

James Mellon

David Lodge and the Tradition of the Modern Novel

By J. Russell Perkin. Montreal and Kingston:
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Pp. xii, 225.



David Lodge is among the best-known and most highly respected contemporary British novelists, and admirers of his work will find Perkin's discussion of Lodge's work illuminating. Those unfamiliar with Lodge will probably find themselves inspired to find out what they have been missing and will check out works like *Changing Places*, *Author, Author* and *A Man of Parts*. Perkin approaches Lodge's body of work, which includes not only novels but criticism and plays, in an interesting manner — he looks at Lodge's work in the light of a number of writers who have particularly influenced that work in one way or another.

Perkin seeks out not only ways in which particular authors have influenced Lodge but, as well, ways in which Lodge has sought to distinguish himself and to find his own voice. Following an introduction, Perkin devotes a chapter to the influence of Graham Greene on the work of Lodge, an English Catholic writer who in works like *How Far Can You Go?* has dealt with the English Catholic post-World War II experience and with issues of religion, morality and sexuality. Aside from leading the

reader to ponder Lodge's work, this chapter is likely to lead anyone who has not already read it to seek out Greene's *The End of the Affair*. This is followed by a chapter on the influence of Joyce and his treatment of the Irish experience on Lodge. The subsequent chapter considers the relationship between Lodge's work and that of Kingsley Amis, who like Lodge excelled at the comic novel and novels about academic life. Just as one will be tempted to seek out not only Lodge's work but, as well, *The End of the Affair*, and Joyce's *Ulysses*, one also will feel the need, if one has not already read it, to examine Amis' *Lucky Jim*. The most obvious parallels in Lodge's work would be the trilogy of *Changing Places*, *Small World* and *Nice Work*. After this, Perkin proceeds to consider the relationship between Lodge and Henry James. Here, of course, aside from James' influence throughout the Lodge corpus, there is the case of Lodge's fictionalization of James' life in *Author, Author*. Lodge experienced one of the improbable risks of writing a novel about an historical figure in that his *Author, Author* came out almost contemporaneously with Colm Tóibín's *The Master*, also based on the life of Henry James. Again, one is tempted to go back, if one is not already familiar with James' work, and read *The Ambassadors*. Finally, Perkin considers the relationship between Lodge and Wells, not a writer arguably with a great influence on Lodge's work throughout his career but one whose life has provided the source for another fictional treatment of an historical figure in Lodge's *A Man of Parts*. One could debate whether similar attention could have been paid to the influence of Dickens or of Waugh.

Lodge is not only a novelist, but also a critic and for many years was an academic. As a working novelist and as an academic, he saw his work as part of a literary tradition. Perkin examines how both Lodge's practice of writing and his works of literary criticism reflect particular approaches to the novel itself. Lodge's *Author, Author* and *A Man of Parts* raise issues of the relation between biographical fiction and historical biography. Henry James had doubts about whether biographical or historical fiction could be pulled off successfully. James harboured reservations on the grounds that, while an author could incorporate all sorts of detail of incident, attire or custom, the con-

sciousness of characters of a particular time and place might still elude the author. Obviously, while Lodge is aware of James' doubts, he was not dissuaded from the attempt even in the case of James himself in *Author, Author*. Lodge deals, as well, with issues of realism, modernism and post-modernism. His early novels are realist in style but works like *The British Museum Is Falling Down* include elements of parody and *Changing Places* and his campus novels move away from realism toward stylized humour. Lodge also deals with the tension between the Henry James and H.G. Wells quite different senses of what the novel can or should be. For one, the novel should be written to be a sophisticated work of aesthetic elegance not compromised by other purpose, whether commercial or political, and for the other, the novel should be viewed as a means to stimulate discussion and to persuade the public not only to buy the book but to vote a certain way or to campaign for certain causes. Not only is the reader led to consider Lodge's work but, at the same time, to reconsider other writers and their work in relation to such issues.

Perkin succeeds in producing a book of literary criticism that is accessible to a general audience without compromising his message. Literature professors will find this book worthwhile but so will many general readers with some degree of familiarity with the work of David Lodge. My first exposure to Lodge was via a PBS broadcast of a program he hosted on the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. He seemed so interesting that, when he mentioned that he was a writer, I had to read some of his works. Having read Perkin's discussion, I look forward to reading more not only of Lodge's work but a number of the other books to which reference is made.