Tringsley Amis has a reputation for not liking other people, but – these so-called Memoirs might seem to permit us to enquire - does anyone, could anyone, like him? Is Kingers himself, at the end of the day, the sort of bloke you'd want to run into at - well, at the end of the day, at the club, or the pub, or at some crappy dinner party?

On the face of it, no thank you. The faint hope might have been that, in writing dir- the ceremony as they had been intending - the cited above. Oxford undergraduates, take had a lifelong fear of going mad, and we beectly about himself, the irascible old shag first of the appallingly long line of figures in would come over as somewhat, shall we say, my life who I have come to value altogether cuddlier than his usual public image makes him seem. To any such tender expectations, though, Amis offers here a close-to-gleeful 'In a pig's arse, friend' - i.e. you bastards will get nothing out of me, or not much, and what you do get you won't like.

For starters, he confides, there will be zero in the book about anything that is private to him. Dodgy material of that sort will be re-Martin the odd walk-on here and there), or about any living loved-ones - a species defined by him as those 'who have emotional claims on me'. He doesn't want to hurt types like these, he says, or hurt them any more than he already has (mind your own business), and he doesn't want to be boring.

thought up the plots of his novels, nor to go on about reviews and sales: writer's-life data that nobody, he thinks, wants to know about - and if anybody does, too bad. As it happens, quite a of Stanley and the Women, or wherever, and he even lets fall the occasional bibliographer's nugget, if you please: for instance, did you, or Private Eye, know that Amis's very first piece of published writing was called 'The Sacred Rhino of Uganda'?

Thirdly, there will be a near-embargo on the ancient Amises of Virginia, USA. We get a grandad with hairs sticking out of his red nose ('how much I disliked and was repelled by him'), a grandma - 'large, dreadful, hairyfaced' - whom he remembers having 'loathed and feared', and an aunt who was, no question, off her head. A few Pritchettian genteel-weirdos are to be chanced upon around the margins of young Kingsley's suburban London childhood, but the general picture of those years is as blurred for us as it evidently is, and maybe was, for him. (And no, we do not get told whose idea it was to call him Kingsley - something to do with Charles of that name, we conjecture, or perhaps it was Henry, C's blacksheep brother, a figure whose curriculum vitae

## One for the road Ian Hamilton

Memoirs by Kingsley Amis. Hutchinson, 346 pp., £16.99, 7 March, 0 09 174533 0

more highly, to appreciate the uniqueness of, now they are gone.'

finds it difficult to cope with unaffected rufffled vanity is the trigger for several of the hospital - he calls it 'A Peep Around the warmth. But this is Kingsley on his Mum, score-settling tales he has to tell. John Wain Twist' - but this chapter is as boring as most choked up; normally, he is careful to avoid has not been forgiven for patronising Amis dream-writing tends to be, as boring as Amis such challenges to his composure. As to that early on, and both Enoch Powell and Roald himself would doubtless find it, were it not 'appallingly long line' of valued and unique Dahl might have been rendered more benign- about him. I suppose what's really missing is associates, it has to be reported that very few stricted to privacies other than his own. He of them put in an appearance in this book. will tell us nothing of real interest about his They, too, come under 'privacy', no doubt. Al- drew Sinclair and James Michie are sniped at stuck into a stretch of fearless self-analysis, we wives, mistresses or kids (although he chucks together, he vows, we will not be hearing much about 'merely good chaps, or fairly good chaps', nor about 'self-restrained' chaps, or 'secretive' chaps.

And fair enough, we have to say: these are his memoirs, after all. But what then is left to one tightwad to nail another. And is there not a tell? Luckily, Amis possesses a good memory for anecdotes, or so he says, and he is also not He also promises not to tell us how he too choosy when it comes to embellishing what he remembers - in this sphere, he would rate himself as 'fairly conscientious'. He has few scruples, either, about putting words into people's mouths - especially dead people's bit of such data does leak through, and we are mouths - if it helps to liven up the narrative or the lefty element in our domestic cultural tor, the recollector, the top judge, consistently two or three times referred to page so-and-so lends support to some malign character sketch. 'Of course,' he says, 'I have invented dialogue,' and if this means giving himself some of the more trenchant ripostes, the more dignified silences, so be it. There are moments, though, when we would like to know just how much inventing has been done. Did Philip Lar- ell: either safely senior or safely underrated by pay. kin really say of John Wain: 'No advantage of the mob. Philip Larkin used to exhibit the genealogical bullshit, Tony Powell stuff about birth or position or looks or talent - nothing, same tendency when asked to name his lineand look where he is now'? If I was John Wain, I would want to be sure of the exact words. According to Amis, Wain used to think of Larkin as a friend. And Larkin, although he is here said to have groaned when Wain 'invited himself' to stay with him in Hull, is also said (not here) to have refurnished his house in preparation for Wain's visit. Admittedly, this does not mean he was looking forward to the visit, but even so, he did a bit better than just groan, or so it seems.

Another sort of scruple Amis doesn't have is the sort that might have restrained him from recycling bits of writing from the past. These old bits - always acknowledged - do tend to stop us in our chortling tracks: strange, un-

note: Sir Kingsley, CBE, Dip. Booker, is per- lieve him. Maybe if he was not so afraid of haps not so honour-laden that he might not, if sounding like an American poet, he could have pressed...etc. Just a thought.

get the feeling that Amis's ire comes mainly from his not having been treated with sufcertain meanness of - um - spirit in making public a chap's way with his wallet? The retribution seems excessive.

But then it often does. Even Amis's famous right-wing politics seem to be standing in for something else, some deeper enmity. Certainly, they have as much to do with loathing arena as they have with plotting any new world-orders. And his literary judgments seem similarly tainted with a sort of oppositional writers he likes pose little or no threat - Elizaup: Barbara Pym, Stevie Smith, Betjeman.

Larkin, of course, is the one contemporary to whom Amis is prepared to yield high marks (Robert Conquest, perhaps the most 'all right' of Kingsley's literary cronies, is shunted off into 'light verse'). Larkin is named as Amis's second-favourite poet (Housman is tops, though he may not have stayed tops, we suspect, if Amis had ever sat next to him at Trinity High Table), and as his 'best friend'. Mysteriously, though, the pair of them seem rarely to have met: in thirty years, Larkin never invited Amis up to Hull - not even to look over his new furnishings. The friendship was given its shape and its vocabulary when they were undergraduates and perhaps each of

and wait for it to go away - the feeling, and the poem? Amis believes it was 'fear of failure' that prevented Larkin from persisting in his attempts to be a novelist. 'No poem of Philip's preferred length lays your head on the block in the way any novel does.' Yes, any novel.

Behind so much of Amis's jesting, we discern a rigidly straight face, an obscure but powerful thwartedness. He tells us that he has told us in this book what sort of mad he has We ought not to downplay Kingsley's sense in mind. We do get a description of some The grumpily workmanlike prose style of his own worth - that's for sure. Wounded or hallucinating he once did when he was in ly if, when given the chance, they had evinced any sense of Amis as a plausible character in a surer grasp of Kingsley's stature. When An- his own narrative. Without wanting him to get for being mean, for not picking up the tab, we would quite like him to tell us what he thinks is wrong with him.

> As it is, all the drunks drink more than he ficient deference. Surely it wasn't just the does, or can't handle what they drink as well money - and yet maybe it was: they say it takes as he can. All the narcissists and time-servers push themselves and try to get ahead, as he does not. All the talent is either wasted early or absent in the first place - not true of his own. To which he might retort: but that's what being a writer of fiction is all about - you get to be in charge, you get to lay their heads on the block. Instead of presence, we get authorial persona, by the yard: Amis the observer, the interlocuprojected as the shag who got things right that other shags kept getting wrong. And as the shag, moreover, who's been given precious vigilance, with protecting his own turf. The little credit for his efforts, since you ask. Well, actually, we didn't ask, but still ... good beth Taylor, Elizabeth Bowen, Anthony Pow- God, is that the time? One for the road? We'll

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