

Theory Meets Practice

BY RICK MARIN

Nice Work, by David Lodge
New York: Viking, 277 pages, \$18.95



In Britain, his name ranks high enough on the literary roll to have been shortlisted twice for the coveted Booker Prize. In the United States, David Lodge remains a well-kept secret. That should change with the publication of *Nice Work*, his eighth novel and the second (after 1984's *Small World*) of his Booker nominees. Widely reviewed and broadly praised since its publication here this summer—"a writer of profound funniness," said *The New Yorker*—*Nice Work* is the most accessible and resonant of recent Lodge books. It's also one of the fullest, fairest portraits of the place invariably referred to as "Thatcher's England" to emerge from that country's ritually disaffected contemporary fiction.

Lodge is an academic. He taught at the University of Birmingham from 1960 to 1987, holds the title of honorary professor

of modern English literature there, and has published four books of criticism. His two best works of fiction to date, *Changing Places* (1975) and *Small World*, mocked with ingenious wit goings-on in the international ivory tower. *Nice Work* shares the same campus home base, a modern "plate-glass" university in the fictional Midlands city of Rummidge, and some familiar characters. But it ventures an important step beyond, into the soot and grime of that antique genre, the Industrial Novel.

Vic Wilcox runs a factory that turns molten metal into the internal organs of heavy machinery (gearbox casings, engine components, and the like). He's short, thick-set, and muscularly aggressive—Bob Hoskins, if you were casting a movie version. From working-class stock, he's now rich enough to drive a

Jaguar. Middle age is wearing him down at home, with a wife gone to seed and kids he doesn't understand, but it energizes him at work, where he is indisputably in charge.

Robyn Penrose is everything Vic is not: highly educated, a feminist, tall. Robyn lectures in the English department of Rummidge's university. By order of a bureaucratic PR scheme linking industry and academe, she is appointed Vic Wilcox's "shadow." At first, both parties detest this unsolicited intrusion into their daily routines. At first. By Lodge's contrivance, their differences ultimately drive the two together. Robyn, a dedicated practitioner of all the newest techniques of poststructuralist literary surgery, specializes in women's studies and the 19th-century novel. She knows Dickens inside and out but has never been inside a factory. Her knowledge is all theory, virgin thoughts both repelled and excited when rubbed up against Vic's hard, sweaty industrial praxis.

To his immense surprise Vic finds himself unaccountably turned on by Robyn's feisty independence and virtuoso book learning. She teaches him the difference between metaphor and metonymy, and how to deconstruct a billboard cigarette ad. He shows her how to stare down a competitor. Their protracted courtship is a mutual education.

For us, too. Lodge has clearly done his research. Rummidge is an "imaginary city," he archly explains in a note at the beginning of the book, "which occupies, for the purposes of fiction, the space where Birmingham is to be found on maps of the so-called real world." He knows the town well and has taken pains to learn the smokestack side of it better. The tour Vic gives Robyn of his foundry is Dickensian in its detail, if not in attitude. For not only does Lodge (in Vic's voice and his own) argue that the factory workers aren't exploited, he makes the

TIM TEEBKEN

indiscreet assertion that they're actually suited to the job. Vic, for his part, takes pride in the tactile, tangible economy of his trade. "We *make* things," he says, during a tirade against London's paper financiers, "things that weren't there till we made 'em."

Readers not plugged in to the latest in lit crit will find themselves less clued out in *Nice Work* than in *Small World*, which is funny but not *as* funny to someone who hasn't read all the footnotes to "The Wasteland" or browsed through a recent issue of *Diacritics*. Lodge, the professor, is more conscientious about setting up his in-jokes this time out. The pointed prefatory and chapter-head quotations all come from the 19th-century novelists—Disraeli, Mrs. Gaskell, Charlotte Bronte—to whom this book is a wry 20th-century homage. Disraeli's *Sybil: or, The Two Nations* and Mrs. Gaskell's *North and South* explored the same fissures in British society, accidents of class and geography, that interest Lodge today. It would be unfair to give away *Nice Work*'s postmodern, self-referential twist, since the plot hangs on it. Suffice it to say that his fiction has a habit of mimicking the literature it describes.

None of which really gets across the book's biggest selling point, the reason it might be recommended by someone with no vested interest in French semiotic theory or the decline of heavy industry in Britain—its relentless use of humor. Full of jokes and cunning satire, Lodge's writing is so funny reviewers are forever championing the need to take him, in Anthony Burgess's words, "very seriously indeed." There are echoes of Evelyn Waugh and Kingsley Amis in Lodge's ear for social dialects—academic, posh, prole—and his talent for comic metaphor. (Not to mention his politics.) Robyn's intermittent boyfriend Charles, for instance, making fastidious love while "crouched studiously over her body, fingering it like a box of index cards."

Lodge, 54, is post-Amis's Young Man crowd, though some of his early books (like *Ginger You're Barmy*) affected an "angry" attitude. A major difference is that Vic Wilcox isn't as beleaguered by the modern world as an Amis antihero. He

relishes the struggle.

Robyn, and especially Vic, are intricately drawn characters, far more substantial than the fleet satirical sketches of Lodge's previous comedies. There's an irony here that isn't lost on the author. In an aside he notes that Robyn is, by virtue of her theoretical doctrine, "a character who, rather awkwardly for me, doesn't

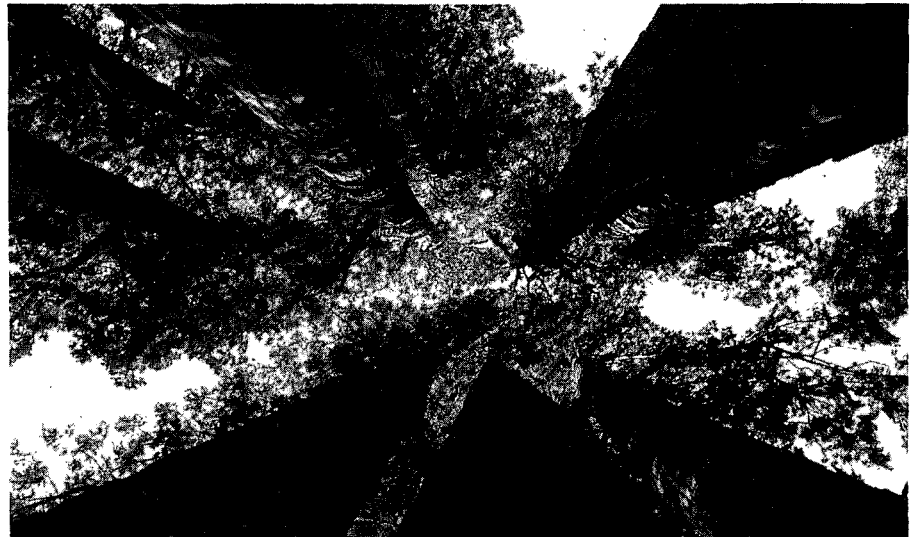
believe in the concept of a character." Neither should Lodge, whose clever-clever "metafiction" is all but eclipsed by this novel's old-fashioned realism and old-fashioned subject. Nice work it is, the best so far of a quietly brilliant career.

Rick Marin is television critic for the Washington Times.

Roots of Environmentalism

BY WILLIAM C. DENNIS

Ecology in the 20th Century: A History, by Anna Bramwell
New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 292 pages, \$40.00/\$16.95



In Anna Bramwell's *Ecology in the 20th Century: A History* we may detect a new development in ecological writing. Here we have a fascinating account of the intellectual roots of modern political ecologism in Germany, England, and (to a lesser extent) North America. Though sympathetic with the ecological spirit, Bramwell is nevertheless fiercely critical of much of the history and current intellectual presumptions of the ecological movement. Some years ago, this reviewer wrote a little essay cataloguing the rather strange collection of people who had been early proponents of wilderness preservation in the United States, among whom were militarists, racists, scientific planners, urban elitists, proponents of the "masculine" virtues, and hunters seeking more game to slaughter. Little did he real-

ize that a broader, more detailed look at the history of the development of the idea of ecology would produce an even more complex and sometimes bizarre collection of advocates.

Bramwell defines as her subject an ecological political consciousness based on the fusion of resource-scarcity economics and holistic theology that, she argues, began to develop in northern Europe in the mid-19th century. Though political ecology, or environmentalism, shares a common origin with the science of ecology, this book is a study of political thought and action, not a history of science. The intellectual strains of this movement were diverse indeed, including at one time or another Tories and other conservatives, communards, communists, anarchists, Georgists, advocates