed, before stumbling a page or so later on some fussy personal detail or irritation. One just doesn't care about James Buchan's review of *Time's Arrow*, A S Byatt's telephone technique or the revelation - ironic or not? Who can tell? - that "John [Travolta] and I would share two intimate dinners at his rented house in Beverley Hills, north of Sunset, and then a farewell lunch in his trailer on the set of *Get Shorty*". And then, amid the teenage and twentysomething years, through the later stages of Martin's loused-up education (from which he was rescued by Elizabeth Jane Howard), Oxford

First and fledgling novels, tumble the babes, dozens of them. There are "Rachel" and Ros, Tina (Brown) and Tamasin (Day Lewis), Julie and Mary (later Countess of Waldegrave), Emma (Churchill's grand-daughter) and Lamorna, whose child provided yet another shock to its real father in those souped-up early Nineties; leading on to his first wife, Antonia, and second wife, Isabel. Never, perhaps, has such a collection of well-bred and suitably connected young women wafted through the pages of an English literary autobiography: a procession of lustre and *eclat* so crowded that, frankly, you wonder how he found time to write all those books.

Finally, and emblematically, there are the teeth. Martin's teeth. James Joyce's teeth. Nabokov's teeth. The mute, existential horror of the orthodontist's chamber. Certainly, the reconstructive surgery that eventually had to be performed on Martin's tumorous lower jaw sounds ghastly in the extreme - so ghastly as to embarrass and shame those of us (myself included) who wrote jokey columns about it. At the same time, one wonders if the sessions with Mike Szabatura (a dozen index references) are quite as central to the freightloads of loss, mortality and recrimination being busily unhitched here as the author imagines. Perhaps one should give Martin the benefit of the doubt. And that, to use a familiar Amis formulation, is what we Amis fans keep doing these days: we keep on giving him the benefit of the doubt, even here in a world where the profound and the profoundly trivial march side by side, a world full of desperate signals from the writer trapped amid the celebrity wreckage.

Both *The Letters of Kingsley Amis* and *Experience*, in their separate ways, seem to have been compiled with one eye on a remote and exacting audience: posterity. Martin's book, in particular, carries with it an almost painful sense (Nabokov, Bellow, Joyce . . .) of a writer standing cap-in-hand before some far-off literary judgement seat. The influence of *pere et fils* on English life over the past half-century has been, on the one hand, almost incalculable and, on the other, entirely (and one should hastily add, innocently) malign. If *Lucky Jim* and its successors had a single literary consequence, it was to make the world safe for a certain kind of English writing - comedy slapstick - at the expense of another. Anyone who doubts the generic quality of the post-*Jim* movement should note the endless invocation of Amis senior's name on the jackets of books by William Boyd, Tom Sharpe and others, and the stream of variations on the *Jim* cover illustrations (boozy fatman stares vacantly into space). Martin, more directly, was the key stylistic influence of the Eighties and early Nineties, the first mainstream importer of modern US rhythms and inflections to the Thames Valley, and the spiritual godfather to those pageants of home-grown prose that begin: "Jimmy was fucked. Seriously. Seriously fucked. Fucked and then some." I have bitter personal experience of this: the difficulty of getting the Amis virus out of your veins once it sets up camp there.

Aside from fitting under the "serious comedian" label, there is not much to connect father and son as writers. Kingsley, famously, found his son's novels difficult to get on with, and wondered whether he might not be trying too hard. Martin, although he now inhabits a study littered with the parental *oeuvre*, seems to take the view that there were times when Dad could have tried a bit harder. If there is a shared characteristic, it is perhaps the ability of the personal, distant, capering figure of the author to obtrude into the art. *Lucky Jim* is full of these false battles - the author disliking some of his characters so much that the victories won over them by Jim Dixon are simply arbitrary. In much the same

way, Amis junior's books are shot through with an aching loftiness, the characters - the downmarket characters especially - habitually stretched into caricature whenever their creator remembers, as he does every page or so, just how hilarious he finds native oik-speak. Curiously, *Experience* shares this trait, and even Amis's cleaning lady gets to address him as "Miss Tramis". No modern English novelist has ever made me laugh quite so much as Martin Amis. Equally, no modern English novelist has ever made me feel quite so uneasy about the source of that laughter, not out of any lurking PC dread, but because, on a much more basic level, it just isn't fair.

But then, who expects comedy to be fair? Meanwhile, this month's newspapers have been wall-to-wall Amis: an unprecedented media tumult about two "writers" in which the question of what the writers write has been practically ignored. From the angle of that spectral judging panel, this is a very bad sign - the worst sign, as Martin might put it. Ominously, five years after his death, two-thirds of Kingsley's books are already out of print. As for Martin, stuck in mid-career, you fear that the literary celebrity niche he has carved out for himself will become increasingly problematic. *Experience*, as you may have gathered, is crammed with accusing references to the Fourth Estate. Some of them, notably the denunciation of Eric Jacob's behaviour after Kingsley's death, are well-deserved; others are a bit less so. Amis has a line about "prolific reviewers of fiction" turning anxious whenever it looks as if the fictional climate might be about to change. I didn't altogether care (a familiar Kingsley formula, as in "I didn't care for your friend who wanted the lift/wouldn't pay his round", etc) for the reference to "prolific reviewers of fiction", with its faint imputation of careless punditry. There are worse failings, surely, than writing lots of book reviews. And, oddly enough, the fictional climate is changing, a process that took root five or even ten years ago, turning less metropolitan, less wrapped up in itself, less stylistically snookered - less Amisian, to be blunt. Whatever one finally thinks of these huge, embattled chronicles of two intimately connected literary and emotional careers, they represent the end of something in British literary life, not a beginning.

The Letters of Kingsley Amis edited by Zachary Leader is published by HarperCollins, £24.95. Experience by Martin Amis is published by Jonathan Cape, £18

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