

and the “absurd” New Historicist view that “Shakespeare was locked into an undeveloped, savagely hierarchical political philosophy by the period in which he lived.” Leaving these sterile ideas and methods to those “in the airless lecture-room,” Nuttall sets out to help readers find their way into the plays (he does not consider the sonnets or narrative poems) and to account for their distinctive intellectual power after four centuries. To this task he brings exceptional learning (especially in the Greek and Latin literary traditions), a grounding in European philosophy, a lifetime of studying and teaching the plays, and an accessible prose style.

Explaining his title, Nuttall properly distinguishes between, on the one hand, what Shakespeare thought—which, given the medium of drama, we cannot know—and, on the other, what he thought about and how he thought about it, which we can know. He advances more or less chronologically through the canon, devoting some 10 pages to almost every play, identifying and exploring the dramatist’s treatment of such central human concerns as love, death, politics, religious doubt, nature, art, and language. Scrutiny of these topics generates Nuttall’s fundamental insight, that Shakespeare “shows an uncanny ability to anticipate almost every kind of counter-feeling.” In other words, the playwright routinely complicates or subverts any important statement or position he dramatizes by considering the virtues of its opposite. Villains talk sense; heroes behave badly; audiences cannot make up their minds.

This tension between opposing points of view is indisputably central to Shakespearean thought and theater. *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, for instance, raises ethical concerns about words, offering a “juxtaposition of verbal gymnastics and an anti-verbal message.” *Richard II* presents a “horror at the substitution of an idea of reality for reality itself.” In *Hamlet*, “less guilty than most of evading the central mystery of

un-being . . . , Shakespeare propels us into a more fundamental bewilderment.” Late in his career, “the dramatist may have been visited by a kind of nausea as he contemplated the obscene power of his own manipulative art.” Judicious source study, poetic sensitivity, historical context, linguistic scholarship, acquaintance with, among other philosophers, Locke, Wittgenstein, Hegel, and Popkin—all these tools are employed to illuminate the competing ideas that animate play after play.

If the book displays the benefits of lifelong study, it also suffers, regrettably, from some of the mild corrosions academic eminence can bring. Years of autonomy and admiration made the author a little too Olympian. He dismisses the critical establishment as if he were not a product and a perpetuator of it. (His central theory, for example, resembles arguments made by unmentioned critics such as Helen Vendler and Norman Rabkin.) And when he does occasionally linger over a stimulating essay or argument, these almost invariably turn out to have been written either by his own students or by critics dead for several decades. Too many paragraphs begin with some form of the phrase “Several years ago I wrote that. . . .”

But a little tolerance will lessen the irritation. Nuttall’s voice will be missed. And the reader—whether general or professional—will find much to enjoy in this posthumous volume—and much, well, to think about.

—Russ McDonald

The Professor of Desire

THE CHIEF IMPRESSION ONE takes from *The Life of Kingsley Amis* is of a man who loved pleasure. Indeed, few men have matched Amis’s enormous appetite for enjoyment—of music, laughter, booze, and especially sex—or his capacity for stirring delight in others. With the publication in 1954 of the comic novel *Lucky*

THE LIFE OF KINGSLEY AMIS.

By Zachary Leader.
Pantheon.
996 pp. \$39.95

Jim, Amis (1922–95) burst onto the British literary scene as one of the isles' Angry Young Men. But from the start, his obsession was not rage but desire. "There was no end," concludes the reluctant academic of that novel's title, "to the ways in which nice things are nicer than nasty ones."

The trouble, as Amis's next 40 years proved and as Zachary Leader documents in this meticulous yet surprisingly jaunty biography, is that nice things can't dispel the nasty ones, and the single-minded pursuit of nice things might turn you more than a little nasty your-

Amis's cocktail of neuroses was a strong blend—he was afraid of loneliness, madness, and above all death—and to cope he became a first-class heel.

self. Amis's cocktail of neuroses was a strong blend—he was afraid of loneliness, madness, and above all death—and to cope he became a first-class heel.

He cheated on his first wife, Hilly, at an astonishing rate. (In one of the book's richest anecdotes, he misses the opportunity to testify against the longtime ban on D. H. Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* because he's busy with a lover of his own.) After he abandoned Hilly and their children for a second marriage, he poisoned it with energetic callousness. And as Amis's fame increased, he delighted in playing the role of the reactionary clubman, with a sideline in what he admitted was "pissing on harmless people."

Yet Leader is not without sympathy for this man who was "full of fear, full of fun." The fun is of an extraordinarily high level: not only in two dozen novels (*I Want It Now* [1968] and *The Old Devils* [1986] rank with *Lucky Jim* as masterworks in chronicling the frustrations of the little guy) but in limericks, verbal mimicry, and wonderfully vitriolic, often poignant letters to his best friend and fellow putdown artist, the poet Philip Larkin.

Leader, a professor of English literature at London's Roehampton University, previously

edited Amis's letters, and is alert to how the novelist, with his aggrieved, heckling tone, influenced British literature by jeering at pretension. Cultural critic Paul Fussell best described the virtues of his friend Amis's writing: "the quest for enjoyment, unmarred by anxiety about fashionableness and alert to the slightest hint of phoniness or fraud."

Those who wish to see Amis only as a bully and a debauchee will find plenty of ammunition here. But such judgments ignore the fact that, ultimately, he was not a defender of libation but the bard of the hangover. His work never lost its humor, but as he aged, it was increasingly flooded with regret.

In *The Old Devils*, one of his later novels, about a group of retired friends, the character Peter (an obvious stand-in for Amis) offers a halting apology to Rhiannon, the woman he abandoned years before. "I've always loved you and I do to this day," Peter says. "I'm sorry it sounds ridiculous because I'm so fat and horrible, and not at all nice or even any fun, but I mean it. I only wish it was worth more." This is the confession of a man who came to see the limits of consuming nice things. It is worth quite a lot.

—Aaron Mesh

CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

Hard Word

THE N WORD IS NOT AN easy read. That's hardly surprising, given that the history of the word "nigger" is so brutal and violent. What is surprising, though, is how seamlessly Jabari Asim threads a history through his story of the "n word": a history not only of the African-American experience but of the American republic itself. His title harkens back to Randall Kennedy's *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* (2002). Asim's polite title may land a softer blow, but the substance of *The*

THE N WORD:
Who Can Say It, Who
Shouldn't, and Why.

By Jabari Asim.
Houghton Mifflin.
278 pp. \$26