

## David Lodge – interview

Interviewer: Hello, this is James Naughtie, and here it is a programme from the book club archive, first broadcast in 2004. Hello and welcome to book club from Birmingham, home, perhaps, who knows, to the Rummidge University that provides so much of the humor in David Lodge's novel "Nice Work", which is our book of the month. It's a romp satire of that chaired Britain and of some of the ways and assumptions in our universities, a book that does make you laugh at loud. We have got this month this group of readers here at the BBC Pebble Mill Studios with David Lodge to talk about the story that hangs on their likely coming together in the 1986's industry year shadow scheme of Vic Wilcox, factory managing director, about to enjoy his midlife crisis, and Robyn Penrose, doctor Robyn Penrose, university lecturer in English, who's prey to many of the vanities and prejudices that Lodge often finds so comically associated with universities which provided him with so much inspiration for humor and social reflection in his fiction. He was of course a professor of English here at Birmingham university for many years, having among other things a celebrated friendship in the 60s with Malcolm Bradbury, whose novels still are of admirable enjoyable amusement and always seem to be modeled up together in some readers' minds. This plot is a comical meeting of two unlikely people who of course drift apart at the end, when a strange magnetism appears, and they go back to lives which seem rather like the ones they would have continued to lead if they had never met, although Robyn does pass on part of an inheritance from Australia to Vic, so in a nonsense at least he has better off, and it would encourage to think that a strange fare may well have opened up a new future for both of them in some ways. David Lodge, welcome to book club. Rummidge University... let's be honest, it's here, isn't it?

David Lodge: No, it's not, it's a virtual university in a virtual world. The city of Rummidge is lustily based on Birmingham and its university is a sort of medley of several universities actually, but it's not identical with Birmingham; but I could hardly have written the book had it been so. It's a familiar strategy, I think, for novelists: they want to give the work a kind of plausible, realistic and recognisable setting, but if you specific about both the time and the place, then you are running into the fact that this place was inhabited at that time by real people, so you have to have a kind of fictional version of the reality and that's what Rummidge and Rummidge university is.

Interviewer: Particularly since those real people worked with you.

David Lodge: Sure.

Interviewer: It's a book written and conceived in the mid-eighties, a time that is quite distant. What were you trying to say, what were the things that were flicking in your mind at that time about, I suppose, the height of that chaired Britain?

David Lodge: Yes, it was. I was very conscious of living in a city that was living on the fool brunt of that chaired economic, so local industry, for instance, lost about a third of its companies over a period of a few years and there was a very high unemployment, but at the same time our university was being subjected like other universities in the country to swinging cuts. There was a sense of hopelessness, I think, particularly among young people about ever getting a job; our students didn't really expect to get a job when they graduated and young lecturers like Robyn Penrose who didn't have ten-year jobs were uncertain of their future. So I was really meditating on the paradox that people who were in work at that time were probably working harder than ever in their lives and probably doing quite well, but there was a large group of people who couldn't access that life, and so there was a division between those who worked and those who didn't, those who had working prospects and those who didn't. And I

really started the novel with the idea of just a man, he was to be the central figure, he was to be a business man who suddenly, he'd lived towards his life for his job and suddenly he was deprived of it, and what might he do, he might meet a woman from a completely different area, from the world of education, of the arts and it was when I thought "Well, I need to know what kind of work this man done" that the novel really changed direction, because when I started to do the research to find out what kind of work he done, that was more interesting really than his life after work.

P1: One of the aspects of the novel I found so realistic and wonderful was the way you painted a picture of this city, the drive that Robyn takes pretty junction up toward ... whether the factories are, and you said you didn't know nothing or not a lot about metal bashing when you started to write so you had to go into factories and talk to people. Were the people you spoke to in any way suspicious of your motives? Did they feel that you could fasten them to your characters?

David Lodge: I have no idea, the novel really came when I started to do the research and I shadowed a friend in industry, a managing director of an engineering foundry. Only one person recognised me and there we met in the weeks that I followed him about, everybody else took the story straight because shadowing is quite a common institution in industry and it was Industry Year. I was on the whole rather impressed with the managers I met actually, I thought that they were fairly dedicated people who were trying to keep their firms going in conditions of extreme competitiveness and great difficulty. They were not capitalists, so, I mean, they were salaried managers who could lose their own jobs if the company went bust, you know. So I suppose it was an education for me and I made that point through Robyn really, who does have a kind of knowledge that university does not grow on trees and the wealth that funds must come from somewhere.

P2: And I was struck by how the academic world you described almost twenty years ago in many ways still seems quite fresh and relevant about high education and how to pay for it and who pays for it. I wanted perhaps, in your re-reading, for this kind of program, if you were surprised by how recent some aspects still are.

David Lodge: Well, I certainly think that the debate which came to our head in the recent parliamentary focused on funding our higher education shows the issues that Vic and Robyn discuss, I mean, how do you fund universities; that's still relevant. At that times universities were being forcedly made to reform themselves and I feel if they had reformed themselves earlier, on their own terms, they would have avoided a lot of the pain, actually, because I think they didn't it before. But, as it worked out, they were pushed into often inappropriate kinds of reform, based on economic and market factors that really don't apply to education, and I tried to put it in the last part of the book.

P3: In some ways it's a dark idea that you describe, but the point to make about the book is that it's terribly funny.

Interviewer: And that's what readers here, I can't see what they actually feel about it, how do you, as readers, manage the comedy and the darkness behind?

P4: I really liked it in the smallest details. I think I have a very great fun at the opening of the novel for the passage where he's talking about seeing the fox in the garden and you just have that lying is like nature, he's gone on the door, you know. It's a very funny lie, but it absolutely sums up. The feeling of those times actually came back to me that feeling that somehow, I should say, people don't expect to work and live like the foxes around Rummidge and the dust bins.

and I am by myself laughing with them, but then pretty soon just laughing over them all of them all the way through the book."

P5: I think now because it's an historical novel the comedy it's a kind of different in a way. I mean, I remember what's David referring to the sense for people expecting not to get a job. Because reading it now, 20 years on, there isn't that sort of feeling, people feel be part of some kind of job when they try to make their own future in some way and I can't have forgotten how that world had been. So the comedy is a sort of different because it's not quite so immediate, you're not so worried about the personalities and what's going to happen to them in their real lives, but the contrast between the academic world and the industrial world is absolutely marvellous and I find myself first of all acting wisdom but then pretty soon I just laugh at both of them, all of them, all the way through the book .

Interviewer: Which do you find more ridiculous, the industrial world as it's portrayed or the academic one?

Person 5: Oh, the industrial world became more,... less ridiculous as it went on, more proper, more appropriate, so to be admired, and the academic world, I mean, it started pretty low down anyway and became more and more ridiculous as the book proceeded on and I was going to actually ask David whether he'd felt a loyalty with one of the characters that was more strong at the start, if that loyalty changed as you have gone through to write the book. Because I certainly felt that Vic was quite ridiculous at the start but by the end he seemed a strangely heroic figure, having survived all of this and he's been given a second chance and Robyn, who definitely didn't change so much, she was still stacking.

David Lodge: Well, I think I started with a certain ironic satirical distance on both of these characters, there's a certain amount of euphoria in the early chapters. And in a way as I began to develop the story and I began to set the main interacting, they became more rounded, they became more human to me in a way and my own authorial voice a sort of recipe, so I let them carry the ball really and take the novel on and I think I tried to be felly even handed in my sympathies really; and this is the case of many of my novels, which often turn on some kind of oppositional contrast and I find people read them in very different ways, usually according to their own predisposition or predilections.

Interviewer: Well, let's set these characters in context, give us a reading from the novel, David, and set the scene.

David Lodge: This is on the day that Robyn Penrose, young Lecturer, feminist, theorist in English Literature, comes to the factory for the first time and is given a tour by the managing director Vic Wilcox and she is appalled by the conditions in which she sees people working, in the filth and the noise, and this is a little bit of a conversation they have in the workers' canteen at lunchtime. Vic, really, should have a midland accent but I'm not very good at that but I'll do the best:

- "You don't want to get too sentimental about the operatives, you know. They're a pretty crude lot. They seemed to like dirt. We put new toilets in the fettling shop last November. In two weeks they were all vandalised. Disgusting it was, what they did to those toilets."

"Perhaps it was a form of revenge," said Robyn.

"Revenge?" Wilcox stared. "Revenge against who? Me, for giving them new toilets?"

"Revenge against the system."

"What system?"

"The factory system. It must generate enormous resentment."

"Nobody forces them to work here," said Wilcox, stabbing the crust of his steak pie with a fork.

"That's what I mean, it's the return of the repressed. It's unconscious."

"Oh? Who says?" Wilcox enquired, cocking his eyebrow.

"Freud, for one," said Robyn. "Sigmund Freud, the inventor of psychoanalysis."

"I know who you mean," said Wilcox sharply. "I'm not completely solid between the ears, you know, even if I do work in a factory."

"I wasn't implying that you were," said Robyn flushing. "Have you read Freud then?"

"I don't get much time for reading," said Wilcox "but I've a rough idea what he was about. Said everything came down to sex, didn't he?"

"That's a rather over-simplified way of putting it," said Robyn, disinterring some overcooked fish from its carapace of orange batter.

"But basically right?"

"Well, not entirely wrong," said Robyn. "The early Freud certainly thought libido was the prime mover of human behaviour. Later he came to think the death instinct was more important."

"The death instinct – What's that?" Wilcox arrested the transfer of a morsel of meat to his mouth to put this question.

"It's hard to explain. Essentially it's the idea that unconsciously we all long for death, for non-being, because being is so painful."

"I often feel like that at five o'clock in the morning," said Wilcox. "But I snap out of it when I get up."

I think that it illustrates a kind of initial collision of minds, of the completely different mind-sets, vocabularies and ways of thinking.

P6: I think it is very interesting you're talking about the opposites, so we basically have a book that is written half from a man's point of view but basically half from a woman's point of view and that is still quite a dangerous thing to do, I think it was an even more dangerous thing to do in the Eighties, because the state of feminism was out, and I think I recall sitting down to read it thinking "okay, let's see if you can do it then!" and feeling completely in safe hands when she got Robyn dressed because I think the first,... the way she chooses her clothes in the morning would, you know, (...) Susannah would be very proud of you, as I could say.

David Lodge: That's a compliment, isn't it?

P6: That's absolutely a compliment.

David Lodge: Right, just checking.

Person 6: Absolutely, you know... in a woman's mind. And I'd really like to ask you a little bit about that and I'm insisting that all novelists had to attempt to do, is that observation, is that finding what's human in all of us because it is half the book, I mean, you were taking on something really big there.

Interviewer: I think this was a right question, you should begin with a description of what she decides to wear.

David Lodge: Eager more interesting than what she decides to wear the very first morning is what she decides to wear to go to the factory. She doesn't now; remember that she has to think about that but very carefully, she doesn't want to be too sexy or too undressed, she does not to want to put on an Interview suit. On the other hand, you know, she doesn't want to dress (...)

so, I mean, that seemed to me to be the kind of occasion on which a woman would really be playing a lot on brain part, so on what she would wear. You're quite right that there was an element of risk, but writing so much of the novel from a woman's point of view, I hadn't done that before, I was in slight advantage I was using a third person technique. In my last novel I chose to write in the first person and that was much more difficult I think, for my novels, to do. I suppose to be a novelist you've got to draw the feminine side of your own personality as a woman novelist must draw the male side of her personality in order to come in to it, have the other sex, my react, you depend on,... I depend heavily on journals, on magazines. And so, you know, I read a lot of trivial stuff about fashion and so on because that is valuable when you have to do this sort of work.

P7: I think she's absolutely deep pushing me of an academic person. There is nothing that I don't know about her and especially at that time. She's absolutely spot on. I have no hope for her.

Interviewer: Do you have hope for (...)?

David Lodge: Well I didn't introduce her into my last novel, actually. She became rather, a bit of a slave driving academic, the head of the department of "her own", but she was still a convinced literary theorist and post-structuralism, but she became a little bit more hard nose as her career is in the way, learning something I think from Vic Wilcox's management skills.

Interviewer: So there is still some hope?

David Lodge: Yes

P8: I felt that the personal potential for change was Mrs. Wilcox, but you didn't explore it. Do you have any feelings just on what might have happened to her?

Interviewer: Let's talk about Marjorie a little.

David Lodge: Well, Marjorie is a "poor" defeated character really through most of the book. She is a simple-minded woman who Vic met when they were both very young, she was in the typing pool and she's just settled down to life as a housewife finding her out "let in shopping" and she is an image of the repressed woman by Robyn's feminist standards.

Interviewer: "Enjoy your menopause".

David Lodge: Yes, well she's a minor character who's a kind of "foils" of Robyn. Robyn thinks that Vic patronises her and doesn't do enough to try and liberate her. Vic himself feels really very little passion anymore for her, but a kind of moral responsibility, which is shaken when he has his infatuation with Robyn, but again at the end, when his own life is in a real crisis and he loses his job, he tends to Marjorie, not to Robyn, and recognises the real value of loyalty.

Interviewer: You're listening to book-club on radio 4 with David Lodge discussing his novel "Nice Work".

P9: Talking about the appearance the way Robyn looked and looks, many people may exchange the book for the televisional adaptation or had their enjoyment of the book influenced by it and I didn't know if you were involved in the television adaptation, what you did yourself, ... I wanted

to ask you one more question about what is lost in your book, apart from kissing and other kind of things, when it is adapted.

David Lodge: It's a topic I could talk about for several hours, because I was involved: I did write the script and I actually was involved in the production and I was even down on location around here, a little bit on my embarrassment actually, because I used Birmingham university as a location and made the model a little bit too near to life, but it was a very happy experience actually. I think "Nice Work" lends itself to adaptation and as much as it's a story which develops through the dramatic interaction of two characters that are constantly debating and discussing and talking. What's difficult to adapt in fiction is psychological fiction, novels which happen mainly in the minds of the characters, because that's not something you can film and if you turn it into voice-over it's rather artificial. So it wasn't easy, it's never easy and you do have to sacrifice some things. One of the favourite passages of readers in this book is Robyn's analysis of the Silk Cut advertisement and I couldn't get that in because, I mean, it would take about a fifth of an entire episode to represent it, so things like that... and it isn't actually essential to the story; so things like that have to go out.

P10: It's one of my favourite passages in the book. It's very funny the way that... Vic's bullish attitude towards Robyn and also at the same time where he's aroused by Robyn.

Interviewer: Remind us what happens.

P10: Well, Robyn is discussing metaphor and metonymy with Vic, trying to essentially explain what those terms mean, so what she does is she uses a cigarette billboard.

Interviewer: What else with the cigarette?

P10: Silk Cut.

Interviewer: The famous purple ad.

P10: Vic is very upset by this sexual reading of the advert and I think this is one of the funniest parts in the book. What it has led to me onto was to ask you: the book itself contains some quite detailed literary discussions, I'm interested into how you feel about pointing that into what is essentially a mass-market novel, a popular novel, in many ways. Are you worried that the average reader would skip those parts?

David Lodge: I mean, as far as I'm concerned "Nice Work" is a literary novel and I never really anticipated when I wrote it that it would have the success it had, actually. So, I mean, most of my novels, practically all of them, have quite a lot of literary references and a lot of ideas in them, because Robyn is a specialist on the Victorian industrial novel although she has never been inside a factory, which comically ironies the situation. But because Victorian novel did set out and the Industrial novel particularly to try and make life better, to reconcile different classes and different interests. And so with the slight tongue in the cheek I was able to moralise a little bit more in that novel perhaps. Novels should, I think, give people information they didn't have when they started, but it has to be made accessible and amusing and entertaining in the way it's fed out, so that... I was tried to do that. So there's some amusement to be got by, for instance, having Vic who signs on to be a student at the university, he starts to shadow Robyn and he takes part in the tutorial. And, you know, it's fun for the writer, I think, to see how a tutorial might work with such an incongruous character sitting in among the students.

P11: I wanted, as you know so much about literary and critical theory, and you have written a lot about that, whether it was a help or a hindrance when you come to write your own fiction.

David Lodge: To me criticism was always something complementary to writing fiction, it didn't interfere with it. There were things about being a professor which occasionally seemed incompatible with being a novelist, but the act of critically analysing fiction I found gave me choice, gave me methods for solving technical problems in my own fiction, so I'm a very self-conscious writer, but when I was in Birmingham I kept the two lives completely separate.

Interviewer: Were your colleagues generous about some of the characters?

David Lodge: I think that, I mean, I was very careful not to portray anybody in any way that could be recognised to give a fence, but I think they were pretty coloured about the generally satirical view of their profession, though I was implicated in the satire myself of course. I mean, one reason why "Nice Work" is, you know, a slightly more serious book than its immediate predecessors was partly the result of, I think, a certain amount of unfavourable feedback from academics in particular to my previous novel "Small World", which was a kind of an onslaught on academic life, on conference going and the academic freebies and so on.

Interviewer: Pretty close to it all.

David Lodge: Yes, but it was set in 1979, you know, just the year that Mrs Thatcher came to the power in fact, when there was a sort of party atmosphere still in universities. And by the time it came out, 1984, the whole situation had changed and I think some of my colleagues thought it was a rather inopportune book to be published at that time, when the universities were fending off the cuts. So I think that maybe it was a rather serious book about academic life at this time. Although it's funny and I'm glad you find it funny, I don't think that it's essentially a comic novel really, it's a serious novel with comedy writing right through it.

Person 12: I wanted to ask David if he kept of the industry to be reading more fiction, a more crazy (...) to be better employees or more rounded individuals (...) messy today.

David Lodge: Well, first of all I think that people in common industry actually read quite a lot, I mean, I found that the reason "Nice Work" was rather successful was that there was a huge audience of people whose lives are of this kind; they work in these kind of situations and environments and they take my writing very seriously, I wrote about their lives; so they were very interested, they were very sympathetic and it had a very good reception in those areas. But I think it's a general, yes, hopelessly culture is a need, social value is something that everybody should have access to and again this is a theme of the Victorian recourses of "Nice Work", but if you just run society according to strictly, financially, economic, materialist criteria you will create alienation and division.

P13: When you quote "Sybil" or "North and South" or "Hard Times" or other novels of that genre from the Victorian era, do you share sometimes the optimism that's often shown through and even the sentimentality especially in Dickens that was such a part of that vision, because, you know, sentiment pebbles up quite strongly in this book.

David Lodge: I am rather inclined at that, although I'm sometimes criticised for it. I mean, my endings are a little bit too reassuring, or...

Interviewer: The accusation of sickening endings is not admissible.

David Lodge: I've always been, as a student in literature, I was always fascinated by romance and Shakespearean romance and, you know, the great English plays where everything, you know,

could come at its evil and all the kinds of tensions and conflicts which come to a sudden result... I find it a very kind of inspiring literary dream, if you like. I liked trying fine ways round, you know, modern, 21<sup>st</sup> century pessimism, ... I'm not naturally a tragic writer, I mean, I don't have a tragic view of experience, I have a comic view and it can either be satirical or it can be comic in the sense of, you know, the "Divine Comedy", I mean, of a happy ending, of a resolution. So it was difficult how to end the story, because that really sets a seal on the meaning of the story and it implies what the writer actually thinks life is like, and in "Nice Work" I used the model of the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel to get round my prompt.

Interviewer: What are the people's funniest moments, just as we end?

P14: I just laughed at the moment when Philip Swallow had the phone call and kept going back and back and you knew what was going to happen. That was such a take on a typical university sub-headed to a class professor who's trying to be off the world and he's not in the world. And for me the comedy came through more the university characters than perhaps the industry context.

P15: I liked very much the scene about the foreplay, about Charles' foreplay, about how previewed he was as an academic until he actually went to sleep and when he woke up again he was still (...). That made me laugh at loud.

Interviewer: Thanks of a more appropriate place to drop proceedings to our clause. David Lodge thank you very much indeed for being this month's guest in book-club and to all our readers for joining us here in Pebble Mill. Remember, if you would like to come here for a book-club recording you can let us know on our website [bbc.co.uk/bookclub](http://bbc.co.uk/bookclub) or you can write to us at broadcasting house in London W1A1AA. Next month, on the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of June, you can hear (...) discussing her dark thriller. Next week at this time on radio 4 it will be of course Mariella Frostrup with open book. Until next month and the next book, from all of us here at Pebble Mill, goodbye.