Sir Kingsley Amis (1922 - 1995)

Novelist, poet, critic, and teacher, father of the writer Martin Amis, generally grouped among the "angry young men" in the 1950s, though he denied the affiliation. Amis' ascent from the obscurity of lower-middle-class London was largely self-willed. He became a man of outrageous wit and genius, and gained reputation as a "supreme clubman, boozer and blimp." A radical in his young adulthood, Amis was later know for his conservative critique of contemporary life and manners.

"'You'll find that marriage is a good short cut to the truth. No, not quite that. A way of doubling back to the truth. Another thing you'll find is that the years of illusion aren't those of adolescense, as the grown-ups try to tell us; they're the ones immediately after it, say the middle twenties, the false maturity if you like, when you first get thoroughly embroiled in things and lose your head. Your age, by the way, Jim. That's when you first realize that sex is important to other people besides yourself. A discovery like that can't help knocking you off balance for a time.'"
(from Lucky Jim, 1954)

Kingsley Amis was born in London as the only son of a business clerk. He was educated at the City of London School and St. John's College, Oxford. After service in the army with the Royal Corps of Signals Amis completed his university studies and worked as a lecturer in English at the University College of Swansea (1948-61) and in Cambridge (1961-63).


Martin Amis was born in 1949, and had Dickensian early years: "I slept in a drawer and had my baths in an outdoor sink. My nappies bore triangular singe marks where they had been dried on the fireguard. It was tough. My father's dinner would often consist of the contents of the doggybag that my mother brought back from the cinema café (the Tivoli) where she worked." (from Experience by Martin Amis) During this time Amis was a member of the literary group The Movement, whose members included Robert Conquest, Elisabeth Jennings and Philip Larkin. As a novelist Amis made his debut with LUCKY JIM (1954), which was very successful. The comic main character also appeared in
the novels THAT UNCERTAIN FEELING (1956), which was filmed in 1962, starring Peter Sellers, and I LIKE IT HERE (1958), a xenophobic novel set in Portugal.

Lucky Jim (1954) - the central character is the antihero Jim Dixon, a junior faculty member at a small university, who faces one disaster after another with his girlfriend and professor. Dixon's job is in constant danger, often for good reason. He despises the pretensions of academic life, but his ambitious plans to improve his situation are fruitless, because the class distinctions are unbreakable. - see also Odili from Chunua Achebe's novel A Man of the People (1966)

After the death of Ian Fleming in 1964 Amis wrote a James Bond adventure, COLONEL SUN (1968). His study of the world famous spy appeared under the title THE JAMES BOND DOSSIER (1965). In the story Colonel Sun Liang-tan of the People's Liberation Army of China collaborates with an ex-Nazi plan to open the eastern Mediterranean for Chinese influence and continue to the whole Arab world and Africa. Also M is kidnapped. "The empty room gazed bleakly at Bond. As always, everything was meticulously in its place, the lines of naval prints exactly horizontal on the walls, water-colour materials laid out as if for inspection on the painting-table up against the window. It all had a weirdly artificial, detached air, like part of a museum where the furniture and effects of some historical figure are preserved just as they were in his lifetime." (from Colonel Sun)

Amis's unfeigned stance is seen in such anthologies as THE NEW OXFORD BOOK OF LIGHT VERSE (1978) and THE POPULAR RECITER (1978). Amis loved detective stories and science fiction. He published columns on food for Harper's and Queen, detective books, critical study RUDYARD KIPLING AND HIS WORLD (1975), MEMOIRS (1990), and THE KING'S ENGLISH (1998), mini-essays on the craft of writing well. He was very sure about his likes and dislikes: "I dislike men and women when they are cold-hearted (a reserved manner is okay), unpleasant to those who can't hit back (waiters, etc.), unable to allow others to finish a sentence, stingy, disinclined to listen to reason and fact, bad hosts, bad guests, affected, racialist, intolerant of homosexuality, anti-British, members of the New Left, passively boring." (from The Letters of Kingsley Amis, ed. by Zachary Leader, 2002) ON DRINK (1972), HOW'S YOUR GLASS? (1984) and EVERY DAY DRINKING (1983) were books on alcohol - partly his enthusiasm was hobbyistic, but his second wife Jane Howard also insisted that he should, in effect, join Alcoholics Anonymous. Amis's own "New Alcoholic Policy" meant that he took 4-5 drinks a day.

Amis was knighted in 1990 - according to Martin Amis he got it partly for being "audibly and visibly right-wing, or conservative/monarchist." He had three
children from his first marriage to Hilary Bardwell; the separated in the mid 1960s. After divorce her second husband was D.R. Shackleton Bailey and 3rd Lord Kilmarnock. Amis was married from 1965 to 1983 to the novelist Elisabeth Jane Howard. The author's disappointments, which unwinded in bitternes in some of his later work, were seen in the poem 'Wasted' (1973). Amis described in it a memory of a cold winter evening, when he is trying to kindle rain-soaked logs. Others have gone to their chilly beds before the wood began to flame. "Why should that memory cling / Now the children are all grown up, / And the house - a different house - / Is warm at any season?" Amis died in 1995 at the age of 73 with over 20 novels to his credit, plus dozens of volumes of poetry, stories, collections of essays, and criticism. His last unfinished novel was BLACK AND WHITE, about an attraction between a white homosexual man and a black heterosexual girl.

The popular notion of Amis as mean spirited reactionary has been criticized by Paul Fussell in his monograph The Anti-Egotist. Fussell sees the author as one of the great literary moralists of this century. A "cultural democrat," Amis values honesty, civility, and lack of pretense. The only novelist Amis admitted reading (other than his son Martin), was George McDonald Frazer, author of the Flashman series. Among the author's life long friends was the poet Philip Larkin, whom Amis befriended because they were "savagely uninterested in the same things."
A Note On Wyatt

See her come bearing down, a tidy craft!
Gaily her topsails bulge, her sidelights burn!
There's jigging in her rigging fore and aft,
And beauty's self, not name, limned on her stern.

See at her head the Jolly Roger flutters!
"God, is she fully manned? If she's one short..."
Cadet, bargee, longshoreman, shellback mutters;
Drowned is reason that should me comfort.

But habit, like a cork, rides the dark flood,
And, like a cork, keeps her in walls of glass;
Faint legacies of brine tingle my blood,
The tide-wind's fading echoes, as I pass.

Now, jolly ship, sign on a jolly crew:
God bless you, dear, and all who sail in you.

Anonymous submission.

Sir Kingsley Amis