

The Old Reliable

by J.O. Tate

The Folks That Live on the Hill

by Kingsley Amis

New York: Summit Books;

246 pp., \$18.95

Here is a sentence that begins with the deep predication of Henry James, though not with his tone, and proceeds to a cadenza in the unmistakable Amis mode: "On current form he would never be in danger of imagining that her merely being his sister somehow made Clare less effectively a woman than the rest of her sex, or what was nowadays called her gender, as if like all the others she had become a noun or adjectival form in an inflected language." There is a divinity that shapes Kingsley Amis's prose style, rough-hew it how he will.

I read Amis, as I think many others do, in order to read sentences like that one, and even better ones. While there is no shortage of such in *The Folks That Live on the Hill*, that is not the only cause to enjoy Amis's latest novel. Others are the old-fashioned virtues of characterization, development, suspense, and incidental comedy. Also there are atmosphere, social observation, sense of place—the entire composition being the picture of England that is really a postcard from Amisland.

The Folks That Live on the Hill mines something of the same vein as *The Old Devils*, *Difficulties With Girls*, and *Stanley and the Women*, recent Amis productions. There are the themes of alcohol, sex, aging, the decline of the quality of life, the meager but necessary survival of love, courtesy, and good will. There is the broad canvas of characters arranged on Shepherd's Hill and related to each other through the central character, Harry Caldecote. A retired librarian ambivalent about his career and his culture, and obsessed with sex and booze into the bargain, Harry's a familiar type, a Lucky Jim grown older—and wiser, too. Harry has left in his veins some of the milk of human kindness, and he knows when and how to share it.

Because he's shrewd and generous, Harry is sometimes a bit of a mark. Relatives, in-laws, all kinds want a piece of him. Desiree, the wife of his

poor brother, Freddie, tries to manipulate Harry in one of the most wickedly funny passages Amis ever wrote. She tries to imply there's a "special relationship" between them as Harry resists her flirtatious arm-twisting:

There was supposed to have been a sexual encounter of uncertain duration between the two of them in and around a smallish car in some woods or on some waste ground somewhere. Whether it had amounted to an act of intercourse even God might have been a little bit uncertain. Neither Desiree nor Harry had said more than a couple of words about it at the time.

Then gradually it had dawned on him that she was treating the whole thing (what whole thing?) as unmistakably special, specially intense to a degree that transcended its brevity and elevated it to some undefined area of the great-loves-of-our-time category.

But Harry manages to help Freddie in spite of the impossible Desiree, who is undoubtedly related to the unforgettable Margaret who so troubled Jim Dixon 36 years ago.

Now, 20 novels on, Amis has become "Sir Kingsley," and no wonder. Her British Majesty has followed the public's lead, for this author has been the best popular novelist in England—and in the English-speaking world—for over three decades. As he shows Harry Caldecote's relations with his widowed sister Clare, with his alcoholic niece Fiona, his lesbian daughter Bunty, and with all the other men and women and the enveloping process of change and loss, Amis leavens satire with sentiment, and shows range as well as depth. Above all, he completes his portrait of the Harry who can say, "Holding people in play is my natural game."

In other words, *The Folks That Live on the Hill* is a solid, substantial, and satisfying work, the sort of book that people crave. But returning to my emphasis on texture over structure, I find even more to relish. Little things mean a lot.

Who else but Kingsley Amis would compose a prose poem of exasperation

to a big slobbering dog—or could? The passages about Towser, canny combinations of external observation and internal indignation, are worthy of Smollett and Dickens at their verbally inventive best; and in those passages Towser seems to be another character, a *presence*, not always the most annoying one around and not even the stupidest, but certainly the one most endowed with toenails and saliva.

Reading Amis's prose is a trip, a blast, a whirl on the merry-go-round. Agile intelligence is confounded by its own vexation, and good sense often is expressed in language that is somehow in tense opposition to good taste. I suppose that when Desmond the restaurateur has words with Phillipa the cook, Amis is hinting something about language and values and even about the book under discussion. He has to tell her to give the clients what they want, not what she supposes they ought to want. Her reply is, "You ought to be doing the food in the army. Or a prison. An oil-rig. Where it's eat what's there or go without." Desmond's riposte, it seems to me, obliquely explains much about the aesthetics and morals not only of Desmond's cuisine but also of Amis's discourse:

For your information I happen to know that the food on oil-rigs is gourmet standard, and I mean proper gourmet standard, not just half bottles of Cyprus red poured into everything. It has to be to get the blokes there, because they can't drink while they're there. And yeah, in the army and prisons they call things by their right names.

The prose of Sir Kingsley Amis fuses high knowledge with low intuition, intellect with feeling, exaltation with grumbling, tarts and toffs, cabbages and kings, the mind and the body. What's offered for the eye to scan is a whole scale of experience, a ladder of emotion from the low to the lofty, one comprehensively rendered through the medium of its expression. The Amis style, not only telling us but showing us how to look at things, leaves nothing promised that is not performed.

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Exit Stage Left

by Gregory McNamee

The Disappearance of the Outside

by Andrei Codrescu

Reading, MA: Addison Wesley;
216 pp., \$17.95

The Outside: beyond wall and watchtower, on the far lee of the border, the place of the Other, the place of exile. Now that the walls are crumbling around the world, helped along by the crowbars of angry patriots; now that the faces of the other look pretty much like our own, the Outside seems to be shrinking. In its place we have some dawning version of the Global Village, whereby a denizen of Zamboanga wears the same sneakers and listens to the same pop music as a Manhattan sophisticate, and one nation blends imperceptibly into another.

All this worries Andrei Codrescu, the Romanian exile, poet, and radio commentator who since 1966 has lived in the United States, exercising his surrealist magic. Like his fellow exiles Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov, Codrescu has made the English language his home, and he has written 26 noteworthy books of poetry, fiction, and fact that outstrip most native production. His latest, *The Disappearance of the Outside*, announces his emergent technophobia and his fond hope that the world will retain at least some places to escape the machine; in the age of the computer and the networked planet in which the Global Village has devolved into World Empire, Codrescu frets with just cause that "we may become mere images, trapped like shadows in some collective hell. . . . In another generation, people raised by images will not be able to imagine escape. The walls of Plato's prison-cave will be animated."

Much of Codrescu's book-length essay concerns his return to Romania after the fall of Nicolae Ceausescu in December of 1989. Arriving in his hometown of Sibiu, Transylvania, Codrescu notes with some surprise that images have replaced words in bibliocentric Eastern Europe, that television programs and not books temper the intellectual climate of the land where, as a boy, he prowled through bookstores and private libraries, even

hanging out in the Russian-language Communist Party bookstore to take advantage of the air-conditioning. And what shows are beamed into Romanian homes, haunted by Ceausescu and Dracula? *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, and *Miami Vice*, the stuff of brain death in many an unsuspecting land.

Invisible in the way of a practiced exile, Codrescu affords a moving account of life in revolutionary Romania, democratic for the moment but still aswarp with Stalinists, unrepentant agents of the Securitate, and other enemies of liberty. But this account is secondary to Codrescu's larger meditation, centering not only on the disappearance of the Outside but on the subtle erasure of cultural differences in the age of worldwide television and computer data networks. (While there is much merit to Codrescu's argument, at the same time, ethnic hatred seems to be on the rise everywhere as borders of all kinds dissolve—witness Azerbaijan and Bensonhurst.) Like many other theorists of the Information Age, Codrescu speculates upon the possibilities for global electronic control, of a

technototalitarianism serviced by a deliberately uneducated, politically apathetic, and terrorized population, uncomprehending helots whose days are spent in equal parts at the workplace and before the television set. (All those to whom this sounds familiar may now shudder.)

"We are a new kind of being now," writes Codrescu. "We don't need an unconscious, we *are* unconscious." Overwhelmed by information and injured to all the high-level lying language is used to accomplish, most citizens of the world now shun the written word whenever possible. To lure them back to literacy, "we should wage a campaign against too much information," the poet writes, "like the campaign against cholesterol. Down with info-fat!"

There may be hidden virtues for bibliophiles like Codrescu in the electronic world. In it, the book may regain some of its status as a sacred object, precisely because it lies on the periphery of the general culture. History has accustomed us to changing fortunes, and the book age is, after all, very

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