

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-

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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

N Word delivers a serious pummeling.

Asim, deputy editor of *The Washington Post Book World*, begins by disputing lexicographers' claims that the first recorded usage of "nigger" was neutral. Jamestown colonist John Rolfe described the arrival in 1619 of "twenty negars" in his diary. In fact, Asim writes, none of the terms—among them "nigger," "niger," "negur," and "negar"—used to refer to black Africans was devoid of negative connotations. Long before the Revolutionary War, black people fought against efforts to dehumanize them through language, but "the notion of black inferiority spread as rapidly as the spirit of independence that enlivened the new nation."

American ideologies are on trial here, and so are a few individuals who embody them. Thomas Jefferson, for instance. Asim calls Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1784–85) "a handy, influential primer for those who aspired to advance the cause of white supremacy." Jefferson represents a quintessentially American paradox: The legacy of one of this country's most prominent statesmen cannot be separated from its white supremacist roots. Of course, as Asim points out, the black American experience is steeped in this same paradox. Campaigns against white supremacy have been central to the evolution of African-American identity.

And yet, he argues, "nigger" survives because Americans want it to. He buttresses this claim with prodigious examples from literature, music, theater, film, and science. Josiah Nott, a 19th-century scientist who sought to prove blacks' inferiority, described his work as "niggerology." Asim links widespread acceptance of this pseudoscience to anti-Negro campaigns evident in courtrooms, congressional committees, churches, and the popular media.

Asim does not believe the word can or should be expunged from our language. He applauds black artists, such as comedian and actor Richard Pryor and poet Sonia Sanchez, who have used the word for aesthetic, historical, and ethical purposes. Ultimately, however, he calls black people's casual use of "nigger,"

even in an attempt to reclaim it, unimaginative: "As long as we embrace the derogatory language that has long accompanied and abetted our systematic dehumanization, we shackle ourselves to those corrupting white delusions—and their attendant false story of our struggle in the United States."

Determining when use of the "n word" is permissible—even constructive—and when it is harmful is a delicate and subjective matter. For Asim, the issue comes down to a distinction between the public and the private spheres. "A man may have as bad a heart as he chooses," he quotes Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., "if his conduct is within the rules." Though Asim does not make good on the definitive and prescriptive promise of his subtitle, readers come away with an appreciation of the fact that every utterance of the word is accompanied by a history to which we must all be held accountable.

Asim displays a curious obsession with quantification ("nigger" appears some 95 times in *Gone With the Wind*, 215 times in *Huckleberry Finn*, 21 times in the 1859 novel *Our Nig*), and his careful cataloging of these mentions functions as a kind of rhetorical assault. Perhaps his private ambition is that readers will be forced to reflect on the psychological effects of this constant confrontation with the word on the page. Each repetition compels us to revisit the awful history the word carries. And we have Michael Richards, Don Imus, and the others who will come after them to remind us that the history of the "n word" is by no means concluded.

—Emily Bernard

Oil's Final Frontier

ON A 2005 VISIT TO SOUTHERN Chad's Doba Basin, John Ghazvinian stood on a road outside a fenced compound occupied by ExxonMobil. On one side, a 120-megawatt

UNTAPPED:
The Scramble for
Africa's Oil.

By John Ghazvinian.
Harcourt. 320 pp. \$25