

DAVID LODGE

NICE WORK

cism (1972) and *Modern Criticism and Theory* (1988). In 1986 he published a collection of occasional essays, *Write On*. His most recent work of criticism is *The Art of Fiction* (1992).

Small World was adapted as a television serial, produced by Granada TV, in 1988. David Lodge himself adapted *Nice Work* as a four-part TV serial for the BBC, broadcast in the autumn of 1989. It won the Royal Television Society's Award for the best drama serial of the year, and David Lodge was also awarded a Silver Nymph for his screenplay at the International Television Festival in Monte Carlo in 1990. His first stage play, *The Writing Game*, was produced at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in May 1990.



PENGUIN BOOKS

I

Monday, January 13th, 1986. Victor Wilcox lies awake, in the dark bedroom, waiting for his quartz alarm clock to bleep. It is set to do this at 6.45. How long he has to wait he doesn't know. He could easily find out by groping for the clock, lifting it to his line of vision, and pressing the button that illuminates the digital display. But he would rather not know. Supposing it is only six o'clock? Or even five? It could be five. Whatever it is, he won't be able to get to sleep again. This has become a regular occurrence lately: lying awake in the dark, waiting for the alarm to bleep, worrying.

Worries streak towards him like enemy spaceships in one of Gary's video games. He flinches, dodges, zaps them with instant solutions, but the assault is endless: the Avco account, the Rawlinson account, the price of pig-iron, the value of the pound, the competition from Foundrax, the incompetence of his Marketing Director, the persistent breakdowns of the core blowers, the vandalizing of the toilets in the fertling shop, the pressure from his divisional boss, last month's accounts, the quarterly forecast, the annual review . . .

In an effort to escape this bombardment, perhaps even to doze awhile, he twists on to his side, burrows into the warm plump body of his wife, and throws an arm round her waist. Startled, but still asleep, drugged with Valium, Marjorie swivels to face him. Their noses and foreheads bump against each other; there is a sudden flurry of limbs, an absurd pantomime struggle. Marjorie puts up her fists like a pugilist, groans and pushes him away. An object slides off the bed on her side and falls to the floor with a

thump. Vic knows what it is: a book entitled *Enjoy Your Menopause*, which one of Marjorie's friends at the Weight Watchers' club has lent her, and which she has been reading in bed, without much show of conviction, and falling asleep over, for the past week or two. On retiring to bed Vic's last action is normally to detach a book from Marjorie's nerveless fingers, tuck her arms under the covers and turn out her bedside lamp, but he must have neglected the first of these chores last night, or perhaps *Enjoy Your Menopause* was concealed under the coverlet.

He rolls away from Marjorie, who, now lying on her back, begins to snore faintly. He envies her that deep unconsciousness, but cannot afford to join her in it. Once, desperate for a full night's sleep, he had accepted her offer of a Valium, sluicing it down with his usual nightcap, and moved about the next morning like a diver walking on the seabed. He made a mistake of two percentage points in a price for steering-boxes for British Leyland before his head cleared. *You shouldn't have mixed it with whisky*, Marjorie said. *You don't need both*. Then I'll stick to whisky, he said. *The Valium lasts longer*, she said. Too bloody long, if you ask me, he said. I lost the firm five thousand pounds this morning, thanks to you. *Oh, it's my fault, is it?* she said, and her lower lip began to tremble. Then to stop her crying, anything to stop that, he had to buy her the set of antique-looking brass fire-irons she had set her heart on for the lounge, to give an extra touch of authenticity to the rustic stone fireplace and the imitation-log gas fire.

Marjorie's snores become louder. Vic gives her a rude, exasperated shove. The snoring stops but, surprisingly, she does not wake. In other rooms his three children are also asleep. Outside, a winter gale blusters against the sides of the house and swishes the branches of trees to and fro. He feels like the captain of a sleeping ship, alone at the helm, steering his oblivious crew through dangerous seas. He feels as if he is the only man awake in the entire world.

Toilets

The alarm clock cheeps.

Instantly, by some perverse chemistry of his body or nervous system, he feels tired and drowsy, reluctant to leave the warm bed. He presses the snooze button on the clock with a practised finger and falls effortlessly asleep. Five minutes later, the alarm wakes him again, cheeping insistently like a mechanical bird. Vic sighs, hits the Off button on the clock, switches on his bedside lamp (its dimmer control turned low for Marjorie's sake), gets out of bed and paddles through the deep pile of the bedroom carpet to the *en suite* bathroom, making sure the connecting door is closed before he turns on the light inside.

Vic pees, a task requiring considerable care and accuracy since the toilet bowl is low-slung and tapered in shape. He does not greatly care for the dark purplish bathroom suite ('Damson', the estate agent's brochure had called the shade) but it had been one of the things that attracted Marjorie when they bought the house two years ago – the bathroom, with its kidney-shaped handbasin and goldplated taps and sunken bath and streamlined loo and bidet. And, above all, the fact that it was '*en suite*'. *I've always wanted an en suite bathroom*, she would say to visitors, to her friends on the phone, to, he wouldn't be surprised, tradesmen on the doorstep or strangers she accosted in the street. You would think '*en suite*' was the most beautiful phrase in any language, the lengths Marjorie went to introduce it into her conversation. If they made a perfume called *En Suite*, she would wear it.

Vic shakes the last drops from his penis, taking care not to sprinkle the shaggy pink nylon fitted carpet, and flushes the toilet. The house has four toilets, a cause of concern to Vic's father. *FOUR toilets?* he said, when first shown over the house. *Did I count right?* What's the matter, Dad? Vic teased. *Afraid the water-table will go down if we flush them all at once? No, but what if they start metering water, eh? Then you'll be in trouble.* Vic tried to argue that it didn't

make any difference how many toilets you had, it was the number of times you flushed them that mattered, but his father was convinced that having so many toilets was an incitement to unnecessary peeing, therefore to excessive flushing.

He could be right, at that. At Gran's house, a back-to-back in Easton with an outside toilet, you didn't go unless you really had to, especially in the winter. Their own house in those days, a step up the social ladder from Gran's, had its own indoor toilet, a dark narrow room off the half-landing that always niffed a bit, however much Sanilav and Dettol his mother poured into the bowl. He remembered vividly that yellowish ceramic bowl with the trademark 'Challenger', the big varnished wooden seat that was always pleasantly warm to the bum, and a long chain dangling from the high cistern with a sponge-rubber ball, slightly perished, on the end of it. He used to practise heading, flicking the ball from wall to wall, as he sat there, a constipated schoolboy. His mother complained of the marks on the distemper. Now he is the proud owner of four toilets - damson, avocado, sunflower and white, all centrally heated. Probably as good an index of success as any.

He steps on to the bathroom scales. Ten stone, two ounces. Quite enough for a man only five feet, five and a half inches tall. Some say - Vic has overheard them saying it - that he tries to compensate for his short stature by his aggressive manner. Well, let them. If it wasn't for a bit of aggression, he wouldn't be where he is now. Though how long he will stay there is far from certain. Vic frowns in the mirror above the handbasin, thinking again of last month's accounts, the quarterly forecast, the annual review . . . He runs hot water into the dark purple bowl, lathers his face with shaving foam from an aerosol can, and begins to scrape his jaw with a safety razor, using a Wilkinson's Sword blade. Vic believes fervently in buying British, and has frequent rows with his eldest son, Raymond, who favours a

C.V.
disposable plastic razor manufactured in France. Not that this is the only bone of contention between them, no, not by a long chalk. The principal constraint on the number of their disagreements is, indeed, the comparative rarity of their encounters, Raymond invariably being asleep when Vic leaves for work and out when he returns home.

Vic wipes the tidemark of foam from his cheeks and fingers the shaven flesh appraisingly. Dark brown eyes stare back at him. Who am I?

He grips the washbasin, leans forward on locked arms, and scans the square face, pale under a forelock of lank brown hair, flecked with grey, the two vertical furrows in the brow like a clip holding the blunt nose in place, the straight-ruled line of the mouth, the squared-off jaw. You know who you are: it's all on file at Division.

Wilcox: Victor Eugene. *Date of Birth*: 19 Oct. 1940. *Place of Birth*: Easton, Rummidge, England. *Education*: Endwell Road Primary School, Easton; Easton Grammar School for Boys; Rummidge College of Advanced Technology. *MI Mech. Eng.* 1964. *Marital Status*: married (to Marjorie Florence Coleman, 1964). *Children*: Raymond (b. 1966), Sandra (b. 1969), Gary (b. 1972). *Career*: 1962-64, apprentice, Vanguard Engineering; 1964-66, Junior Production Engineer, Vanguard Engineering; 1966-70, Senior Engineer, Vanguard Engineering; 1970-74, Production Manager, Vanguard Engineering; 1974-78, Manufacturing Manager, Lewis & Arbuckle Ltd; 1978-80, Manufacturing Director, Rumcol Castings; 1980-85, Managing Director, Rumcol Castings. *Present Position*: Managing Director, J. Pringle & Sons Casting and General Engineering.

That's who I am.

Vic grimaces at his own reflection, as if to say: come off it, no identity crises, please. Somebody has to earn a living in this family.

He shrugs on his dressing-gown, which hangs from a hook on the bathroom door, switches off the light, and

Vic flicks a switch on his telephone console and summons Shirley, whom he had gestured out of the office while Baxter was talking, to take some letters. He leafs through the file of correspondence in his In-tray, the two vertical lines in his brow above the nose drawing closer together as he concentrates on names, figures, dates. He lights a cigarette, inhales deeply, and blows two plumes of smoke through his nostrils. Outside the sky is still overcast, and the murky yellow light that filters through the vertical louvres of the window blinds is hardly enough to read by. He switches on his desk lamp, casting a pool of light on the documents. Through walls and windows comes a muffled compound noise of machinery and traffic, the soothing, satisfying sound of men at work

frustrations, fears, and to have a difference I shall not assistance of

And there, for the time being, let us while we travel back an hour or two in space, to meet a very different character. rather awkwardly for me, doesn't herself concept of character. That is to say (a favourite phrase of her own), Robyn Penrose, Temporary Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Rummidge, holds that 'character' is a bourgeois myth, an illusion created to reinforce the ideology of capitalism. As evidence for this assertion she will point to the fact that the rise of the novel (the literary genre of 'character' *par excellence*) in the eighteenth century coincided with the rise of capitalism; that the triumph of the novel over all other literary genres in the nineteenth century coincided with the triumph of capitalism; and that the modernist and postmodernist deconstruction of the classic novel in the twentieth century has coincided with the terminal crisis of capitalism.

Why the classic novel should have collaborated with the spirit of capitalism is perfectly obvious to Robyn. Both are expressions of a secularized Protestant ethic, both dependent on the idea of an autonomous individual self who is responsible for and in control of his/her own destiny, seeking happiness and fortune in competition with other autonomous selves. [This is true of the novel considered both as commodity and as mode of representation. (Thus Robyn in full seminar spate.)] That is to say, it applies to novelists themselves as well as to their heroes and heroines. The novelist is a capitalist of the imagination. He or she invents a product which consumers didn't know they wanted until it is made available, manufactures it with the

assistance of purveyors of risk capital known as publishers, and sells it in competition with makers of marginally differentiated products of the same kind. The first major English novelist, Daniel Defoe, was a merchant. The second, Samuel Richardson, was a printer. The novel was the first mass-produced cultural artefact. (At this point Robyn, with elbows tucked into her sides, would spread her hands outwards from the wrist, as if to imply that there is no need to say more. But of course she always has much more to say.)

According to Robyn (or, more precisely, according to the writers who have influenced her thinking on these matters), there is no such thing as the 'self' on which capitalism and the classic novel are founded – that is to say, a finite, unique soul or essence that constitutes a person's identity; there is only a subject position in an infinite web of discourses – 'he discourses of power, sex, family, science, religion, poetry, etc. And by the same token, there is no such thing as an author, that is to say, one who originates a work of fiction *ab nihilo*. Every text is a product of intertextuality, a tissue of allusions to and citations of other texts; and, in the famous words of Jacques Derrida (famous to people like Robyn, anyway), 'il n'y a pas de hors-texte', there is nothing outside the text. There are no origins, there is only production, and we produce our 'selves' in language. Not 'you are what you eat' but 'you are what you speak' or, rather 'you are what speaks you', is the axiomatic basis of Robyn's philosophy, which she would call, if required to give it a name, 'semiotic materialism'. It might seem a bit bleak, a bit inhuman ('antihumanist, yes; inhuman, no,' she would interject), somewhat deterministic ('not at all,' the truly determined subject is he who is not aware of the discursive formations that determine him.) Or her,' she would add scrupulously, being among other things a feminist), but in practice this doesn't seem to affect her behaviour very noticeably – she seems to have ordinary human feelings,

ambitions, desires, to suffer anxieties, frustrations, fears, like anyone 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.

Robyn rises somewhat later than Vic this dark January Monday. Her alarm clock, a replica of an old-fashioned instrument purchased from Habitat, with an analogue dial and a little brass bell on the top, rouses her from a deep sleep at 7.30. Unlike Vic, Robyn invariably sleeps until woken. Then worries rush into her consciousness, as into his, like clamorous patients who have been waiting all night for the doctor's surgery to open; but she deals with them in a rational, orderly manner. This morning she gives priority to the fact that it is the first day of the winter term, and that she has a lecture to deliver and two tutorials to conduct. Although she has been teaching now for some eight years, on and off, although she enjoys it, feels she is good at it, and would like to go on doing it for the rest of her life if possible, she always feels a twinge of anxiety at the beginning of a new term. This does not disturb her self-confidence; a good teacher, like a good actress, should not be immune from stage fright. She sits up in bed for a moment, doing some complicated breathing and flexing of the abdominal muscles, learned in yoga classes, to calm herself. This exercise is rendered easier to perform by the fact that Charles is not lying beside her to observe and ask ironic questions about it. He left the previous evening to drive to Ipswich, where his own term is due to begin today at the University of Suffolk.

And who is Charles? While Robyn is getting up, and getting ready for the day, thinking mostly about the nineteenth-century industrial novels on which she has to lecture this morning, I will tell you about Charles, and other salient facts of her biography.

*

She was born, and christened Roberta Anne Penrose, in Melbourne, Australia, nearly thirty-three years ago, but left that country at the age of five to accompany her parents to England. Her father, then a young academic historian, had a scholarship to pursue post-doctoral research into nineteenth-century European diplomacy at Oxford. Instead of returning to Australia, he took a post at a university on the south coast of England, where he has been ever since, now occupying a personal Chair. Robyn has only the dimmest memories of the country of her birth, and has never had the opportunity to refresh or renew them. Professor Penrose's characteristic response to any suggestion that the family should revisit Australia being a shudder.

Robyn had a comfortable childhood, growing up in a pleasant, unostentatious house with a view of the sea. She attended an excellent direct-grant grammar school (which has since gone independent, much to Robyn's disgust) where she was Head Girl and Captain of Games and which she left with four A grades at A-Level. Though urged by the school to apply for a place at Oxbridge, she chose instead to go to Sussex University, as bright young people often did in the 1970s, because the new universities were considered exciting and innovative places to study at. Under the umbrella of a degree course in English Literature, Robyn read Freud and Marx, Kafka and Kierkegaard, which she certainly couldn't have done at Oxbridge. She also set about losing her virginity, and accomplished this feat without difficulty, but without much pleasure, in her first term. In her second, she was recklessly promiscuous, and in her third she met Charles.

(Robyn kicks off the duvet and gets out of bed. She stands upright in her long white cotton nightgown from Laura Ashley, scratches her bottom through the cambric, and yawns. She goes to the window, treating the rugs spread on the sanded and waxed pine floorboards as stepping-stones, pulls back the curtain, and peers out. She

looks up at the grey clouds scudding across the sky, down at a vista of narrow back gardens, some neat and trim with goldfish ponds and brightly painted play equipment, others tatty and neglected, cluttered with broken appliances and discarded furniture. It is an upwardly mobile street of nineteenth-century terraced cottages, where houseproud middle-class owners rub shoulders with less tidy and less affluent working-class occupiers. A gust of wind rattles the sash window and the draught makes Robyn shiver. She has not double-glazed the house in order to preserve its architectural integrity. Clutching herself, she skips to the door from rug to rug, like a Scottish country dancer, across the landing and into the bathroom, which has smaller windows and is warmer.)

The Sussex campus, with its tastefully harmonized buildings in the modernist-Palladian style, arranged in elegant perspective at the foot of the South Downs a few miles outside Brighton, was much admired by architects, but had a somewhat disorienting effect on the young people who came to study there. Toiling up the slope from Falmer railway station, you had the Kafkaesque sensation of walking into an endlessly deep stage set where apparently three-dimensional objects turned out to be painted flats, and reality receded as fast as you pursued it. Cut off from normal social intercourse with the adult world, relieved of inhibition by the ethos of the Permissive Society, the students were apt to run wild, indulging in promiscuous sex and experimenting with drugs, or else they turned melancholy mad. Robyn's generation, coming up to university in the early 1970s, immediately after the heroic period of student politics, were oppressed by a sense of belatedness. There were no significant rights left to demand, no taboos left to break. Student demonstrations developed an ugly edge of gratuitous violence. So did student parties. In this climate, shrewd and sensitive individuals with an instinct for self-preservation looked around for a partner

and pair-bonded. By living in what their parents called sin, they nailed their colours to the mast of youth revolt, while enjoying the security and mutual support of old-fashioned matrimony. Sussex, some long-haired, denim-clad veteran of the sixties complained, was looking more and more like a housing estate for first-time buyers. It was full of couples holding hands and plastic carrier bags that were as likely to contain laundry and groceries as books and revolutionary pamphlets. One of these couples consisted of Robyn and Charles. She had looked around, and chosen him. He was clever, personable, and, she thought, probably loyal (she had not been proved wrong). It was true that he had been educated at a public school, but he managed to disguise this handicap very well.

(Robyn, her white nightdress billowing round her hips, sits on the loo and pees, mentally rehearsing the plot of Mrs Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848). Rising from the toilet, she pulls the nightdress over her head and steps into the bath, not first pulling the chain of the toilet because that would affect the temperature of the water coming through the showerhead on the end of its flexible tube, with which she now hoses herself down. She palpates her breasts as she washes, checking for lumps. She steps from the bath, stretching for a towel in one of those ungainly, intimate postures so beloved of Impressionist painters and deplored by the feminist art historians Robyn admires. She is tall and womanly in shape, slender of waist, with smallish round breasts, heavier about the hips and buttocks.)

In their second year, Robyn and Charles moved off campus and set up house in a small flat in Brighton, commuting to the University by local train. Robyn took an active part in student politics. She ran successfully for the Vice-Presidency of the Student Union. She organized an all-night telephone counselling service for students in despair about their grades or love-lives. She spoke frequently in the Debating Society in favour of progressive

causes such as abortion, animal rights, sta-
nuclear disarmament. Charles led a me-
private life. He kept the flat tidy while
doing good works, and always had a cup
of soup ready for her when she returned home,
invariably triumphant. At the end of the first term of her
third year, Robyn resigned from all her commitments in
order to prepare for Finals. She and Charles worked hard
and, despite the fact that they were pursuing the same
course, without rivalry. In their Final Examinations, Robyn
obtained a First - her marks, she was unofficially informed,
were the highest ever achieved by a student in the School
of European Studies in its short history - and Charles an
extremely high Upper Second. Charles was not jealous. He
was used to living in the shade of Robyn's achievements.
And in any case his degree was good enough to earn him,
as Robyn's did for her, a Major State Studentship to do
postgraduate research. The idea of doing research and
pursuing an academic career was common ground to both
of them; indeed they had never considered any alternative.

They had got used to living in Brighton, and saw no
reason to uproot themselves, but one of their tutors took
them aside and said, 'Look, this place hasn't got a proper
research library, and it's not going to get one. Go to
Oxford.' He had seen the writing on the wall: after the
oil crisis of 1973 there wasn't going to be enough money to
keep all the universities enthusiastically created or expanded
in the booming sixties in the style to which they had become
accustomed. Not many people perceived this quite so soon.

(Robyn, a dressing-gown over her underclothes and
slippers on her feet, descends the short dark staircase to the
ground floor and goes into her narrow and extremely untidy
kitchen. She lights the gas stove, and makes herself a
breakfast of muesli, wholemeal toast and decaffeinated
coffee. She thinks about the structure of Disraeli's *Sybil*:
or, the *Two Nations* (1845), until the sound of the *Guardian*