FEMINIST CENSORSHIP

Stanley and the Women (1984)

Kingsley Amis

(1922-1995)

"To one of the characters in Kingsley Amis' new novel, women have always seemed just 'like the Russians--if you did exactly what they wanted all the time you were being realistic and constructive and promoting the cause of peace, and if you ever stood up to them you were resorting to cold war tactics and pursuing imperialist designs and interfering in their internal affairs.' Amis, who has been poking barbs at assorted targets ever since his 1950 novel *Lucky Jim*, says impishly, 'I like to annoy people, really,' but the reaction of some feminists to *Stanley and the Women* has been more than annoying. Almost all his 16 earlier novels have been published in the U.S.; this one has been shunned by American publishers, however, even though it was well reviewed in England. Two U.S. firms expressed interest, claims the author's agent Jonathan Clowes, but backed off because of 'opposition from lady members of their board of directors.' Critical acclaim for the book has been such, however, that negotiations with U.S. publishers are again under way. Amis, 62 and twice married, unrepentantly muses. 'Hasn't every man said either to himself or out loud at some point, 'They're mad. They're absolutely mad'?"

Time (1984)

REVIEW

"For a while there it looked as if readers in the land of the free and the home of the brave were going to be protected from Author Kingsley Amis' 17th novel. Although it had won considerable acclaim when it appeared in England during the spring of 1984, *Stanley and the Women* did not find U.S. publishers begging for the rights to reprint it. Odd, thought some people, including Amis' literary agent Jonathan Clowes, who offered the novel to three houses only to receive 'somewhat embarrassed' turndowns. Representatives from two of the American publishers told Clowes that their negative decisions were made because of 'opposition from lady members of their board of directors.' When rumors that one of Britain's most prominent and popular postwar novelists was being censored Stateside by a feminist cabal hit print last January, the literary flap echoed on both sides of the Atlantic for weeks. The attendant commotion and reams of free publicity also guaranteed that someone, for reasons noble, shrewd or both, would finally issue Amis' book in the U.S.

No American publisher, naturally, has admitted rejecting Amis on the basis of suspected misogyny. But if a few zealous feminists in positions of editorial power did try to squelch *Stanley and the Women*, they chiefly succeeded in shoring up an old truth: ideologues, of whatever persuasion, make lousy readers of fiction. They want useful truths, whereas good novels offer unbridled and possibly subversive speculations. Amis has excelled at rattling preconceptions ever since the appearance of his classically comic first novel, *Lucky Jim*, three decades ago. This time out he is near the top of his offensive, infuriating, intolerable and utterly hilarious form.

Stanley Duke, 45, is the advertising manager for a London daily newspaper. The fact that his first wife Nowell walked out on him after twelve years still rankles Stanley, when he bothers to think of it. His second wife Susan, assistant editor of a literary weekly, is both a cut or two above him in class and still devoted after 2 1/2 years of marriage. All in all, Stanley's life suits him just fine. He passes for a liberated gent, supporting his wife's career and ordering drinks for ladies who drop in at one of his favorite pubs, where the rules make it, as even Stanley allows, 'hard on women.'

This routine is violently interrupted by the arrival of Stanley's son Steve. The young man, whom his father has not seen for some time, has begun behaving oddly. He rips up Susan's copy of Saul Bellow's novel *Herzog*. He pays a call on his mother and hurls an ashtray into the TV set. He tells Stanley that Old Testament patriarchs are spying on him. Stanley phones Cliff Wainwright, a doctor and an old friend, and asks for help with Steve: 'I'm afraid he's mad.' This judgment is confirmed by Dr. Alfred Nash, a crusty

old psychiatrist who examines Steve and diagnoses acute schizophrenia. Nash asks the father about mental illness elsewhere in the family, and Stanley opines that ex-wife Nowell 'is a bit mad.' He explains, 'Her sense of other people's not good. They can be sweet to her, and they can be foul to her and that's about as much scope as they've got." The doctor puts another question: 'Would you say, would you assent to the proposition that all women are mad?' Stanley replies, 'Yes. No, not all. There are exceptions, naturally.'

Not in this novel. As he tries to cope with Steve's problem, Stanley begins to feel that every female he meets is in league against him. Dealing with Nowell again is bad enough: 'She makes the past up as she goes along. You know, like communists.' Worse is Dr. Trish Collings, who oversees Steve's hospitalization. She seems bent on blaming Stanley for his son's condition ('You resented him as an intruder'), and her behavior is alternately flirtatious and vengeful. Susan alone offers Stanley comfort and support: 'Remember I'm not like the others.' Ultimately, of course, she proves herself no different from what Stanley calls 'any other deranged bleeding completely wrapped up in herself female.'

Is this novel unfair to women? Probably. Is the question worth asking? No, *Stanley and the Women* is a local indictment of particular, carefully drawn characters. The females in the world of this book all commit 'offences against common sense, good manners, fair play, truth,' at least in the eyes of Stanley, who is smug, casually anti-Semitic in a way 'that came naturally to someone like me born where and when I was,' and nobody's idea of a deep thinker. Stanley's lone attribute is his capacity for comic outrage. His hapless struggles with the denizens of the modern age, including selfish or angry women, provide frustrations and their antidote. As Dr. Nash tells Stanley, 'The rewards for being sane may not be very many but knowing what's funny is one of them.' *Stanley and the Women* offers a session of healthy laughter.

Kingsley Amis has a theory about why *Stanley and the Women*, which provoked little outrage in England, nearly did not make it to the US.: 'Our feminists aren't as loony as the ones in America, although they're trying to catch up.' Still, the author denies that his novel is anti-female. 'All comedy,' he says, 'all humor is unfair.' He elaborates: 'There is a beady-eyed view of women in the book, certainly, and as its author I had to spend some time thinking along those lines. But a novel is not a report or a biographical statement or a confession. If it is a good novel, it dramatizes thoughts that some people, somewhere, have had. Haven't most men, at moments of high exasperation, thought, 'They're all mad'?

Amis is in Swansea, on the coast of Wales, for his annual late-summer sojourn away from the bustle of London. At 63 he is plumper than he was in 1949, when he arrived at the University College of Swansea as a lecturer in English. He still finds the place and its people congenial: 'My countrymen claim the Welsh are deceitful. Well, they're no more deceitful than the English, and they're more genial in the bargain. The English will cheat you, do you down, but do it morosely.' The author spends these vacation mornings at work, trying to get down a minimum of ten type written lines per session on his next novel: 'Its three sympathetic characters are a mother, a daughter and a homosexual. That ought to surprise a lot of people.' Early afternoons are reserved for rounds of Scotch and water with old friends at the Bristol Channel Yacht Club, where Amis is an honorary member. Among the attractions of this handsome Edwardian structure, the author confides, is 'a lack of embarrassing enthusiasm for things. Like yachting.'

Amis' routine back in London has settled down after some turbulent times. "My second wife [Author Elizabeth Jane Howard] walked out on me about five years ago,' he says, adding 'thank God. I didn't say thank God then, of course, but I do now.' He currently shares a house in north London with his first wife Hilary and her third husband. This unconventional menage has occasioned much gossip and speculation. Amis claims the arrangement is simply practical, convenient and mutually agreeable. He is obviously fond of 'Hilly,' to whom *Stanley and the Women* is dedicated, not only as the mother of their three children but as a new and trusted Mend: 'I feel, in a strange way, I'm really getting to know her now.' Amis claims 'good' relations with his younger son Martin, 36, who has established a solid reputation of his own as an author. A reference to Martin's novels evokes a guarded response: 'Oh, you can't quote me on that.' But the father praises his son's journalistic writings and deems him 'a very clever young fellow.'

That was what everyone once said about Kingsley Amis. Now he finds himself being compared with Evelyn Waugh. 'I'm flattered,' Amis says, 'but the analogy is misleading. Waugh wrote very elegant

comedy. His people spoke beautifully. Compared with his works, mine look like grim documentaries. You know,' he goes on, 'critics will accuse you of doing what you're trying to do. They will say things like 'This book is frightfully funny on page 18 and not funny at all on page 20.' That's just the effect I wanted. The standard critique on me goes something like this: "Amis is good at catching the banalities of every day speech." Hmmm.' He pauses. 'Well, I hope so'."

Paul Gray
"Roughing Up the Gentle Sex"
Time (30 September 1985)

AMERICAN FEMINISTS CENSOR BOOKS

"Publishers have their own ways of choosing what they will publish, and for the most part there's a personal element in the final selection. A bias in favor of good writing is standard and proper, and no one calls it bookbanning if the manuscript doesn't measure up. Yet there are some biases that don't work this way, some biases that are simply unfair--or even illegal--and represent subtle bookbanning.

John Baker, Editor-in-Chief of *Publishers Weekly*, points to a peculiar bias that hangs over many an editorial desk. 'A lot of editors in publishing are women,' he says, 'and there are certain authors they regard as anti-women or misogynist. They will not accept work from these authors regardless of their actual status. They simply will not take them on.' It's certainly distasteful to read of a personal attack on one's gender, but don't these editors have a greater responsibility to readers than to censor because of personal distaste?

Baker points to Kingsley Amis, the British novelist, as one who is on the receiving end of this editorial-desk bias. 'He's enormously successful in England, but, believe it or not, his books are published in America very slowly, if at all, and I think that's largely because he is relentlessly misogynist. He thinks rather poorly of women, his men characters are invariably sexist, chauvinist, and I think a number of women editors have gotten together and said, "no Amis around here!"... Bookbanning certainly comes into play with political things from the sex point of view.'

The wise person...would remember that bookbanning only perpetuates the negative message, making it more persuasive, more solidly entrenched."

William Noble
Bookbanning in America
(Paul S. Eriksson 1990) 174-75, 281

Michael Hollister (2015)