

## Think tank

Ian Sansom enjoys a tutorial from David Lodge in *Thinks* . . .

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**Thinks** David Lodge

341pp, Secker & Warburg, £16.99

David Lodge has written yet another campus novel, filled with the usual priapic dons and brilliant come-hitherish women, who puff and blow their way through the same old bourgeois crises, pontificating about post-modernism, God and the meaning of life. And, like his other novels, it's rather good.

The fictional university this time is Gloucester rather than the usual Rummidge, and the don is Ralph Messenger, director of the Holt Belling Centre for Cognitive Science. Renowned for his work on Artificial Intelligence and blessed with a full head of hair, an Estuary accent and film-star presence, Messenger is the classic media don: resented by his colleagues, adored by women, and a regular on the conference circuit. He begins an affair - yet another - with Helen Reed, a novelist and newly appointed writer in residence at the U of G, who is grieving for her dead husband.

As is traditional, the novel plays between the two poles of sex and death, with Lodge also animating that other tired old antimony between the arts and the sciences. The book's central relationship between a scientist and a writer allows for conversations which consist largely of Reed asking "AI?" or "The hardwiring in your brain?" and Messenger responding with a guide to *The Current State of Thinking in the Sciences*. "Helen is confused about quantum theory," Messenger says, thrillingly, to a colleague. "Won't you explain it to us?" Reed, meanwhile, gives as good as she gets, trotting out mouldy old writer-in-residence stuff like "Of course, one can argue that there's a basic human need for narrative: it's one of our fundamental tools for making sense of experience". *Thinks* . . . consists in large part of the exchange of such ideas.

Struggling to offload his notebooks of information, Lodge even goes so far as to have Messenger explain to Helen a large mural "illustrative of various well-known theories and thought experiments in cognitive science, evolutionary psychology and the philosophy of mind". This rigmarole takes up several pages, and as a device is about as artful as painting by numbers. "The first image to catch the eye is an enormous black bat," outlines Lodge. Then he fills in, "In the early 70s a philosopher called Thomas Nagel wrote a famous paper called 'What Is It Like To Be a Bat?'" Thus he splodges his way through Nagel, Searle, Schrödinger and Roger Penrose. It's a prose as creamy and rich - and providing as satisfactory a coverage - as a coat of Dulux Once emulsion.

These bold, colourful patches have come more and more to dominate Lodge's canvas. Back in *Therapy* (1995), for example, even loveable old Tubby Passmore was laying it on pretty thick: "What's the difference between a psychiatrist and a cognitive behaviour therapist?" Alas, this was not the beginning of a joke. "Well, as I understand it, a psychiatrist tries to uncover the hidden cause of your neurosis, whereas the cognitive behaviour therapist treats the symptoms that are making you miserable." Thanks for that, Tubby. D'you ever get the feeling, dear, poor, benighted reader - you who have perhaps not read and pondered as I have - that maybe, just maybe, you're being patronised?

Then again, it is nice to have things explained clearly once in a while, and Lodge is one of the few writers who bothers to take the time and trouble. There's probably not a luckless lecturer in further education throughout the country who hasn't at some time been happy to fall back

on Changing Places , Small World or Nice Work in order to illustrate and explain some intricacy in structuralist or post-structuralist theory. Lodge's soft, welcoming, seamless prose makes him every student's friend. He writes a literary literature that causes no pain. Even at his worst, he's merely pellucid.

So is Lodge's clarity a brilliant novelistic device, or simply the bog-standard style of an essayist with a slight excess of imagination? Well, *Thinks . . .* certainly amounts to much more than another act of higher journalism; more than a reanimation of the ideas in Lodge's own *The Modes of Modern Writing* (1977), for example, or those lovely little vignettes he used to dash off for the *Independent on Sunday* and which were then collected in *The Art of Fiction* (1992), perhaps his finest work of criticism. *Thinks . . .* is a book that appears to be big on ideas, and almost fails for its excess of them, but that ultimately succeeds for all the usual fictional reasons.

Lodge portrays an unbelievably bright but horribly familiar world, populated by unbelievably bright but horribly familiar characters. The university in his work is a cross between a Bower of Bliss and a Weeping Castle, a place full of intrigue and adventure, a realm of the senses in which ideas are made flesh, where the battle between good and evil is carried on by Kierkegaard-quoting antiheroes. Whereas anyone who has ever worked in a university knows it to be more like an out-of-town retail park, a realm of memos and little cacti in pots, in which endless seminars are conducted by semi-professional bureaucrats on the work of David Lodge. This is reality. Fortunately, Lodge writes allegory.

With *Messenger* - as with all of his heroes, with poor old Swallow and the mighty Zapp, with Vic and Robyn - Lodge has created another quality grotesque, a memorable creature of conceit who confronts and amuses the reader with the vulgarity of being, with the shame of being human, with all the lies and pathetic self-deceptions. *Messenger's* only desire is to talk about himself, to confess, to give expression to his huge ego. Helen Reed is more enigmatic and discreet, but her aim and intention are the same. Through these characters' frantic determination to connect and to communicate, Lodge reveals the impossibility of communication. Through their infidelities he instructs in virtue. And through their furtive, fumbled and invariably unsatisfactory couplings he reveals man's essential impotence. Is there anything, one wonders - naturally, pruriently - of David Lodge in his brilliant and appalling characters, these legendary, incapable souls occupying this fantasy England? If there is, and surely there is, it is a Lodge both statuesque and demolished, that being that we all of us imagine and know ourselves to be: grand, omnipotent, discredited, wrecked and totally defeated. It is a work of vulnerable sincerity. *Thinks . . .* ? Feels.

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/mar/03/fiction.davidlodge>>