

The Folks That Live on the Hill Short Guide

The Folks That Live on the Hill by Kingsley Amis

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Characters

Readers looking for a strong plot in *The Folks That Live on the Hill* are likely to be disappointed for there is hardly any plot. The novel depends on strong characterization and social comedy. Excellent characterization is the hallmark of most of Amis's later novels. He fleshes his characters out, showing their strengths and weaknesses in such a way that they seem fully human; their humanity gives depth to their actions because they are real human beings dealing with real human problems. For instance, Harry, the novel's main character, is a decent man who cares for those around him, although he is not sure why he cares.

His relationship with Bunty in particular is a puzzle to him. He is aware that he and she have a father-daughter relationship, yet her life seems too different from his own for any close relationship to form. His good heart prevents him from breaking off his relationship with Bunty, however. He accepts that there is a close bond between them, for whatever reason, and he treats her with love and compassion. Not as introspective as Harry, Bunty simply accepts that like a good father, Harry is available when she needs him, and she gives him unadorned love.

Since *The Folks on the Hill* is a novel about a community, it has a large cast of characters. The principal characters besides Harry and Bunty, are: Piers, Harry's son; Clare, Harry's sister; Freddie, Harry's brother; Desiree, Freddie's wife; Fiona, Harry's niece; and Popsy, Bunty's live-in-lover. Piers begins the novel living with Bunty and Popsy. He survives primarily by mooching money, gambling, and shady speculations.

Although he seems a villainous figure, Amis's elaboration of his character shows Piers to be a nonconformist with a tough mind but a caring heart. When one of his speculations turns successful, he tries to involve Harry and others so that all may profit. Only Freddie is foolish enough to commit his savings to another of Piers's schemes, and Freddie and Piers are wealthy at the end of the novel. Others view Piers as a con man; they fail to notice until the novel's end that he was also their friend.

Like Harry, Clare has failed at romantic love; she lives with Harry, filling the role of housewife. To other characters, it seems as though Harry is exploiting her. A man of traditional gender roles, Harry rarely picks up after himself or does household chores.

When Harry is offered an excellent librarianship in the United States, the truth slowly comes out. Although Clare does somewhat resent having to care for the household, she relies on her bond with her brother to help her lead a fulfilling life. If he left for America, even if she were financially independent, she would deeply miss caring for him. She has a need to care for others.

She and Harry are bound to each other by love, a need to care and be cared for by each other, and their years of intimacy. Their relationship is an island of security in their community; their knowledge of each other is a comforting presence between them.



Freddie and Desiree have a cliché relationship. She is a shrew, and he is her hen-pecked husband. She is a monstrous overcontroller, constantly bullying Freddie, who is submissive. When they first met, she recognized in him someone who needed her strong guidance, and he saw in her someone who could give direction to his aimless life.

But their relationship has gone too far; her strong guidance has become overbearing tyranny, and Freddie is miserable. He returns to writing poetry in order to escape her for an hour or two each day. In the 1950s, he published a couple of books of badly written poetry. More than thirty years later, he turns again to poetry, this time to write a great autobiographical poem, akin to William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850). Harry helps Freddie by declaring that the poem may be an important masterpiece and that Freddie must work on it everyday while perfectly alone. Desiree buys the idea, and Freddie gains an hour or so every day during which he is alone in a room without fear of Desiree bursting in on him and ruining his relaxation. Although nearly everyone thinks Freddie is a miserly old fool, he possesses enough wit to know that his poetry is not good. He merely hopes that someone will pay him some money for it. Desiree controls their finances, making it hard for him to indulge in even the simplest pleasures, such as dining out on fried bread, a popular English snack. Harry finds a publisher that is issuing volumes of poetry to gain literary respect for his company rather than to make money. Freddie is surprised that anyone would actually publish his book. The money he earns, which he keeps from Desiree, becomes a small fortune when he invests in Piers's vodka importation scheme. Although Freddie, for all his annoying faults — failure to pay his share for meals and drinks, obtuseness, and selfishness — is shown sympathetically and as a full human being, Desiree is not. She is the stereotypical nagging wife. She sees her mission in life as dominating a man, which she does with zest. But she is thoroughly dislikable, without any redeeming traits.

Fiona is the focus of a significant subplot. Throughout *The Folks That Live on the Hill* people are shown constructing identities for themselves. Harry sees himself as a father-figure; Clare sees herself as a homemaker; Bunty is lost because she lacks a vision of who she is. In Fiona's case, her self-image is destructive. She sees herself as an alcoholic, and as if to prove that she is, she goes about drinking constantly.

Years earlier, a domineering relative had asserted that she was the perfect image of another relative who had killed herself with alcoholism. Fiona has taken this to heart, believing that she is physically addicted to alcohol and doomed like her supposed model.

She nearly dies, but Harry finds proof that the two women looked nothing alike. He shows Fiona that she was wrong; she is not exactly like her alcoholic relative. At the novel's end she is undergoing a transformation; her behavior is changing as she forms a new self-image.

Amis's portraits of homosexuals have been controversial. Some critics assert that he is unfair to homosexuals. The portrait of Popsy is likely to fuel such complaints. Popsy is a



rude, nasty woman who seeks to dominate Bunty much as Desiree dominates Freddie — but Popsy is more wicked than Desiree.

She is physically abusive, beating Bunty. She hates nearly everybody and takes pains to show it publicly. Although Bunty is shown sympathetically as yet another human being trying to find a place for herself in a difficult world, Popsy lacks redeeming features.

In *Difficulties with Girls* (1989), Amis shows a male homosexual couple; he shows one as playing a dominating role, and the other — often referred to as "she" — as playing a female role.

Although Amis is not so explicit in *The Folks That Live on the Hill*, Popsy seems to be playing the male role in her relationship. Bunty is like Freddie in that she wants someone to give her life direction, and she plays a submissive role.

Social Concerns

The Folks That Live on the Hill portrays a suburban community undergoing changes. Where once only whites were to be found, people of color are moving in and purchasing businesses such as markets and taverns. Old ways are also changing. The Indians and others bring with them a strong work ethic and are somewhat contemptuous of idle Englishmen. Other changes are at work on traditional English morality. For instance, the lesbians Bunty and Popsy are open about their relationship, with Popsy loudly militant about it. Instead of condemning this sexually unconventional relationship, the community is tolerant of it. Even the thick-headed people like Bunty's ex-husband try to be understanding.

The community's objection to Popsy is not to her sexual orientation, but to her rude, downright nasty behavior; she beats Bunty.

Techniques

The Folks That Live on the Hill has what some critics call a "vertical plot."

In a horizontal plot, the action logically develops out of preceding events, with each new event generating new action.

Most mystery novels have horizontal plots; each new clue leads the investigator closer to the solution of the mystery. In a horizontal novel, plot dominates the book's characterization. In a vertical plot the action hops from one character to another without one event leading to another. Thus Fiona can be involved in a series of events that have nothing to do with other characters.

Since The Folks That Live on the Hill portrays a whole community, it shifts to different sets of characters and events, without tying them together logically until the end. The term "vertical" suggests that the characters are like upright sticks, each independent from the others. This structure allows the author to explore characters individually and to allow the more important characters to show themselves fully without having to be constricted or hurried by the requirements of the plot.



Themes

The Folks That Live on the Hill deals with the functioning of a community. It studies how people form relationships and how they interact. In the novel, the root of the community is the extended "family" that centers on Harry Caldecote, a respected librarian. His immediate family consists of a sister, a brother, the brother's wife, and son. Beyond his blood relationships the concept of family extends to include people like Bunty, who is like a daughter to Harry.

Beyond these close relationships lies a circle of friends and lovers who drift in and out of the lives of Harry's family.

And beyond these acquaintances are the people who form the backdrop of the community: the tavern owners, barkeeps, taxi drivers, and market owners. These people interact with Harry's family and acquaintances, providing commentary on the principal characters and occasionally playing important roles in the plot, as when the market owners help save a life.

This complex community is the substance of the novel. It shows how people survive by creating complicated webs of love, friendship, and respect with other members of their community. Such webs are seldom perfect, and Amis shows how these relationships can be lost and how people try to compensate for their absence. For instance, Harry has not been able to have a happy marriage. His difficulties with romantic love have led him to become "unusually interested in relations between the sexes." Instead of turning him bitter, his failures at love have made him sympathetic to the emotional needs of others. Although he considers himself a cynical observer of the community, he is actually emotionally involved with the lives that surround him. He cares about people; thus, he is able to explain to Bunty's ex-husband what her lesbianism means. Harry tells him that it is not that she does not care for him. Instead, she cares for him with deep respect; but having sex with him would be like his having sex with a male friend just to please that admired and respected man. This sympathetic attitude toward both Bunty and her husband helps them to heal their wounds and begin to form a strong bond of friendship.

For all its social comedy and criticism, The Folks That Live on the Hill is, at its most fundamental level, a portrait of how people survive emotional crises and the heartaches of everyday life. Even though the character of the community is rapidly changing with the influx of foreign immigrants, the people in it adjust by forming new friendships and new understandings of themselves. At the end of the novel, new alliances are formed as characters seek new ways to survive. This makes Piers's and Fiona's plotting to scare Popsy out of her apartment oddly hopeful; these two dissimilar characters find that they have traits in common, and they act together to help Bunty.



Key Questions

The Folks That Live on the Hill is an ideal topic for a group interested in discussing adult emotions and issues.

It also affords an opportunity to discuss communities and what holds them together. Although much of the community described in the novel is peculiarly English, Amis's observations offer universalities that could apply to many other communities. For example, the fundamental need in people to form communities is an important motivating force in the lives of the characters. Another example is that of one generation learning to cope with a younger generation that has new ideas about how the community should function. American readers should find the immigrant issues familiar. The attitudes of the native-born and the immigrants toward each other depicted in *The Folks That Live on the Hill* are recognizable in many American communities. Further, the issue of the value of hard work versus leisure time may strike a chord with the values of many Americans. All this means that the novel could spark a lively, pleasant discussion of community and community values.

1. Why does Harry Caldecote think of himself as cynical? Do other characters think he is cynical? Why do other members of his community value him?
2. By making Caldecote a failure at romantic love, but a success as a father figure, Amis creates a situation in which he can explore the idea of the community being an extended family.

Caldecote seems to have adopted his community as his own family, with its problems and growth part of his parental concerns. Other characters seem to welcome his butting into their affairs.

Why? How does Amis use him to pull together ideas about what a successful community is?

3. What do the lives of the immigrants in the community say about how a community can successfully adapt to change?
4. How realistic are the portraits of homosexuality? Does Caldecote really know what he is talking about when he counsels Bunty's ex-husband?
5. What aspects of the novel's community are uniquely English? What aspects may be universally applied to the human condition?
6. How well drawn are the novel's secondary figures? Some are better drawn than others; does this imply that Amis understands some personality types less than others? Overall, how fully human are his characters?
7. What are the essential ingredients for the success of the community in *The Folks That Live on the Hill*?



8. Acceptance of the weaknesses of others seems to be crucial to the success of the novel's community. Does the novel go too far in its portrait of acceptance? When does acceptance of weaknesses actually harm the community? Note how some characters are more accepted in spite of their faults than others. What does Amis suggest through his portrait of Piers, in particular?

9. Typically, popular novels have strong plots that create suspense and drive the narrative to its conclusion.

The Folks That Live on the Hill is not so constructed. How strong is its plot?

How does the narrative hold a reader's interest? Why is it popular?

10. How does the community help people to grow and become stronger?

Literary Precedents

Amis's social comedies are part of an ancient literary tradition. The Ancient Greeks and Romans liked social comedies, and their literature is filled with befuddled businesspeople, conniving slaves, and inept politicians. Social comedy first took a strong place in English literature in the late 1600s, with plays like *The Country Wife* (1673) by William Wycherley. These comedies are usually focused on high society, and they tend to emphasize the strained sexual relationships between men and women. The novelist Henry Fielding deepened and enriched the social comedy tradition with such books as *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749), which relates the misadventures of a young man in quest of love and self-identity. Perhaps the greatest social comedies were written by Jane Austen. Like *The Folks That Live on the Hill*, Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) describes an entire community, although that novel has a stronger plot line that focuses on a romantic relationship. Charles Dickens also wrote social comedies and, like Amis, he first earned fame with a comic novel, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-1837). Amis's most immediate predecessor is Evelyn Waugh. Like Amis, Waugh was interested in how people interacted and made their lives work even in unpleasant circumstances.

Amis has had more freedom to explore human nature than did Waugh; sexual topics were largely forbidden to English novelists in Waugh's era, but Amis is able to discuss all aspects of human sexuality. In recent years, critics have begun to treat Amis as a great writer as well as an important one. They tend to cite characterization as one of Amis's great achievements; one can reasonably compare the characterization in *The Folks That Live on the Hill* and *The Old Devils* (1986) with those in Austen and Dickens's best novels. In fact, Amis gives more depth and meaning to older characters than Austen, although he has not created the variety of vivid characters found in Dickens's work.



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