



—Jacket by Edward Gorey, for "Lucky Jim."

A Scholar's Quest

"Lucky Jim," by Kingsley Amis (Doubleday. 256 pp. \$3.50), is concerned with the problems, professional and personal, of a teacher in a British provincial university.

By Harvey Curtis Webster

NOT much of a novel, those who want the sensational will say about Kingsley Amis's very good "Lucky Jim." It's about some college teachers in a provincial English university, most of them mixed-up and neurotic—and so what? Moreover, this novel that tells a story perceptively doesn't solve the world's problems, probe as deep as Freudian analysis, or institute a new way of writing fiction. Granted. But "Lucky Jim," by someone few know, is written well and shows those who can read a good deal about what makes teachers in provincial universities (and you, too) act as you do. What more can you expect in one of the better not great novels of the past year?

Lucky Jim Dixon doesn't like teaching at a university, but likes the security it gives him. Consequently he alternates between doing what his department head thinks proper and what he improperly prefers himself.

He can take neither his scholarship nor his colleagues very seriously, since both bore him. Nevertheless, as a nice conscientious guy, he does his job, is nice to his quite neurotic colleague Margaret, and tries to be decently unseductive to Christine, whom he finds exceedingly attractive. When his natural impulses and his hatred of academic sham break out together, his job is in jeopardy, but he ultimately and implausibly gets a job he probably will like and the Christine he loves.

Why is "Lucky Jim" as good as it is? First of all, up until the unsatisfactory conclusion, the plot moves and keeps you guessing. Secondly, the department head, his son, his son's mistress, the neurotic Margaret, and the minor others are as "real" as Lucky Jim and Christine, the main characters.

Finally, and far from least, Mr. Amis writes without clichés or awkwardness, a virtue the best English writers today seem unable to avoid. "Lucky Jim" isn't a great book or a probable best seller. It is only a first-rate novel that will continue for some time to appeal to those who think human nature shows up even in the universities. And the author, Kingsley Amis, promises a lot more than he has as yet fulfilled.

Dim, Central Keys

"German Stories and Tales," selected and edited by Robert Pick (Alfred A. Knopf. 371 pp. \$3.95), is a collection of eighteen pieces that demonstrates what German writers have been able to do with the shorter fictional form.

By Ben Ray Redman

A JACKET note tells us that "German Stories and Tales" is "a collection designed for good reading," and the description is accurate, if we understand good reading to mean pleasurable reading of a kind that will not make us hate ourselves in the morning for having yielded to its seductions. It is not only enjoyment that we are offered here, but also literary excellence of a high order. Robert Pick's range of appreciation is wide, his taste sure; he gives us variety as well as worth, but never variety without worth. He has closed his editorial door against famous bores and pretentious frauds, against once-honored shams and experimentalist poseurs. The select company of authors whom he has admitted cannot, of course, show us everything that German writers have been able to do with the short story; but the eighteen tales that comprise this anthology would suffice to demonstrate—even if all their fellows and rivals were lost—that German literary genius has been peculiarly happy, effective, and individualistic within the short-story form. Or should we say forms?

At the heart of most of Mr. Pick's choices is the creative power of man's imagination; photographic realism finds no place in these pages. Yet the majority of the stories are firmly enough rooted in the good earth of phenomenal life to remind us that when fiction loses such roots—when it tries to live only in brains and bloodstreams and subconscious depths—it flirts with death. Hermann Hesse's "Youth, Beautiful Youth," for example, has a substantiality that too many of our intellectually fashionable short stories lack; so has Stifter's "Rock Crystal," a white nightmare made endurable by a steady beam of faith, a masterpiece of hypnotic storytelling; so has Broch's extraordinary "Zerline," another hypnotic narrative; and so, too, has Mann's "Death in Venice," a story that could hardly be more highly charged with intellectual content than it is, within a beautifully realized external setting. As for Kafka's fantastic "The Metamorphosis," it is supported at all

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Gargantua of the Mews

"Thomas Wolfe at Washington Square," by Thomas Clark Pollock and Oscar Cargill (New York University Press. 163 pp. \$7.50), and **"The Correspondence of Thomas Wolfe and Homer Andrew Watt," edited by Oscar Cargill and Thomas Clark Pollock** (New York University Press. 53 pp. \$2.50), illuminate the career of the great novelist during his six years as a teacher at New York University. Here they are reviewed by Robert Gessner, a teacher at NYU since 1930, who is now chairman of the department of motion pictures there.

By Robert Gessner

THE QUESTION with its fascinating perplexities most frequently asked by foreign visitors is why so many American novelists and poets teach in colleges. The implication seems to be that creative impulsion and classroom deduction are antithetical. Each teacher-writer has his individual answer, but here for the first time in two valuable volumes we have the fullest account to date of Thomas Wolfe's trial and his verdict.

When on a winter day in 1924 he faced the bleak buildings on Washington Square East, so unlike Chapel Hill and the Harvard Yard he knew, Wolfe was a mountain boy newly arrived in the City to seek fame and fortune. He was frightened and shrewd, frustrated and suspicious. He had failed as a playwright. George Pierce Baker had warned him not to teach but to keep writing. But he was broke. Teaching looked like logical "employment" and in his application, the first and in some ways the best of the letters to Watt, he honestly and humbly declared—"It is only fair to tell you that my interests are centered in the drama, and that some day I hope to write successfully for the theatre and to do nothing but that." Dr. Watt understood—"I do not take toward my department the average administrator's attitude." With rare insight and magnanimity he hired "a reasonable number of temperamental gentlemen like yourself who have color and imagination to inspire students as well as to teach them."

When on another February day in 1930 Wolfe turned his back on Washington Square East he had written a successful first novel and wanted to do nothing but write. "I think one of the chief reasons for my leaving now," his last personal letter read, "is not that I dislike teaching, and find it dull, but that I may like it too well. I find that it takes from me that same energy that I put into creation. . . ."

It was, however, during those NYU years with its disciplines and demands of teaching that Wolfe was able to organize and write the most lyrical novel ever written by an American. Meeting scheduled classes in the midst of creative concentration, correcting some of the worst sentences ever conceived by mortal brain, discussing the pure gold of great poetry with puzzled pupils, returning to the interrupted paragraph—these were the demands and disciplines out of which Wolfe was forced to find himself as a craftsman. Of all that he wrote since leaving the classroom, nothing surpassed "Look Homeward, Angel." Aline Bernstein helped and so did Max Perkins, the lonely editor; but who is to say that if Watt hadn't hired him he might have found himself alone, lost on the "enhabled rock."

That Wolfe looked upon his experience at NYU as material for writing was inevitable. Obviously he was extravagant in everything, a double-jointed King Midas who touched and produced rare gold and dull brass. Like every true artist, Wolfe was self-ordained. Watt, I think, magnanimously understood this, and although he resented the lampoon of NYU in that famous segment of "Of Time and the River" he, like Aline Bernstein and Maxwell Perkins, never scolded Wolfe for being satirical. That he was hurt was evident. He had favored Wolfe, rearranged schedules to free more time for writing, and he had vicariously rejoiced in Wolfe's emotional excesses. That Wolfe never did a full-length portrait of Homer Andrew Watt has always been a puzzler, because Wolfe kissed those he loved—

mother, mistress, editor, friend—with bitter lips. When I saw Wolfe shortly after he had left NYU, his Brooklyn address supplied by Wallace Meyer, who was the first at Scribner's to read "Look Homeward, Angel," he spoke only in passing of his NYU period. In turn, Dr. Watt never edited his Wolfe letters nor memorialized Wolfe while continuing his own textbook projects, a regret second to Wolfe's strange omission of Watt in "Of Time and the River." Fortunately, and in time, Watt entrusted the assignment to his friend, Dr. Thomas Clark Pollock.

THE second volume of essays and reminiscences casts additional light on the reaction of some who observed Wolfe's graduation from instruction. The introductory essay by Dr. Oscar Cargill, the able inheritor of Watt's office, illustrates, via its admirable scholarship, once again the inevitable difference between the critic and the creator.

Wolfe survives his severest critics because he was the kind of writer who, far more than any critic, was aware of his contradictions, even of his anti-Semitism, and it was this ruthless and total self-revelation which is the trademark of his genius. We wonder, therefore, the appropriateness in a memorial volume, the royalties of which are to create a scholarship in Wolfe's name, of the unfortunate emphasis on the contradictions. In the volume of letters there is included a gracious and generous letter from former Chancellor Harry W. Chase. Appropriately, we have in this volume Wolfe's comment on a student paper: "And why weren't you the one (out of 130) to wonder why the Prodigal Son left home in the first place, and whether the desire for pleasure, gaiety, and beauty is a bad desire? Do you get my drift?"

Henry Volkening has been sympathetic in his essay. The omission of anything by John Terry is regrettable. Vardis Fisher has attempted an Oedipus complex explanation which raises more than it settles, because Wolfe, like Stendhal, did not repress his Oedipus but indulged in it hugely. The key lies perhaps where Dr. Edmund Bergler suggests in his provocative "The Writer and Psychoanalysis"—in the enormous "amount of undigested masochistic passivity connected with the giant of the nursery—Mother." Wolfe's outpourings, his loves and hates, were undoubtedly "inner alibis to his tormenting inner conscience."

At any rate, we know now that the young English teacher had for a few years at Washington Square his greatest discipline and his greatest contribution as a writer.

