

Why Don't You Just Shoot Me and Get It Over With?

by James O. Tate

The Life of Kingsley Amis
by Zachary Leader
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No, I'm not sorry. I'm not. Really. And I'm not sorry about a lot of things that we won't go into, such as believing in the 1950's that "we" were against communism, and such as ever believing that higher education meant very much, or such as entertaining even for a second, much less decades, the notion that my feelings about Ida Lupino would naturally be returned.

And so I have no regrets about investing my attention in some of the books of the late Sir Kingsley Amis (1922-95). How could I regret that—and why should I? *Lucky Jim* (1954) and *One Fat Englishman* (1963) are two of the funniest novels ever written, and the latter is a particularly subtle example of the necessary sublimation of the lower energies by its author, precisely because we cannot say "by its protagonist." And there are other works of different tones and methods, such as *The Green Man* (1969) and *Ending Up* (1974) and *The Alteration* (1976) and *Jake's Thing* (1978) and *Stanley and the Women* (1984), not to mention other notable fictions. There are as well collections of poetry and short stories and essays and three books on boozing, a book of memoirs, and an edition of the letters by the author of the present volume. So take it altogether and, yes, this was quite a talent and career, a real contribution, and even a political and cultural one. The particularities of Amisland were rather idiosyncratic, and the man had his limitations, but this was a remarkable personality. If he made us laugh many times, he also showed us something, and for all that, the appropriate response is gratitude.

But that doesn't mean that we necessarily want, or even that we have been forced at gunpoint or on a water board, to read about Kingsley Amis in microscopic detail for long enough to fly to Afghanistan, where, having finished the

procedures, we might then wish to apply for political asylum. And I freely admit on my own recognizance that I was not forced to read this valuable volume, while conceding with unsolicited frankness that reading it made me feel that I had, indeed, been forced. And forced again and again.

Let me put it this way: I have recently, thanks to reprehensible lapses in judgment, learned more about the paternity of the late Anna Nicole Smith's second child than the late Anna Nicole Smith herself knew; and, more recently, I have learned much more about the drinking, driving, and drugging practices of Lindsay Lohan than Anna Nicole Smith ever knew, or than I had ever known, or ever wanted to know, or even asked to know. But still, even during those elevating moments of instruction and exposure, I never anticipated, much less prophesied, that those woozy dingbats had more human dignity than did the man who was, at least ostensibly, the premier British novelist of the last half of the 20th century.

Kingsley Amis was an only child who enjoyed pretending that he had been oppressed by his father because his father didn't want him to masturbate. So he compensated by cultivating sexual chaos to an absurd degree. Marriage vows, friendship, social contradictions—nothing would stop him from making advances at anything in a skirt. The amount of pain and damage he caused to his family was great, and the exasperation to today's reader is not inconsiderable. Interestingly enough, though, the spoiling of the young Kingsley by his mother was also a lifelong mark. She literally spoon-fed him for years, resulting in a thumb-sucking passivity that strains credulity. Amis had to be taken care of, practically babied, for the rest of his life, and he made sure that he was, in notorious circumstances, when, after his second wife left him, he commissioned his first wife and her second husband to take him into their house and cater to his needs and whims night and day.

When Kingsley had it going, he was a professional writer, systematically productive. His support system allowed him to get the job done—and that, mind you, at the rate of two drunken episodes per day going on for something like an adult lifetime. We would miss the point of Professor Leader's exposition if it were not perfectly clear from his fictions, his essays, and his letters that Amis was honest about all this in the sense that he never

denied how abusive and self-indulgent he was. And he did sublimate his misbehaviors variously, in his work.

There were some aspects, then, of his personality that have the effect, illogically enough, of discrediting his achievement. His early membership in the Communist Party was an act of youthful rebellion, nothing more. His later turn right was emotionally derived to thumb his nose at the usual suspects, even though the most authoritative writer on the gross illegitimacy of the Soviet Union, Robert Conquest, was one of his best friends. His deep desire to caricature and mock what he saw led him to deny himself whatever solace might be derived from engagement with literature. He did a Benny Hill number on Keats and Jane Austen and much else, but he wanted the cover of the academy, at least for a while. In addition, Amis's contempt for and ignorance of other cultures—his fear of travel and of experience—were so provincial as to induce many a cringe.

In short, Professor Leader's life of Amis—scholarly, nuanced, and unstinting—must produce a bimodal response, as the behaviorists say. To read about the man who wrote the books, who was often called the funniest man many individuals had ever met, is one thing. But the schizophrenic monstrosity of the compensating artist is so disgusting that delight is blighted, even as it blooms. How ironic that Amis should have lived in such a way as to justify the most paranoid of feminist fantasies, the very ones that he had satirized. How strange that the clever author seems stripped of all authority. And how sad that, at the end, even with all the books on the shelf, we wind up with no brekkers, no champers, no Kingers. I have to recall that moment when I remarked to a young woman that I like reading biographies. "Not me," she said. "They all die at the end." This is the first literary biography I can remember reading that made me think, *Yes, they do all die at the end. But not all of them die soon enough.*

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Letter to the Bishop

by Joe Ecclesia

All Saints?

November can be a dreary month in these parts, a season of fierce winds and day-long rains. Clumps of damp leaves plaster the streets and walkways. Leafless maples and oaks raise their limbs to gray, lumpy skies like souls in agony. Stripped of their green vestments, the mountains frown as if in mournful anticipation of winter. As you can see, Your Excellency, the mere thought of November can steer even a poor scribbler toward thoughts poetical.

Of course, November also brings us All Saints' Day, November 1, that feast when the Church celebrates Her saints, known and unknown, who are with God in His Heaven. Sainthood, Your Excellency, is why I am writing to you.

Many people seem confused about saints these days. When *Time* broke the story about Mother Teresa's troubled interior life, commentators such as Christopher Hitchens used her as an example of a religious opportunist who soldiers on despite lost illusions. Some of my acquaintances were angry with Mother Teresa, as if she had somehow fooled them. When I mentioned the idea of "a real dark night of the soul," a state of spiritual loneliness common to saints (and to the rest of us mere mortals as well), one of these friends snapped, "That's why we have psychiatrists and Prozac."

Other misconceptions about saints abound. Whenever a certain Lutheran relative hears me mention a particular saint such as John of God (patron saint of booksellers, which I once was) or Elizabeth Ann Seton (a patron saint of teachers, which I now am), she goes ballistic, theologically speaking. "We're all saints!" she cries. She refers to the New Testament passages in which the word *saint* is synonymous with *Christian*, but to insist so vehemently that all of us are saints sounds so, well, American to me, like saying all people are nice. Others look for saints in dubious places. Some have elevated Martin Luther King, Jr., Princess Diana, and Elvis Presley to sainthood. One friend who enjoys his bourbon has taken for his patron saint the alcoholic Sebastian Flyte from Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. When I point out that Sebastian is a fiction, he simply ignores me, hoisting in benediction his glass of bour-

bon, Sprite, and water—a concoction known here as a Presbyterian. (Is there, I wonder, any drink called a Roman Catholic, Your Excellency?)

Even more befuddling to many of us is the question of how to become a saint. Some seem to find good deeds a necessary part of sainthood, yet, if working in soup kitchens and staying off the sauce were routes to sanctity, then every Methodist I ever knew (back when I myself followed Wesley) would be canonized at death. "Not to be a saint—this is the only tragedy": So wrote Leon Bloy, and yet no one can explain precisely how to become a saint. We know how to make doctors and lawyers, plumbers and politicians, but there are no clear-cut paths, no required studies, no diplomas for becoming a saint.

For many of us older folks it is, I suspect, a point of too little, too late: This foggy journey to sainthood seems arduous beyond contemplation. Our will is weak; our predilection for sin, strong. Even our mild vices—drinking a bit too much, gossip, that extra helping of turkey—would necessarily have to yield to painful virtue: a deeper prayer life, works of mercy, frequent confession, daily attendance at Mass. Although several of my friends believe that they are bound for Heaven simply because they are good, such certainty seems little more than wishful thinking. Most likely, we will need many prayers to put a smile on Saint Peter's face. Thank heavens for the gift of Purgatory.

Young people are a different matter altogether. Contrary to what many adults believe, Your Excellency, young people today want challenges. When asked why she had chosen her particular path, Mother Teresa famously replied, "I wanted a hard life." (By holding her far from the celestial embrace for which she longed, God arguably granted her request.) Many young people I know also want physical, mental, and spiritual challenges. Instead, our society gives them condoms, drugs, and electronic toys. Our own *confirmandi* want to know God and how to live a life of holiness, and what do we offer in return? Rock-music retreats, balloons, goofball games, and sappy textbooks. Will none of our religious educators ever understand how much young



people despise this sort of trash? They ask for meat, and we give them pap.

Why not give them meat? Why not at least show them the tools that foster sainthood? Why not, in fact, crank up a diocesan boot camp where young people from the ages of 14 to 22 could go for two-week sessions throughout the summer, where they could learn the techniques of prayer, fasting, physical and spiritual hardiness, and acts of sacrifice?

Some of our young, tough diocesan priests along with members of certain religious orders—the Fraternity of Saint Peter and the Nashville Dominicans have both operated similar camps—could staff the camp. They could act as the spiritual equivalents of a Marine Corps drill instructor. Camp counselors would be graduates of the camp. This cadre would all work together to train up their charges. Daily prayers might include the liturgy of the hours, confession, spiritual recollections, an hour of silence spent before the Blessed Sacrament. (Do you know, Your Excellency, how much silence terrifies our young people?) Our budding saints could learn the practice of fasting; they could endure physical hardships. Former societies ranging from the American Sioux to Ganges holy men to Carmelite monks understood the efficacy of physical suffering and hardship in regard to faith and prayer.

We don't need any more confirmation classes going on bogus retreats or playing childish games. We do need tough young Catholics. We need a Marine Corps of Catholics who can individually combine love with will to bring about their own sainthood and to make saints of those around them.

From the Halls of Montezuma, Your Excellency, and wishing you a splendid All Saints' Day,

Joe Ecclesia