

# Top Secrets and Cosmic Riddles

*The Anti-Death League*, by Kingsley Amis (Harcourt, Brace & World. 307 pp. \$5.95), spoofs espionage, sex, the military, psychiatry, and various other contemporary preoccupations. Heywood Hale Broun, a former newspaperman, is author of "A Studied Madness."

By HEYWOOD HALE BROUN

USING the techniques of the comic novel to make a deeply felt statement is as tricky a job as making mayonnaise at home. You may choose the best ingredients, whip them together conscientiously, and yet, after all that work, find the heavy yolk of purpose clinging sullenly to the bottom of the jar, entirely separate from the oily froth of jokes.

Ford Madox Ford did it perfectly in *The Good Soldier*. The French are supposed to be good at it (Ford's book was called the "best French novel in the English language"), but to those of us who read French slowly, simultaneously translating into idiotic "How do you carry yourself, my old?" English, this must be taken on faith. Nathanael West did it terrifyingly well in *The Day of the Locust*. And now to the list must be added *The Anti-Death League*.

*Lucky Jim* and the novels that succeeded it have made Kingsley Amis perhaps the leading writer on the sex life of the feckless; but it had come to seem, as book followed book, too narrow a field for his considerable talents. *The Anti-Death League* has all of Amis's virtues: the wonderful simplicity of his comedy, the nudgeless writing about sex, and the basic skillfulness of his storytelling. They are employed on a much larger scale than he has previously tackled. Sometimes it seems a little too large, and one feels tempted to ask for a limit of one cosmic riddle per chapter; but such a complaint is a mild one in an age where every second novel seems to be a detailed and intensely personal account of alienation, an analyst's notebook as a patient imagines it.

We gather early that "Operation Apollo," the mysterious military business round which the novel revolves, is no laughing matter. Security is tight under the leadership of Captain Brian Leonard, about whom there is, on occasion, "Something exultant, ardent, even awe-struck, such as might be seen . . . in a

devout youth off to his first communion, or an elderly sexual deviate approaching the arena where every detail of his hitherto impracticable perversion has finally been marshalled." As we proceed through Mr. Amis's maze there are a few eggy moments, notably in conversations between the young lovers (making lovers' conversation interesting seems to defeat everyone but lovers). Mostly, however, we are laughing with the breathless gaiety of those on the toboggan as it goes ever faster. We note the hardness of the ice, feel beneath us the sharpness of the blades, see ahead the abruptness of the bend, and laugh. There isn't much else to do. You can't stop the toboggan.

It is often customary to summarize the plot in these notices so that the reader can decide whether it's "his kind of book." Well, what can I tell you about *The Anti-Death League*? It is a spy story. It is a spoof of spy stories. It is a romance. It is angry. Mr. Amis once addressed a poem to the Messiah which began: "Should you revisit us,/ Stay a little longer, / And get to know the



Kingsley Amis—"angry."

place." He is no mellow about religion here.

The book has an exceptionally vivid cast, including a homosexual about whom there is neither snickery nor pathetic writing, a psychiatrist of exceptional nastiness, a couple of attractive women, a young lieutenant who asks questions, a chaplain who has one set of answers, an adjutant who has another, and a colonel who doesn't know that there are any questions.

*The Anti-Death League* is an exciting development in the career of a most interesting writer.

## Evocation of a Pas de Deux

*Excursion*, by Francis Pollini (Putnam. 254 pp. \$4.95), recreates the spiritual journey of an ex-ballerina revisiting the scenes of earlier triumphs. Julian Gloag's latest novel is "A Sentence of Life."

By JULIAN GLOAG

THIS is Francis Pollini's third novel, and it is far and away his best.

In *Glover*, his second book, Mr. Pollini developed a peculiar, staccato, jabbing, throw-away style in order to render the consciousness of a mindless phallic hero (or anti-hero). Effective and, at times, fascinating as this was, *Glover* was an overlong, sprawling book, and, where the mesmeric effect of the style failed, it became wearisome. With *Excursion*, Mr. Pollini has taken on something far more intricate, and he has brought it off superbly.

Janet, an American ex-prima ballerina in her early thirties, goes on a trip to

Europe, visiting some of the cities that were the scenes of her dancing triumphs. This is her physical excursion, sensual, erotic, dreamy—cities and sex, green scenery and lovely meals. She sees nothing and wants nothing that is not beautiful and timeless. "They were swimming in a circle, in the warm waters, round and round, slowly. . . ." It is the narcissist's fantasy made actual. She makes love, is loved, smoothly, easily, laughingly. She is hardly touched at all.

The second, and "spiritual," excursion—which is the real purpose of the trip but which, like all real purposes, is avoided, put off, skirted, and danced about—is an attempt to cure that sickness of which her giving up the dance is only a symptom. Her mind revolves within the jargon of the ballet, where prince and princess have real being, and returns again and again to her brother Carl, her love for him, and at last, agonizingly, his death. The excursion is thus both prevarication and investigation.

This is a bald summary of a book that

is both deep and complex. Janet's consciousness, memory, action, and talk are presented in a superficially disordered fashion because they are of the order of feeling, not mind. The fat of the conventional sentence has been pared off. *Excursion* is much of the time written almost in note form—flicks and flecks of thought, motion, words arranged, repeated, rearranged. Sensations and movements are directly rendered, never described. Mr. Pollini uses words not to convey a precise, isolated meaning but as playthings, or, as a dancer uses steps, to form part of a flow:

"Shall I bring two, Signore?"  
 He turned to Janet.  
 "Can we take two?"  
 She smiled.  
 "Let's try to take two."  
 He turned to Maria.  
 "Bring two."  
 They were laughing. The three of them now, in the warm, gentle night, laughing.

This use of incantation and rhythm—stately, staccato, languid, urgent—is both

powerful and flexible in conveying the feeling life. And, like the ballet, each measure of Pollini's prose is organized and controlled, and, for all its apparent looseness, the result is a taut and extraordinarily dramatic work.

The heart of the drama is Janet's heart. She is perfectly revealed through the movement of the book—having all the charm, and all the hidden perils, of the beautifully self-absorbed. For her, dance had provided an image of perfection and an escape from actuality. When, some time after her brother's death, dance loses this magic property, Janet is left floating, seeking another enchantment. (In fact, as is made clear in some fairly savage satirical scenes, the reality of her family and background is grotesque.) Yet, although she at last tries to swim out of her timeless circle and come to shore, she is unable to do more than recreate a dreamed perfection, and the novel ends, gently, inevitably, heartbreakingly.

*Excursion* is a subtle, sensual, moving book of great originality. Francis Pollini is a rare and fascinating writer.

## A Code for the Pale

*The Late Bourgeois World*, by Nadine Gordimer (Viking, 120 pp. \$3.50), narrates a day in the life of a white middle-class South African woman who sympathizes with the black political activists. Bernard McCabe, a British professor who has taught in the U.S. for several years, is presently a member of the English Department at Tufts College.

By BERNARD McCABE

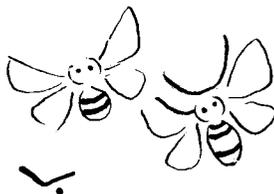
THE WHITE suburban world in South Africa is "late" because, in the narrator's words, "I don't think that the code of decent family life, kindness to dogs and neighbors, handouts to grateful servants, has brought us much more than bewilderment." What, she goes on to ask, about "all those strangers the code doesn't provide for?" The strangers are of course the black South Africans. So Nadine Gordimer's subtle and moving portrait of a lady is set in a pre-revolutionary world.

It is the story of a day in the life of thirty-year-old Elizabeth Van Den Sandt, a day that begins with a death: Elizabeth learns that her long-divorced husband, Max, has drowned himself. From then on she moves between death and life. She visits her twelve-year-old son and her dying grandmother, and

spends the evening entertaining Luke Fokase, a militant young Pan-African worker, whose strong presence brings both life and death dangerously close.

Elizabeth also moves among past, present, and future. The past enters with her recurring memories of her dead ex-husband. Max was a failed revolutionary who "talked" in jail. He was also a failure as husband and father. His upbringing had undermined him; his family is white South Africa, and the forces that made it overwhelmingly necessary for him to rebel also destroyed in him the strengths that effective rebellion demands. In the real context of African activism Max's attitudes seem only self-indulgent—one more variation of all the potentially disabling motivations to be found among white sympathizers. So Elizabeth comments:

Some of the white people I know want the blacks' innocence; that innocence, even in corruption, of the status of victim; but not Max. And everyone knows those whites who want to be allowed to "love" the blacks out of guilt; and those who want to be al-



lowed to "love" them as an aberration, a distinction. Max wasn't any of these. He wanted to come close; and in this country the people—with all the huddled warmth of the phrase—are black. Set aside with whites, even his own chosen kind, he was still left out, he experienced the isolation of his childhood become the isolation of his color.

So Max's rhetoric about bourgeois "moral sclerosis" is only the obverse of the white middle-class oratorical coin. Yet, and this is the measure of the novel's moral balance, Max is not simply dismissed. "He didn't die for them—the people, but perhaps he did more than that. In his attempts to love he lost even his self-respect in betrayal. He risked everything for them and lost everything. He gave his life in every way there is."

Max's past is a blatant story. In a subtler, more casual way we became engaged with Elizabeth in the present. Her sympathies are all with the political activists, but her alertness to the inauthentic, her intelligent awareness of the complexities of private relationships and public situations, keep her in a sort of political limbo, as her "cool" love affair with a sophisticated lawyer of similar views keeps her in a moral limbo.

The future clearly belongs to Luke Fokase and his kind. As the novel ends Elizabeth is edging towards direct and dangerous engagement in political action. In the last lines this civilized, almost self-sufficient woman lies listening to her heartbeat saying; "afraid, alive, afraid, alive, afraid, alive . . ."

In this beautifully composed and widely-ranging tale (its resonances for the Western world are obvious) Miss Gordimer's particular success is her establishment, both delicate and solid, of the narrator's persona as moral conscience. As body and as spirit Elizabeth is convincingly there. Only rarely is our sympathy threatened by an attitudinizing lapse that is at odds with the book's pervasive tact: "Oh we bathed and perfumed and depilated white ladies, in whose wombs the sanctity of the white race is entombed! What concoction of musk and boiled petals can disguise the dirt done in the name of that sanctity?" Nobody wants to be caught even pretending to think in precisely those terms.

There is an artificial side to Miss Gordimer's writing ("afraid, alive, afraid, alive"). Her almost mannered urbanity compares strikingly with the plain and violent honesty of Doris Lessing's writing about South Africa. Yet they are not so far apart. Miss Gordimer's elegant language is a cloak for an astringent realism. And it is peculiarly effective for rendering with stridency life in *The Late Bourgeois World*—a smooth, highly polished surface of suburban living, sustained by the spying, sudden arrests, beatings, and deaths.