

Interview with David Lodge

by: **Raymond H. Thompson** (Author) from: **The Camelot Project** 1999

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Every time I drive into Birmingham, England, I get lost. It is difficult to read directions and to spot street names when you are caught up in busy city traffic. Pulling into side streets to consult maps (usually inadequate because they do not cover suburbs in sufficient detail) often ties one up in one-way traffic that leads one even further astray. Nor is it easy to find people familiar enough with the area to give help. I did, however, receive enough advice at a couple of pubs to enable me make my way at last to David Lodge's address. Regrettably, shortage of time and the need to drive prevented me from staying on for a quick pint to restore my flagging energies, but a cup of tea at Lodge's home did the trick.

If there are (very) distant echoes here of the Quest for the Grail, they are signally appropriate, for Lodge's comic novel *Small World* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1984) transposes elements of the Grail legend into the world of academic conferences. Like other authors who transpose Arthurian legend into a contemporary setting, he was reluctant to conduct much additional research into the material lest he be tempted to squeeze too many traditional features into his story. Even so, their identification remains among the most enjoyable of the many ironies that the book offers its readers.

RT: You write both as an academic scholar and a novelist. Since you show no sign of interest in the Arthurian legend in your earlier work, why did you decide to introduce it into *Small World*?

DL: As an academic critic, I'm a modernist. I write mostly about the novel in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. My knowledge of the Arthurian legend, I suppose, goes back to undergraduate work in medieval literature, as well as a common cultural inheritance.

The reason why I thought of using the Grail legend in *Small World* is a very simple one. When I started thinking about the novel, I wanted to deal with the phenomenon of global academic travel. The idea came to me at a James Joyce conference in Zurich, which in fact is one of the settings for the novel. I was getting into that international conference-going circuit myself for the first time. Indeed I went straight from Zurich to another conference in Israel. I was intrigued by the conjunction of high-level academic discussion with a certain amount of partying and tourism; by the mixture of cultures; and by the idea of people, all of whom know each other, converging from all over the world on various exotic places to talk about fairly esoteric subjects, and then flying off, only to meet each other again in another exotic venue. This is where I started: a kind of academic comedy of manners, with a global dimension. The characters would travel widely, having adventures as they went.

When I write a novel, I usually keep a notebook for some time, in which I jot down ideas of how I'm going to develop the core idea. I try to think of events and character sketches and things that can go into it. I also write memos to myself about how I see the story developing. Fairly early on I thought of having at the center a young innocent who would be initiated into the world of conferences: some junior lecturer who would, perhaps, fall in love with a girl and pursue her from one conference to another. Then I thought of using my two characters from *Changing Places*--Philip Swallow and Morris Zapp. Originally I thought of just having them, as a little joke, appear at

conferences on the periphery of the story, but then I thought, well, they could be actually central. They could even be the characters who introduce the innocent young hero to the world of the global campus.

I could think of lots of amusing things that might happen to them, but what bothered me really was that the novel was in danger of becoming just a picaresque romp without any unity. I remember writing in my notebook something like, what the novel needs is some kind of principle of unity--perhaps some myth which would function like the Odysseus myth in James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

About that time--and I think these things do depend upon chance to a large extent--I went to London with my wife and we met some friends for lunch. After we separated from them we decided to go to a movie, and we went to see John Boorman's *Excalibur*. In spite of the slightly absurd style of the film, I was reminded again what a tremendous story the Arthurian legend is. It's quite powerful. Then it struck me that here was a story which could provide the mythic skeleton or underpinning necessary to give shape to my modern comedy of academic manners, though I didn't instantly see all the ramifications. It gradually grew on me that there was an analogy between my story and the Arthurian story, particularly the Grail quest in which a group of knights wander around the world, having adventures, pursuing ladies, love, and glory, jousting with each other, meeting rather coincidentally or unexpectedly, facing constant challenges and crises, and so on. Later I thought that the heroes of romance had an almost magical mobility that enabled them somehow to travel around the whole known world on winged horses, or by no particularly rational means. They do seem to be extraordinarily mobile.

This all corresponded to the modern world with its Round Table of professors: the elite group who get invited to conferences, who go around the world in pursuit of glory. Sometimes they take the opportunity to indulge in amorous intrigue, or to joust with each other in debate, pursuing glory in the sense of wanting to be at the top of their profession. There was room also for a mock heroic element that would suit my purpose. Once I realized that the Grail legend could provide the structural principle for my story, then I really felt my novel could work.

I usually find I need some structural principle like that to make the story happen. In the case of *Changing Places*, it was the idea of an exchange. I'd been groping about for some way of bringing together my own experience of going from one university system to another, and the idea of the academic exchange came to me as a way of handling that. So that was really why I chose to use the Grail legend.

I then started to broaden out the generic intertextuality of it, to include not just the Arthurian story but the romance tradition to which the Arthurian stories belong, going back to classical Alexandrian romance, and forward to Renaissance epic romance. Again by a lucky chance I happened on Patricia Parker's *Inescapable Romance* in our campus bookshop. It doesn't usually stock rather esoteric, academic monographs like that, but there it was, in hardback, a new book. She deals with a number of Renaissance romance writers, and both Spenser and Ariosto particularly interested me. I had studied Spenser as a student, but I didn't know very much about Ariosto so I got a translation of *Orlando Furioso* and read bits of it. I immediately saw all kinds of possibilities, and I began to get interested in the whole idea of romance as a type of narrative. I thought about writing a novel, deliberately alluding to the genre of romance, which would license me to contrive all kinds of coincidences and twists in the story that might otherwise be too hard to swallow. Thus there's a little epigraph from Nathaniel Hawthorne in the front of *Small World*,

which says, "When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume had he professed to be writing a Novel."

Since *Changing Places* was an academic novel, this would be an academic romance. I began to look for ways in which the characters in my novel could echo and allude to various characters and actions in literary romance, and in particular the Grail legend. When I first thought of using the Arthurian story, after seeing Boorman's film, I wrote in my notebook that perhaps the Grail legend would serve my purpose, remembering how it served T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*.

RT: At that time were you familiar with the tradition of Perceval as the naive hero?

DL: Yes, but I then read more about the Grail legend. I reread Jessie Weston, which I had read some time before in connection with Eliot. I thought about how he used the Grail legend, among other legends, in imitation of Joyce, really. I decided to weave Eliot in too, to provide a double reference. Influenced by Weston, he had interpreted the Grail legend as a displaced form of a fertility mystery. Fertility mystery suited my purpose very well, because I was concerned with intellectual and artistic sterility. The novel ends with a number of characters who have been blocked or become sterile, in one way or another, suddenly being released from that spell and becoming fertile. At that point I thought I'd make the young hero actually write his thesis on Eliot, so that I could get plenty of information about him and Jessie Weston into the story.

So as always with writing, the pursuit of some device, like using the Grail legend as a structural principle, suggests things to put in the story which you wouldn't otherwise have thought of. It actually begins to dictate the modern level of the story. I'm sure this happened with Joyce's *Ulysses*. Thus there are characters in my novel who correspond to certain figures in Arthurian legend.

RT: So the decision to use Arthurian legend as a structural framework directed the selective process to a considerable extent?

DL: Yes. It obviously dictated the choice of a name for the hero, and the fact that he would be young. The identification with Perceval either fitted in with, or may have suggested, the idea that he should be sexually innocent. I'd already decided he should be Irish, and I gave him this Joycean name, Persse, which could be seen as a play on both Perceval and Perseus--the hero of the classical myth of the young man who rescues the maiden from the dragon, which is in some ways a cognate myth with that of the Fisher King. In both the country is released from a curse.

The classical legend also had in it the element of striptease, because in iconographic representations of Perseus and Andromeda, and of St. George and the Dragon, which is also cognate, the girl is usually naked or very flimsily dressed. She is tied to a stake, and the dragon is coming for her. That was an image I wanted to use and it appears in travesty form in the striptease club.

These things just proliferate. Zapp and Swallow did not correspond to any particular figures in the Grail legend, but they can be seen as veteran knights, if you like. Kingfisher obviously was suggested by the Fisher King, and he comes from Jessie Weston. So is Siegfried von Turpitz to the extent that he has the black glove on his hand. This glove is a source of sinister power because nobody knows what's underneath it. That detail was suggested to me by the story of the black hand in the Grail Chapel in one of the versions of the Grail legend that Weston discusses. Very few people have picked that up, actually, and indeed some have thought I was getting at particular

people in the academic world who have malformed hands. That wasn't the reason at all. He comes from Jessie Weston.

I made him a German for other reasons, in that the story required there should be a villain or, in narratological terms, an antagonist, somebody who is trying to stop the hero doing what he wants to do. Moreover, that character had to represent one of the schools of critical theory which are debating--contesting in a kind of tournament--in the course of the novel. Since Germans are almost a literary archetype of the villain in Anglo-American literature, it seemed right to make him a German, and since the German contribution to literary theory is mainly in reception theory, I made him a reception theorist.

The scene in which von Turpitz steals Persse's ideas in his lecture takes place at a conference in the Sonesta Hotel in Amsterdam. It actually exists, and it has a conference center attached to it, built in a former Lutheran chapel. I read this in a guidebook, and I wrote to the hotel, saying I was thinking of organizing a conference and asking them to send me their literature. They sent me wonderful photographs of the conference center, and I incorporate it into the story as the Chapel Perilous, where the hero fights with the black hand. When the novel was adapted as a television series, they actually shot that scene in this very chapel. It looks wonderful.

RT: What did you think of the television version of *Small World*?

DL: It was adapted by somebody else for Granada TV, but I was consulted about the project at various stages, read the scripts, and attended rehearsals and some of the shooting, so I felt personally involved with the production. It was a very faithful adaptation of the novel and I enjoyed watching it. Some things in it were quite brilliant, but one has to say that the critical reception was disappointing. Oddly enough, the highbrow critics didn't like it, although it included a lot of the literary jokes and allusions, whereas the popular papers gave it good reviews. It was aired in late January and the whole of February of 1987, in six episodes. Bob Chetwin was the director, Steve Hawes the producer, and it was dramatized by Howard Schuman. Barry Lynch played the role of Persse McGarrigle.

RT: What about the character of Fulvia Morgana?

DL: Since her character was partly dictated by the theme of competing schools of criticism, she's an Italian Marxist with an enormous income. She corresponds to Morgan le Fay only in being a seductive witch, I suppose. The analogy there is not very elaborate. Other parts of the novel are derived from other romances. Angelica's tendency to disappear at crucial moments derives from the figure of Angelica in *Orlando Furioso*.

RT: Where did the idea of having identical twins come from?

DL: According to Northrup Frye, it's a very common device in romance, especially in Greek literature--it appears in Shakespeare's *A Comedy of Errors*, which is based on a Greek romance. I read Frye again because I view him as a great theorist of romance. I was struck by his observation concerning the prominence in romance of the theme of the virtuous woman who appears to be guilty of some sexual misdemeanor, but is eventually shown to be innocent. Thus I decided to include that also: the girl whom Persse is pursuing would appear to have been sexually disgraced but would turn out not to have been. The twins motif offered itself as a way of explaining this reversal, so that's why I used it.

The other main Grail element in my novel is the UNESCO Chair of Literary Theory. My hero's story is very straightforward: he's questing for a girl, and this leads to wordplay on girl and Grail. It's easy enough to generate narrative interest when a man is pursuing a girl who keeps escaping him.

The problem was what I should do with the other characters. What would they pursue? So I thought up this idea of a UNESCO Chair, which would be the academic job to end all jobs, and everybody would be trying to get it. That is the Grail the older characters are pursuing.

RT: Did you come across the motif of the Perilous Seat at the Round Table, that has to be left empty until it can be filled by the best knight in the world?

DL: Yes, I did. When Philip Swallow and Joy meet Miss Maiden at Delphi she quotes the passage on the Siege Perilous from Tennyson's "The Holy Grail." Miss Maiden is, of course, a kind of Jessie Weston character.

RT: You said that the hotel was the equivalent of the Chapel Perilous. What about the chapel at the airport?

DL: That's not the Chapel Perilous. There are a lot of chapels in the Arthurian stories, but this one happens to be a real chapel. I chanced upon it one Sunday morning on my way to Poland or somewhere, and I thought, this is great; I must use this. It was fun writing this book, and things kept falling into my lap.

RT: So the legend became a convenient structure which allowed you to include a certain number of features, and partly because you had it in mind, you became more observant of features that might fit that pattern?

DL: Right.

RT: You've already mentioned various romance sources. Did you look at any of the chronicles, by Geoffrey of Monmouth and others, or works by historians and archaeologists, or any Welsh material?

DL: No, not at all. I concentrated upon the Grail legend seen through the lens of Jessie Weston and T. S. Eliot, really. For instance, in the climax of the novel at the M. L. A. conference, the question that Persse asks is straight out of Jessie Weston. The idea of the weather suddenly changing, winter turning into spring, was related to the idea of the Grail legend being a displaced fertility myth. By a most extraordinary coincidence, about a year or two after I wrote that chapter there really was a freak heat wave during the M. L. A. conference in December. Temperatures went up to about seventy degrees in somewhere like New York.

RT: Did you read any modern fiction dealing with Arthur?

DL: No, not really. I read an abridged version of Malory as a child, but I didn't choose to study him at university. As a student I did read some other romances, like *King Horn* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and I did an essay on them, so I suppose I was drawing on those memories. I also found *Orlando Furioso* very suggestive, as I've already mentioned. The tone is both romantic yet comic, which was exactly what I was trying to create in *Small World*. There's a little map at the beginning of my copy of the translation of *Orlando Furioso*, which shows the movements of the characters across the Mediterranean and northern Europe. It looks just like a map of academic conferences, for people flying backwards and forwards between them.

RT: Do you write specifically for an academic audience that might be able to identify the allusions?

DL: I write to communicate, but like most literary writers I don't display all my goods on the counter. The books are written in a layered style so that they have coherence and comprehensibility on the surface. I don't want to write books that repel lay readers who don't know much about the literary sources, and so there is in the novel itself a certain amount of indirect explication of the analogy between modern professors and knights of romance.

Then there's another level of fairly esoteric literary allusion which I don't expect more than a small percentage of readers to perceive. Although I wouldn't conceal in that way elements that are vital to the structure of the whole, I like to feel that a book shouldn't give up all its meanings at the first reading. There should be nuggets hidden there. Readers who stumble on them will then get special pleasure at having recognized them, just because they're not obvious. I hope the novel invites readers into a world which may not be familiar, but yet is comprehensible enough to give pleasure. They may have the sense that it's holding something back from them, and I don't think this is a bad thing. Only those with a literary education would see all the allusions and parallels that I've put into the book.

RT: Because the characters of Philip Swallow and Morris Zapp were already developed in *Changing Places*, were they difficult to adapt to the Arthurian structure of *Small World*?

DL: To some extent, and more in the case of Swallow than Zapp, because the role I had for them was that of veterans on the international conference circuit. It was easy enough to make Zapp into such a character because he already was a successful academic. In the first novel he doesn't like travelling very much, and so he's changed to allow that.

Philip Swallow, however, was a rather dim academic; he wasn't very successful in *Changing Places*. He was only a lecturer who hadn't published anything, and he was very diffident in personal relations. So I had to re-jig his character to some extent, or at least explain why, in the intervening ten years, he'd developed. First of all I made him head of department. Then I made him more sexually adventurous than he'd been in *Changing Places*, though I have observed that some men in middle age become, suddenly, more attractive to women. They seem to develop a kind of charisma they never had before. I know at least one person to whom this happened very strikingly, and it happened as a result of going off to conferences, actually. I was thinking of him. It was necessary also to engineer some unexpected academic success for Philip to make him even an outside candidate for the Grail of the UNESCO Chair. This accounts for the intrigue employed by another candidate, Parkinson, who is pushing Swallow's candidature as a cover for himself; for how Philip's book is pushed into the limelight; for how he gets onto the final panel; and so on. Those contrivances were, I thought, licensed by the mock heroic romance style in which I was writing.

When I wrote *Changing Places* I had no idea I was going to write another novel about those characters, and so it was necessary to make these adjustments. Now I've written a third one, called *Nice Work*, and it too presented problems of continuity from the earlier books.

RT: Were there any parts of the legend that you felt tempted to use but found you couldn't because they were inconsistent with what you were trying to achieve?

DL: Yes. I considered a Merlin figure at one point, but I just couldn't see a place for him. I think you have to be aware of the danger of the mythic archetype running away with the book, because it does suggest things which you wouldn't otherwise have thought of. If you try desperately to incorporate everything from the mythic archetype you find in your sources, then it would begin to distort the modern story, I think.

The main problems were unifying all the different elements in the book, and keeping all the plot strands going. After I'd finished, I came across the term "entrelacement"--interlacing-- which Renaissance writers like Philip Sidney introduced into works like *Arcadia*. Instead of just a linear series of adventures, you had these interweaving stories. Though I wasn't familiar with the concept when I wrote *Small World*, that is exactly what I was trying to do. It appears during pauses

in the action, when characters tell their own stories. That's a device I used, consciously, in *Small World*.

RT: Might you have used the interlacing technique because you were influenced by *Orlando Furioso* as a model?

DL: Yes. Perhaps Chaucer too, because I was thinking of *The Canterbury Tales* when I wrote. The prologue of my novel is a parody of "The Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales*. Like Chaucer's pilgrims, the characters journey to new and interesting places, meet new and interesting people, form new and interesting relationships with them, and exchange gossip and confidences, for their well-worn stories are fresh to their companions and vice-versa. Embedded in the larger story of the novel are little stories, like Frobisher's account of the computer printout of his keywords. I think that storytelling is part of the romance tradition and I have incorporated it into *Small World*.

RT: When you're writing, do you have more than one book on the go at a time?

DL: No.

RT: Do you write on computer?

DL: I write the first draft of anything important in longhand, and then I put it onto computer where I revise and edit it. I still rewrite by hand quite a lot, but I'm at that stage now where I'm tending to go to the word processor earlier and earlier. I haven't actually written a novel directly onto it; I doubt whether I ever would.

RT: When you were using Arthurian legend in *Small World*, was there any particular part you felt was crucial to include?

DL: Well, once I committed myself to utilizing the Grail quest I had to decide how to resolve it in a way which had some kind of analogy with the original. That was the real problem. The solution came fairly late: to bring it all to a climax at a big seminar panel at the M. L. A. conference, where Persse would reenact the Grail knight's question that would suddenly break the spell of sterility. Because this solution came fairly late, it always weighed on the back of my mind as I was developing the general analogy between the adventures of the knights and adventures of my professors. How was I going to bring it all together in a way which preserved the parallel, and yet was meaningful in terms of my modern story?

RT: Would you be tempted to make use of the Arthurian legend again in your fiction?

DL: I think it very unlikely because to me it was just a device. It's not as if I have a thematic interest in that particular body of material. It would look like lack of imagination were I to use it again. One likes each novel to look like a new solution to the problems of narrative.

RT: Thank you.