

REVIEWS

Stanley and the Women (1984)



Kingsley Amis

(1922-1995)

FEMINIST CENSORSHIP

“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)

REVIEWS

“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." Hmm.' He pauses. 'Well, I hope so.'

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

"Its cheerful misanthropy helped make a modern classic of *Lucky Jim* (1953), Kingsley Amis' hilarious first novel. In his 15th novel *Stanley and the Women*, Amis is still cheerful and still misanthropic, although he has mostly narrowed his misanthropy to misogyny and that has already gotten him into a certain amount of trouble. Because of its misogyny, several [13] U. S. publishers rejected the book (which appeared in England last year) before Summit had the courage to publish it.

Thirty years ago *Stanley and the Women* would have been published without controversy. But these are better times and misogyny--even when it is meant to be funny; even if it *is* funny--makes us more than a bit uncomfortable. With any luck, times will change again, so one day the notion that women might not deserve equal rights will be a dim archaism, like the denial of universal suffrage. Then we will be able to laugh along with the novel without feeling implicated in a large injustice. I don't doubt that *Stanley and the Women* will be read when that millennium arrives. It's a good novel, almost as good as *Lucky Jim*, and even when it is offensive to the sensibility of the times, it contains as humor must, subtle truths about human nature. Even Amis enthusiastically believes that women are human and *la difference*, after all, is one of the great engines of fiction, as life.

Stanley Duke is a middle-aged advertising man with a London newspaper. The women include his mad former wife, Nowell Hutchinson; and his present wife, Susan, and her mad mother, Lady Daly; his once and future lover Lindsey Lucas, and most infuriating, his son's mad psychiatrist, Trish Collings. Of all the women, the most solid and most appealing seems to be Susan, but that changes in such a surprising way that the book ends up being about her. The one character who is truly, certifiably mad is Stanley's son, Steve, whose illness and its treatment make up the bulk of the action in the novel. This is a problem. One of the book's characters, another psychiatrist named Alfred Nash, describes what the problem is: 'All

schizophrenic patients are mad, and none are sane. Their behavior is incomprehensible. It tells us nothing about what they do in the rest of their lives, gives no insight into the human condition and has no lesson for sane people except how sane they are.... Internally, in itself, madness is an artistic desert.' Which makes it odd that Amis goes into Steve's case in such detail.

Partly because he narrates the book in his own words, partly because it is so funny, Stanley turns out to be likeable in spite of his views. He is not the worst woman-hater in the book, by a long shot. Here's Nash again: 'Men have been known to blame themselves for behaving badly, men not only feel they've made mistakes but on occasion will actually admit having done so, and say they're sorry, and ask to be forgiven, and promise not to do it again, and mean it. Think of that! Mean it. All beyond female comprehension. Which incidentally is why they're not novelists and must never be priests.' Events in the book make Stanley more sympathetic to this view at the end, where it comes, than he was at the beginning. That damns Amis more than the wild beliefs of such characters as Nash, which are meant to be absurd."

Robert Wilson
USA TODAY
(September 1985)

"Thirty-one years ago, Kingsley Amis published *Lucky Jim*, a hilarious and sometimes brutal satire on academia in particular and the human quest for happiness. He attacked so many things--class structure, pomposity, hypocrisy, the debacle of modern education--that few noticed how particularly sharp and cruel was his attack on Margaret, the nervous, suicidal and unscrupulous academic spinster whose avocation was teaching, but whose profession was pursuing unattached men. Mr. Amis did not respect Margaret; he vivisected her. As his career progressed, the cold war between men and women became increasingly central to Mr. Amis's work. Like Freud, he asked what women want. He also asked compulsively and obsessively, what women *are*.

Jake's Thing (1978)--his 13th novel to be published in the United States--chronicled an Oxford don's heroic attempts to resuscitate his fading libido, and his final, surprising conclusion that he was better off as he was: 'Jake did a quick run-through of women in his mind... Their concern with the surface things...with seeming to be better and to be right while getting everything wrong...their certainty that a view is the more credible and useful for the fact that they hold it, their use of debate, their selective sensitivity to tones of voice, their unawareness of the difference in themselves between sincerity and insincerity...their fondness for general conversation and directionless discussion, their preemption of the major share of feelings, their exaggerated estimate of their own plausibility, their never listening and lots of other things like that, all according to him.'

All these complaints are again on view in *Stanley and the Women*. This time, however, Mr. Amis's protagonist, Stanley Duke, goes farther. He wants to know *why* women are so terrible. Women, according to Stanley, are extremely dangerous creatures dedicated to screwing men up and 'attention getting.' In fact, they may all be collectively insane. Whether they are or not is the question that animates Mr. Amis's book. 'Would you say,' a psychiatrist asks Stanley, 'would you assent to the proposition that all women are mad?' At first, Stanley waffles, 'Yes. No, not all. There are exceptions, naturally.' By the end of his adventures, he does not waffle. All women are mad. His former wife has warned him that 'they' say you marry the same person over and over again, and tells him to watch out. 'Well we certainly do,' he says. 'There isn't another other sex.' And herein lies Mr. Amis's complaint. It is not so much that his narrator is uncontrollably angry at women. He is in a rage against all creation and its creator, that idiot who made the mistake of creating only two sexes, each utterly dependent on and absolutely incompatible with the other.

Because the entire natural order seems to be the target of Stanley's rage, I would not call *Stanley and the Women* a fundamentally misogynist work. It is a *misanthropic* work in which Mr. Amis attacks almost everything in sight: the young (their ways are, according to him, as incomprehensible as the world of 'medieval Patagonia'), psychoanalysts of all types (whenever he mentions an analyst, the word quack is never more than three syntactical units away), liberals who believe the police ought to maintain law and order, actresses, editors of newspapers, modern education (the lack of) and mental hospitals (the buildings dubbed 'Rorschach House' or 'Ebbinghaus House'). This is only a partial list.

The story begins when Stanley's 19-year-old son, Steve, arrives unexpectedly after Stanley and his second wife, Susan, have just finished giving one of Susan's 'most successful evenings.' Steve becomes progressively more irrational, first tearing the cover from Saul Bellow's *Herzog* and then attempting to rip the book in half. He leaves, and by the time Stanley's first wife, Nowell, calls with the news that their son is now disrupting her household as well, Steve has progressed to a more chaotic state, attacking and destroying a television set he believes is spying on them. In short order he is diagnosed as an acute schizophrenic, confined to a mental hospital and heavily medicated.

Susan seems perfectly selfless in this crisis until her stepson is taken off medication and sent to *her* home. Once there, he begins to keep a switch-blade knife in his top drawer. His paranoia, which takes the form of violent anti-Semitism, causes him to invade the Jabali Embassy, where he volunteers to join the Arab secret service in their fight against Jewish plots. Back home, he sits in a tree outside the house, frightening the cleaning lady, who promptly quits--thus requiring Stanley to call his first wife, Nowell, to talk him down. No longer the center of attention, Susan becomes ever more distant until she inspires in Stanley 'a kind of fear I had not even thought about for nearly ten years.'

The fear turns out to be well founded. Called at work and told of a 'dust up' at home, he finds his wife, arm bandaged, apparently stabbed by his stepson. Steve denies having stabbed anyone, and unaccountably, Stanley finds himself believing him. 'Behind it all,' Stanley thinks, 'is something I could neither face nor define.... Had she really stabbed herself?' he asks. 'What a perfectly ridiculous...question. Who ever heard of the assistant literary editor of the *Sunday Chronicle* stabbing herself a bit and saying her barmy stepson had done it to pay her husband out for thinking the barmy stepson was more important than she was?' As it turns out, Susan did indeed stab herself--at least according to an expert in forensic medicine. In the aftermath of the 'dust up,' a college friend of his wife's tells him that Susan was always 'quite mad.' Once, when not invited to a party, she took a bottle of champagne and threw it like a bomb through a window and then proceeded to smash everything in sight.

Stanley and the Women is an ingeniously contrived book. It is divided into four sections: 'Onset,' 'Progress,' 'Relapse,' and 'Prognosis,' all terms that ostensibly refer to the stages in son Steve's acute paranoid schizophrenia, but which also refer to the progress of Susan's mental disorder, as well as the progress of Stanley's disillusionment with women, especially Susan. Steve is, however, a schizophrenic who might have been ordered from a waxworks, nothing but a catalyst. He ought to be able to command our sympathy, but as a cartoon cannot. He is present to show how people react to him. He is present to show that, crazy as he is women are even crazier.

'Onset' concludes with Steve's commitment to a mental hospital. It also concludes with Stanley's inexplicable decision to 'keep an eye on Susan,' as if she too were a patient. 'Progress' ends with Steve drugged and inaccessible, while his father begins to suspect that he has married 'the same woman'--in other words, a woman as crazy as his first wife. In short, Stanley's progress--none. 'Relapse' ends with Steve recommitted to the hospital after ostensibly stabbing his mother, but it is a relapse for Susan as well, who this time stabs herself instead of throwing champagne bottles.

'Prognosis' is the final and most depressing section. It is clear that Steve will not recover. It is also evident that Stanley will, because he has no choice, continue to live with a woman he can no longer respect and will soon cease to love. There is, after all, no other sex, and, according to him, all women are the same, egotistical and crazy. It is part of the insane scheme of things that women and men need one another, and, as Stanley's friend predicts, Susan and Stanley begin pretending. She will pretend she doesn't know he knows she stabbed herself and will put the blame on his son. So will he. And so, in fact, their story ends. As Stanley's friend predicted, they pretend 'it never happened. Easy as winking.'

Mr. Amis has often been castigated for his anti-feminist views. How fair is it to identify the author with his protagonist? No more fair than it would be to identify Vladimir Nabokov with Humbert Humbert, the child molester of *Lolita*. Moreover, there are hints throughout his work that Stanley's reactions are meant to be viewed as extreme. At various points, he is referred to as 'Mr. Joke.' Mr. Amis is, therefore, either playing devil's advocate or has come to his conclusions (as he says of the mad child, Steve), 'at the

sacrifice of all the common sense and humor in the world.’ The reader should begin to suspect that there is something not entirely reliable about a man who cannot poke out his nose without a madwoman biting it off. Stanley’s former wife, a monster of egotism, and his second wife, another monster of the same breed, are as nothing compared to the demented psychiatrist who treats Steve in the hospital, tracks Stanley down in his office, pretends she is someone else, then interviews him in a pub and finally threatens to release Steve simply because the boy’s father has not found her sexually attractive.

Men do most of the talking in this book, unhappy men, and naturally they sympathize with and agree with one another. But are they meant to be sane? One of them mimics a constant state of drunkenness to avoid fighting with his wife. Another refuses to consort with women more than is absolutely necessary because he cannot bear to part with money. There is enough material here for a volume entitled *Susan and the Men*. But overwhelmingly textual evidence does support certain conclusions about the author himself. From *Lucky Jim* to *Stanley and the Women*, most of Mr. Amis’s protagonists have shown an alarming fear of other humans, whom they seem to regard as bombs that, if not defused, are likely to blow them up at any minute. They watch and interpret every gesture, every compression of a lip, every narrowing of an eye, for what evil it might portend. Their view of the world is mildly--and often not so mildly--paranoid. Stanley walks into a room, catches a glimpse of his mother-in-law, and thinks how much she looks like Ingrid Bergman ‘interrupted in a bit of spying.’

When he first meets the female psychiatrist, before she deigns to identify herself, he threatens to call the police and she asks him what he’s afraid of. ‘Plenty of things,’ he says, ‘and one of them’s that you might be off your head whoever you are.’ Stanley suffers, as the abominable female psychiatrist says his son suffers, from ‘an appalling fear of being hurt.’ And in *Stanley and the Women*, as in his other books, Mr. Amis’s protagonist is afflicted with a fear of what women will do to him. ‘One day quite soon,’ he says, after a particularly callous remark by his son’s psychiatrist, ‘a woman was going to say something very much like that to me, something hardly at all more noteworthy than that, and I would collapse and die without recovering consciousness.’ It is this fear that in turn generates a paranoia (comically described) the protagonist and the author seem to share.

Those who are unhappy to see women attacked in print *ever--*and I am not one of those people (better, I think, to know your enemies than to be patronized into oblivion by them)--will get their revenge by reading *Stanley and the Women* very carefully. Although everywhere and always Mr. Amis expresses his contempt for analysts, those ‘quacks,’ what do Stanley and his cohorts decide (albeit drunkenly) motivates all women? A desire to be desired. A thirst for revenge against men who refuse to desire them. An irrational insistence that they are superior because their characters are ‘based on a gigantic sense of insecurity.’ But what has he, after so much digging, come up with this time? Nothing but Freud’s theory of penis envy--the castration complex. To go to so much trouble only to provide further evidence for the theories of one’s *bête noire* is revenge enough. Apparently, there is a wild, Amislike justice in the world.

Finally, a book must be judged by what it sets out to do. *Stanley and the Women* sets out to be comic and serious exploration of the trouble between men and women. In the end it is neither comic nor truly serious. It suffers from long stretches of tedium, an almost neurotic repetitiveness and a certain straining for effect. It is not, for the most part, interesting. We find vitriol where we would like to find intelligence or truth. Many of its characters--most noticeably Steve--never become more than caricatures. The intricate scheme of the book, Mr. Amis’s commendable willingness to say whatever he thinks, *ought* to have made this a better book than it is. *Stanley and the Women* is finally a courageous but failed attempt, a book that shows that Mr. Amis has perhaps treated his theme once too often, or prematurely, before having time to expand upon what he has already said so well. This is, however, a book with a vision, and it is an extremely sad one. Theoreticians of comedy claim sadness is at the heart of all humor. It is the very heart and soul of this is seriously flawed and disappointing book.”

Susan Fromberg Schaeffer
“Only Two Sexes, Both Crazy”
The New York Times Book Review (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)