

NICE WORK: OF MANAGERS AND LECTURERS

David Lodge in general

This is a review of 'Nice Work', placed in the general David Lodge category for a want of better place in dooyoo database. In my defense I would say that this is one of the best and also fairly typical Lodge novel.

--- Back to Rummidge---

For those unfamiliar with the setting, in author's own words "Rummidge is an imaginary city, with imaginary universities and imaginary factories, inhabited by imaginary people which occupies, for the purposes of fiction, the space where Birmingham is to be found on maps of so called real world

The book is set around the unlikely relationship between Victor Wilcox, a Managing Director of a struggling engineering plant, and Dr Robyn Penrose, a lecturer of English literature theory at Rummidge 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 service 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. In fact, be it realities of 80s' Britain, post-structuralism or the plight of manufacturing industry; everything is explained and an ignorant reader like me gets gently educated. A reader familiar with one or all of themes appearing in the novel does not need to worry about being patronised as the explanations offer not only the facts but also commentary ranging from subtly ironic to scathingly hilarious.

I am a great fan of David Lodge's writing and his books provided me with hours of enjoyment, surprising amount of knowledge of literary theory and many a fascinating insight into the British academia in particular and British society in general. Rummidge novels are my favourite and "Nice Work" is one of the best in that cycle. As all good books it works and can be enjoyed on many levels.

The first level is the realistic "what meets the eye" level and on this level Robyn and Vic meet and develop their understanding of each other throughout a sequence of events taking place during the two university terms. 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 virtually 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.

Let us meet the main characters

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, she does not fall madly in love with Vic, neither is she swept off her feet (and out of the literary theory ivory tower) by his infatuation. 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. In fact, she is honestly annoyed by being '...dragged into a classic realist text, full of causality and morality.' What gives Robyn this independence and strength? Undoubtedly her social background but above everything, her real commitment to work and to the idea of University.

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.

Vic Wilcox is a thoroughly decent and "by no means stupid" follower of market capitalism, traditional morals and stringent business values, a passionate believer in buying British. For Robyn he is a "...literate, intelligent person who had never read Jane Eyre." His is the old-fashioned Protestant work ethic, the ruthless but fundamentally honest spirit of Industrial Revolution; but also the conventional morality, the disillusionment of the mid-life crisis. He is, then, straight from a XIXth century realist novel and as such he falls for Robyn - initially angered and annoyed and then attracted and fascinated by her independence, her intellect, her open mind and the fact that she is — simply — interesting. Of course her indisputable good looks, however well hidden under utilitarian though stylish clothes, do help this infatuation.

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 — in conversation first and foremost but also in action (for example when Robyn's idealistically driven behaviour almost causes a wildcat strike potentially threatening the very existence of the factory) — is exceedingly funny.

We also witness a personal journey of discovery from which both emerge internally changed, but without revolutionary alterations in their way of life.

Vic acquires a taste for poetry and an understanding — even enjoyment — of a difference between metonymy and metaphor. Eventually his shattered life is going to be rebuild according to the principles of self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship (with a little help from — surprise, surprise - Dr Penrose). Robyn admits that universities don't grow on trees; she develops and then dispels some doubt about the elitist set-up of the academia as opposed to no-frills polytechnics; starts to reflect on how things are made but ultimately the experience reinforces her commitment to collegiate way of life and the values of freedom and knowledge.

Contemporary and timeless issues

But of course "Nice Work" is not just a comedy of character and social mores. It is — on the second and perhaps the most important level — an "issue" novel; novel that uses its characters not just for description — however amusing — of the status quo; but also to espouse important issues; issues of the time as well as more universal ones.

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 Rummidge 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 Rummidge to Frankfurt, shiny and clean, modern and efficient.

"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.

If you are bored by literary theory, however entertainingly it might be explained, skipping the next section and going straight to the "summary" might be a good idea. If, however, you were getting increasingly impatient for the literary games: here they come. 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.

Literary Games

'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 "here we go"; 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.

Even introduction of her character invites an authorial, theoretical comment: "...a character, who, rather awkwardly for me [narrator], doesn't herself believe in the concept of character (...) holds that 'character' is a bourgeois myth (...) 'you are what speaks you' is the axiomatic basis of Robyn's philosophy. It might seem a bit bleak (...) but in practice it doesn't seem to affect her behaviour very noticeably. She seems to have ordinary human feelings, anxieties, desires (...) like anybody else in this imperfect world, and to have a natural inclination to try and make it a better place. I shall therefore take the liberty of treating her as a character, not utterly different in kind, though of course belonging to a very different social species from Vic Wilcox

The way that the book concludes is also straight from the "industrial novel". The solution to all the characters' worries comes *deus ex machina*, in the form of inheritance; the only way the XIXth 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.

Verdict

"Nice Work" is a surprisingly complex novel that can be perfectly well enjoyed on any of its levels; as a comedy of characters, as a social satire, as an "issue novel" and as a literary game.

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 then this book is probably not for you.

It is currently available on Amazon for # 6.39

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