

Difficulties with Girls Short Guide

Difficulties with Girls by Kingsley Amis

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Contents

Difficulties with Girls Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns/Themes.....	4
Techniques.....	6
Key Questions.....	7
Copyright Information.....	9

Characters

Patrick is the main character of the novel and reviewers have repeatedly identified him as Amis's spokesman, asserting that Amis always has one character who embodies his own views.

In truth, no one fully speaks for Amis in *Difficulties with Girls* (or in his other novels). The character who most precisely expresses the controversial view that humanity is divided between males and non-males is Eric, whom no one suggests is Amis's spokesman.

Patrick, in fact, is a self-centered fool who wanders aimlessly from one sexual liaison to another, never fully comprehending why he philanders nor ever fully understanding the women around him. Several Amis characters in other books are men who are befuddled by women. Perhaps this repetition suggests to some that Amis believes that men are confused by women, thereby indicating that any character who is confused by women must represent Amis. No critic has made a good case for assuming that such characters are any more representative of Amis's own personality than other of his numerous male figures. In fact, in his social comedies nearly everyone is confused to some degree. In *Difficulties with Girls*, women seem every bit as confused by men's often downright stupid behavior as men are confused by how women behave.

As a personality, Patrick is not particularly likable. He has lived a life of endless sexual pursuits, never fully valuing any woman he has been with, including his wife. Jenny is a noble figure, full of warmth and honesty, and Patrick's cheating on her makes him seem both cruel and foolish. No other woman can give him what Jenny can, but he wastes time in frivolous matings that he knows are empty. Although an intellectual who has a passion for uncovering the truth, he is incompetent in his relationships with people. His strength of character in his publishing work helps round his personality, and it makes him somewhat sympathetic, but essentially he is a shallow man.

Perhaps this is why some reviewers call *Difficulties with Girls* a "slight" book; it lacks the in-depth characterization found in novels such as *The Folks That Live on the Hill* (1990) and *The Old Devils* (1986).

Social Concerns/Themes

In *Difficulties with Girls*, Amis returns to the relationship between Patrick Standish and his wife Jenny Standish, the characters from his novel, *Take a Girl Like You* (1960). In that novel Patrick worked hard to bed Jenny. He managed to get her drunk and have sex with her while she was passed out.

Jenny became pregnant and Patrick married her. However, she had a miscarriage and future children seem unlikely for her. *Difficulties with Girls* takes place seven years after the end of *Take a Girl Like You*, placing the time of the novel's events in 1968, just before the passing of the English law that legalized homosexuality.

Homosexuality is one of the more sensitive topics dealt with in *Difficulties with Girls*. For the lovers, Eric and Stevie, this new legitimacy takes some of the zest out of their relationship. No longer will it be daringly illegal. Some critics object to Amis's depiction of homosexuality. They note that in the novel people are divided into two groups: those with male qualities and those with non-male qualities. Thus, the novel's homosexual couple, Eric and Stevie, is divided into maleness and non-maleness, with Stevie being called "she" and representing the girl element in that relationship's "difficulties with girls." These critics note that many homosexuals reject the notion that any partnership is necessarily that of a person who assumes the role of the male and a person who assumes the role of a "non-male."

This criticism does not seem to have fazed Amis, who continues to include homosexual relationships in his fiction.

In *Difficulties with Girls*, he portrays relationships in friction, and he suggests that this friction stems in part from two divergent views of sexuality, one of which he associates with males and the other with non-males. Eric explains it to Patrick by asserting that "you and I are by nature, by our respective natures, males who are irresistibly attracted by a non-male principle. In your case, straightforward, women; in my case not straightforward, not women — but, non-male, except anatomically. And it's the clash between male and non-male that causes all the trouble. They're different from us. More like children. Crying when things go wrong. Making difficulties just so as to be a person." It is no wonder that feminists in particular have attacked *Difficulties with Girls* as misogynistic.

Women and homosexuals are not the only ones touched by Amis's satire. He ridicules modern psychology, everyone having anything to do with the publishing industry, bosses, tavern owners, racists, and snobs. Of these, psychology and publishing receive the most attention. Psychology appears in the form of Tim Valentine, whose real name is Tim Vatcher. He is a strange man who may or may not rent a flat in the building in which Patrick and Jenny live, but who manages to impose himself on his would-be neighbors anyway. A psychologist has told him that his emotional problems stem from his latent homosexuality. In spite of the great faith he puts in modern psychology, sexuality is not really at the root of his problems. Eric and Stevie take him on an evening

jaunt through homosexual hangouts, and he is horrified and repelled by the sexual behavior he witnesses. Perhaps his problem is that he is too gullible.

Amis portrays the publishing industry as capricious and silly. Patrick attends a party given in honor of the poets whose work will appear in a series of books to be published by his employer. There, he meets a young woman poet who firmly declares that she does not like reading poetry, that in fact she does not like reading, and that she writes poetry without benefit of any examples. Her work is appalling, but the publisher does not care; good work is not what is looked for — work that will fill the pages of a profitable series of books is all that is wanted. Patrick sometimes feels lost in the world of publishing. He edits a series of books about ancient peoples, and he applies high academic standards to his work. Even so, he must wade through drivel that is more fantasy than reality, with cultures being portrayed as fiction rather than as well-researched fact. In the world of publishing, it does not matter whether the book is a fraud; will it sell? Inept at office politics, unable to forcefully advocate his views, Patrick is torn by his desire to edit high quality books and to simply survive and keep his job, which could be lost anytime that his boss thinks it is not profitable enough.

Techniques

Difficulties with Girls is a broad social satire that mocks the lives of the London middle-class. They are shown to be petty social climbers and sexually confused. The appeal of the novel is primarily in its humorous rendering of human foibles. This humor relies primarily on readers recognizing character types that are familiar to them in real life. For instance, readers may not in their own lives have ever worked in the publishing industry, but they may recognize Patrick's capricious boss as a kind of boss they have worked for. Or they may have read annoyingly stupid books; they may enjoy Amis's portrait of how such books get published. Or they may have attended cocktail parties like those shown in the novel, and they may recognize the silly interactions of people at such parties. In general, the comedy succeeds or fails on how recognizable the character types and social situations are.

Key Questions

Difficulties with Girls is primarily an entertainment, intended to amuse more than to inform. Even so, there are aspects of the novel that would make for a good discussion. For instance, a group devoted to discussing readings is likely to be composed of people who will find Amis's insider's view of editorial offices and the publishing industry interesting. On the other hand, Patrick is a more problematic subject; some readers may find him merely annoying.

It is interesting how Amis constructs a comedy around an essentially unlikable, sometimes downright stupid character; the techniques he uses to make his novel successful in spite of (or because of) such a protagonist would make for a good beginning to a discussion of the book.

1. Difficulties with Girls is a good example of the sort of novel that has sustained Amis's popularity for four decades. It is funny, with its humor stemming from outrageous characters whose bizarre lives seem to reveal how truly bizarre real life actually is. What aspects of the novel account for its popularity? What makes it attractive reading?

2. Why does Jenny stay with Patrick?

3. How fully human are the novel's homosexual characters? Are they wellrounded, well-individuated figures, or are they stereotypes mouthing Amis's social commentary?

4. In real life there are published writers who do not read the sort of books they write; there are mystery writers who do not read mysteries, poets who read no poetry, and so on.

What is Amis's attitude toward such writers? What is your attitude toward such writers? Would their writings be worth reading?

5. How dependent on irony is the comedy of Difficulties with Girls'?

6. How are themes associated with homosexuality interweaved with Patrick's empty love affairs and Tim's confused life?

7. What is the male vs. "non-male" stuff all about? Is Eric's attitude sexist?

Does it account for how love relationships sometimes work? Would it be valid to talk of females vs. non-females?

8. Just how much of Amis's real attitudes may be discerned in the narrative and how much of it is composed of his observations of the attitudes of others. Just because a character makes a strong assertion does not mean that Amis subscribes to it. He may be, as in the case of the poetess who does not read, expressing views appropriate to his characters but not himself.

9. Is there anyone in Difficulties with Girls with common sense?

10. Is Difficulties with Girls a slight novel, easily forgotten, or are there aspects of it that make it memorable?

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