

*Nice Work* is set around the unlikely relationship between Victor Wilcox, Managing Director of a struggling engineering plant, and Dr Robyn Penrose, a lecturer of English literature theory at Rumridge University. Robyn and Vic meet through a PR scheme designed to bring the Industry and the University closer at the time when both the Industry and the University are threatened by the emerging monster of financial services industries; at the time when making real things is going out of fashion and ex-English lecturers compete with barrow-boy yuppies at City merchant banks just before the Big Bang.

Yes, we are talking Thatcher's 80's here and the historical and social realities are always there, explained clearly enough for those who don't remember or were not told.

The story is, of course, the classic, topical - let's call it 'Crocodile Dundee' - scheme, where two people from two different social spheres meet and go from more or less despising each other to developing understanding and more. This vehicle of a story is used to present the reader with the main two characters and a host of others. Those characters are superbly drawn, typical without being boring, vivid without becoming caricatures.

Doctor Robyn Penrose, a daughter of a lecturer and a lover of a lecturer; thoroughly liberated and independent; follower of feminism and a passionate devotee of semiotic materialism. Robyn is confident, but not vain, stylish but not coquettish. Refreshingly, her intellectual belief that love is a textual construct does not fall apart under the force of real-life passion of a real-life phallic male. Her academic background, her intellectual backbone are not proven to be false and we do not discover that, underneath, she was really an emotional cripple.

I found it rather satisfying to read a novel in which the main female character is not some kind of victim (or even a survivor) of profound emotional trauma. It is also quite sad that it somehow had to be a book written by a man.

Each of the character is a figure standing for a social group, for a world from which he or she comes from: down-to-earth, practical industry and the ivory towers of the academia. Their work habits and dress habits, their values and their mores; their prejudices and annoyances differ and clash; and observing this clash is rather funny.

But of course *Nice Work* is not just a comedy of character and social mores. It is an "issue" novel and the main issue discussed and debated by and in the book regards the role and the form of university in the world of (disappearing) factories and (seemingly unstoppable) financial services.

The contrast between a Managing Director's Office and a Lecture Hall is only one of the many explored in the book. In one instance the grim realities of Rumridge as a whole are put against the well-dressed, well-heeled and refreshed by the sea-breeze comfort of the seaside university town where Robyn's parents live. In another we have the opportunity to compare Rumridge to Frankfurt, shiny and clean, modern and efficient.

The *Nice Work* of the title refers mostly to Robyn's work and I have to say that, to my satisfaction, the University seems to come out of this ideological confrontation quite victorious. After piling the critique on the elitist set-up, the irrelevancies of theory, the mores, habits, prejudices and occasional utter stupidity of the academics the last word is given to young Dr Penrose, the human and humane but also competent and committed face of the academia and her shaken but still strong belief in the values represented by the University. I have to say that I passionately share this belief and am greatly saddened by the currently in vogue attempts to re-present and re-formulate academic institutions as some high-level vocational courses. The debate is in some ways more relevant now that it was in the 80s.

All this serious stuff shouldn't shadow the fact that *Nice Work* is a very funny book indeed, not in a laugh-out-loud funny but rather smirk-with-delight funny kind of way.

On top of this, Lodge plays with the language, plays with the characters, plays with the social stereotype and (of course!) engages in a very post-modernist play with literary theory. The whole novel is, in fact, such a big game as it is self-referential to the extreme.

'Industrial novels', known in their time as 'conditions of England novels' are mentioned in one of Robyn's University lectures: "They are novels in which the main characters debate typical social and economic issues as well as fall in and out of love, marry and have children, pursue careers (...) and do all the other things that characters do in a more conventional novel." These novels are where Dr Penrose's expertise lies and she happens to actually be a character in such a novel. *Nice Work* is quite obviously a 'condition of England novel' for the 80s. However much Lodge likes to take the mickey out of post-structuralism and literary theory, he himself engages in a most delicious, post-modernist, inter-textual game.

The way that sections describing Robyn's side of the story are presented differs subtly from the way Vic's story is told. His part is traditional, realistic, 'like novels should be'; while Robyn's side is more ironic, full of author's comments, reminding of digressional poem.

The way that the book concludes is also straight from the "industrial novel". The solution to all the characters' worries comes *deus ex machina*, the only way the 19th century writers could find to resolve the conflicts described in their books. This resolution is described in the best realist tradition, moving and satisfying as in a proper realistic novel; so those reading on one of the more literal levels will not be disappointed.

All in all, *Nice Work* is a surprisingly complex novel that can be perfectly well enjoyed on any level: as a comedy of characters, as a social satire, as an "issue novel" and as a literary game. The issues it explores (Industry, Academia and Finance) are still as current as they were in the 80's; sadly so.

It does not have a terribly compelling plot, but the characters are brilliant and actually grow on you, the jokes are funny and the argument is pervasive.

If you get bored by references to literature as well as social issues, or if you cannot stand David Lodge as such, then this book is probably not for you. Otherwise recommended.

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