Anything Goes

The Anti-Death League
by Kingsley Amis.
Harcourt, Brace, 307 pp., $5.95

Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me
by Richard Farina.
Random House, 329 pp., $5.95

The Time of the Hero
by Maria-Margis Lloza.
Grove, 409 pp., $5.95

Bernard Bergonzi

Each book that Kingsley Amis publishes enshrines the popular conception of him as a predominantly comic novelist seem
less realistic. It is, after all, more than twelve years since the unfairly un
complicated fun and high spirit of the Lucky Jim and since that
brave Mr. Amis has been getting steadily gloomier, though without losing the power to be devastatingly funny when he
wants to be. The dark side of his imagination has long been apparent in his poems, though these are not widely read; few readers of his last two novels,
Take a Girl Like You and One Fat Englishman, can have missed their
intemperate brooding on death, physical disablement, the inescapability of unhap
siness and the general arbitrariness of fate. If they
were still broadly comic, their comedy was frequently undermined by these grim
preoccupations. In The Anti-Death League Mr. Amis plunges bravely into the depths that he has for some time been unceasingly contemplating from the
brink.

The ways in which this novel differs from Amis’s previous fiction are very
apparent. The tone is flatter, and the narrative, instead of being the character
threatened by a single obstinate conscious
ness (or two, as in Take a Girl Like You) is split among a number of char
acters. Almost all the action takes place in two institutional settings, where the inmates are in varying de
grees depersonalized: a secret military establishment hidden in the English
countryside, and a nearby mental hospital. The Anti-Death League, it soon
becomes clear, is a generalized and implicitly symbolic fiction, in which Mr.
Amis has voluntarily surrendered some of his major strengths as a novelist.

Apart from some touches of sardonic humor and several accurately caught
collections, one misses his character sketches of contemporary Eng
lish life. He has, in fact, ventured on a novel of ideas, about the enormity of
death and the strange patterns in which human life is constantly en
meshed, and the result is close to moral fable, or even, in places, to a
Platonic dialogue (the book contains a remarkable amount of conversation on
weighty topics).

In one respect, though, it simply and powerfully explicit certain implica
tions in his earlier books. Amis has always been a curiously sophisticated,
even anemic writer, and his fictional world is dominated by strange patterns
and correspondences: the professional
sinister life of their own, like Professor Welch’s car in Lucky Jim or the
bathroom geyser that terrifies Jenny Bunn in the opening chapter of Take a
Girl Like You, and fate is constantly
interfering in the smallest details of
everyday life. The hero of his second

Max later confesses, “I’ve never been particularly keen on having to talk
about things. On and things that make you think about things. You know, ha
music and all that. Love’s another one.”

I joined the army specially to get away from love. But the realities of
love and death have finally caught up
with him, and shown the inadequacy of
this view of existence. So be it, too, in revolt against death and God (Amis
never wholly distinguishes between
them). This, we may take it, is a va
diction to the world of Lucky Jim.
Amis has complicated his narrative by grafting it on to a compted ex
ample, a commonplace, a colourful
story. I don’t say it was
the more real

RICHARD FARINA’S BEEN DOWN in Long (etc.), mixes hipster-picaresque
with a much more modish, campy style, and seems to be by, for, and about,
what Leslie Feldler calls the New Hip
ants, whose attachment to normal
life, many attributes is extremely
tenuous. There isn’t much to it except for
a forceful facility in writing and 

MARIO VARGAS LLOSA was only twenty-six when his first novel, The
Capricorn Years, appeared in Peru four years ago; and he had already
published a collection of short stories.

His novel is a remarkably
and, one imagines, highly autobiogra
phical account of life among the
group of adolescents of a college
in a military academy in Lima, where savage
military ceremonies, bullying, ro
discipline that is little short of
terrorism, are part of the,
accepted order of existence. (The aca
demy in question burned through a thousand
copies of Lloza’s novel in an affair that was called “the Lloza affair”)

The New York Review
LETTERS
THE SECOND OSWALD
To the Editors:
Permit me to bolster R. H. Popkin's brilliant reconstruction of the Kennedy assassination (July 28) by adding to his account certain facts which have just recently come to light.

(a) Commission Exhibit 390—Popkin states that "there is evidence suggesting the Commission could obtain anything like pristine No. 399 in any of its tests." Actually, there is one test performed by the Commission which did produce two bullets virtually identical with 399. In order to get control rounds for use in ballistics comparison tests, Special Agent Frazier test-fired two bullets from Oswald's rifle (3:37). Although Frazier indicates only that he test-fired the rifle to get these rounds, it is standard ballistics practice to obtain such rounds by firing into a long tube of cotton waste. When we look at the two bullets so produced (Commission Exhibit 572; 17:258), we find they appear to be virtually identical with 399. Although the Commission appears not to have realized it, a test had been performed which indicated quite clearly that 399 was a plant, that its most likely source was the test-firing of Oswald's gun into cotton.

(b) The Autopsy Report—The disparity between the final autopsy report and the FBI reports of Dec. 9th and January 13th is explained as due to a reconstruction of the wounds by the autopsy doctors on November 23rd and 24th. Since FBI agents were not present at these subsequent conferences, the FBI was naturally ignorant of the reconstruction. Such an explanation seems plausible only as long as there is no substantive discrepancy between what the FBI observers say they saw at the autopsy and what the doctors later report. Such a discrepancy emerges from an examination of the report on the autopsy performed by the two FBI agents who were present.

This report is entitled, "Autopsy of Body of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy." Five pages single-spaced, it was dictated by Agents Francis X. O'Neill and James W. Sibert on December 25th, 1963. The following citation gives the salient characteristics of Kennedy's wounds as they were observed by agents O'Neill and Sibert:

Upon completion of X-rays and photographs, the first incision was made at 8:15 p.m. X-rays of the brain area which were developed and returned to the autopsy room.

This report bears the Commission File Number CD-7 and FBI file number 89-30. It was discovered in the National Archives by Mr. Paul Hoch of Berkeley, California.

uncover; another of the students—she novel's center of consciousness, in far as it has one—feels himself impelled to give away the name of the murderer to the authorities. They are determined to keep the whole thing quiet, and the only decent officer in the place is sent off to a remote mountain garrison because he is determined to establish the truth. If Lluma's novel had been severely edited at an early stage its dramatic core would, I think, have emerged more effectively: despite its prolixity, it is still a harsh and honest piece of fiction.