

Your Time Starts Now:

Questioning what's real in David Lodge's Birmingham

by Lorelei Mathias

QUESTION 3.b): "Rummidge is not Birmingham, though it owes something to popular prejudices about that city",¹ David Lodge. Discuss.

Seven years ago, almost to the day. It was the middle of the afternoon, and the sun was just poking its head out over the green campus quadrangle. Inside Avanti, the half-empty campus diner, two people were perched high on stools, picking at cups of murky orange soup. One, a bespectacled middle-aged man named Don, turned to the other, a shy and awe-inspired girl of nineteen, and asked:

"Have you ever read any David Lodge?"

And that was my first whiff of Rummidge. In Edgbaston, just a year into my university education, sitting with Don Hughes – who was and still is one of Random House

Publishers' friendliest sales reps. Rummidge, as Don went on to explain, is an intriguing comic world created by David Lodge. Rummidge University in particular, is the main backdrop for the trilogy of "campus novels", *Changing Places*, *Small World* and *Nice Work*, written between 1969 and 1989. In all these novels Rummidge is a version of Birmingham; a character in itself, born out of Lodge's learned satire. There is Birmingham, which belongs on the geographical map of England – in the belly of Britain, just past the perplexing spaghetti junction and Cadbury World. And then there is Rummidge, which resides firmly on the literary map of Lodge's comic imagination. But what do the two really have to do with each other?

Back in 1999, over lukewarm soup with Don, I had little idea of the significance I would later attach to Rummidge and its creator. Seven years ago, like most people in the last year of their teens, I didn't really know where I was going; what I wanted to do with my life. But I knew I loved reading, writing, and well, Birmingham – although as Lodge knows better than anyone, the latter is a statement that many people find hard to digest. The reason I was sitting there with Don was that I was at the mercy of an experimental scheme called the "Student Brand Manager" programme. This was a strange breed of pseudo-internship which entailed more free books landing on my doorstep than I could ever hope to find readers for, followed by a relentless stream of postcards, cardboard pig cut outs, branded t-shirts, Noddy Holder masks and Captain Pugwash tattoos. Lamentably, many of these items lived their greatest years as house party decorations and dressing up materials, and not all of them found their way out of my filthy and almost certainly haunted cellar. But for those that did, the idea was that I, along with twelve other students around the country, would go forth and create a Marketing Buzz for Random House titles. Out of all this bedlam, for me, two things eventually grew: a career in writing ads for books, and a love for the novels of David Lodge.

That day in the diner was only my second "Meet Your RH Sales Rep" session, so there was plenty for me and Don to talk

about. When he went on to suggest that I arrange a launch event for *Home Truths* – the new novella by this already renowned local author – I agreed enthusiastically. Then, after weeks of frantic planning, I met David Lodge in the overcrowded and over-heated Arts Faculty Senior Common Room, where he talked and read from *Home Truths*. The event took place in the same SCR from where he had recently retired after decades of academia, and also the same SCR where much of the action in the Rummidge trilogy took place. After that day, I read as many of his novels as I could.

I soon found that I could not enter a Rummidge novel without first being confronted by one of Lodge's disclaimers: "Perhaps I should explain, for the benefit of readers who have not been here before, that 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 the so-called real world".² As he also explains in a later critical work, the two places differ in various ways: "Rummidge is more dourly provincial ... The University of Rummidge ... is a much smaller and much dimmer place", and, "its undistinguished English Department could not conceivably be confused with this large and flourishing school of English ... in which I have had the privilege of working for most of my professional life".³ Similarly, Rummidge's town centre has an extreme kind of grimness about it which in fairness, now seems exaggerated. Think of the kind of muddy brown cityscape you're used to seeing on "The Office". Imagine Brent-ville; the soul-destroying trading estate and its perpetually grey environs, and you're starting to get the picture.

Despite these differences, I can't help finding that the campus descriptions have an undeniable likeness to my memories of the real Birmingham. There is a passage in *Small World* which, although it is told from the voyeuristic perspective of the character Philip Swallow, still conjures up the essence of a balmy summer term at Birmingham. Philip gazes out of his office window, at the sun which "blazed down from a cloudless sky on the library steps and the grass quadrangle". He

watches the girls in their summer dresses, “strewn all over the lawns”, while the boys lounged in clusters around them, “skimming frisbees ... eyeing the girls”. He watches as the young students sun themselves and wrestle playfully, “in a thinly disguised mime of copulation ...”. And he admires the way “the compulsion of spring had laid its irresistible spell upon these young bodies...”⁴

Of course we did *some* work. But as everyone knows, there is a world of amusement to be had in between all the academia; in those times when the “books and ring-binders lay neglected on the greensward”. University, as well as a time for expanding the mind and stuffing your head full of specialist knowledge, is also a time of discovery, of chasing the spark of new relationships, forming new friendships; of following dreams even as they are still forming. Philip was right; in those days it really was like a “spell” had been cast in the air.

Speaking in Jane Austen’s *Emma*, Mrs Elton pontificates, “One has no great hopes from Birmingham. I always say there is something direful in the sound”. Negative perceptions of Birmingham like this still abound today; and as Lodge admits in his author’s note, Rummidge owes something to these prejudices. In the opening to *Small World*, he describes how the academic staff, having arrived in Rummidge for a conference, “glumly unpacked their suitcases” in their study-bedrooms. He describes how they surveyed the “stained and broken furniture”, the, “cracked and pitted walls”, and the many fade mark patterns which were the tell-tale signs of “posters hurriedly removed by their youthful owners at the commencement of the Easter vacation”. Disappointedly, they tested the springs of the narrow single beds which, “sagged dejectedly in the middle, deprived of all resilience by the battering of a decade’s horseplay and copulation ...”⁵

The intention may be to caricature Birmingham through the dour grimness of Rummidge. However, what may seem to be a dilapidated Martineau Hall from the perspective of the characters, instead reads to me like a mirror image of the real Mason Hall of Residence on which it is based, and where I spent my first year in Birmingham. What this passage really

projects is a sense of who passed through this room before the academics, before Lodge. Who plastered the walls with pin-ups and then had to hastily rip them down again? Who made the springs in the bed sag, and how? Between the lines, there is an almost nostalgic portrayal of the joyful shabbiness of student life. The wanton bliss we all took in the idea of “roughing it”, all the time knowing (or hoping) that it was only temporary. Student days are the only days when living in freezing, squalid conditions can have a sense of fun about them. The party continued even when in our second year, we upgraded from Mason to a tiny, mould-riddled house in the student vacuum that was affectionately dubbed Smelly Oak.

What begins with Lodge taking a gentle jibe at Birmingham being rough around the edges, ends up being a nod towards the more universal student experience, to which students from any major city would relate. As is the case with most large university towns, there is a striking disparity between Birmingham city centre and the more sheltered campus life, tucked safely away in suburban Edgbaston. But the two worlds are never more intertwined than they are in Lodge’s campus trilogy, which has at its heart exactly this polarity between academia and the so-called “real world”.

Recently I went back there to see how much had changed, and to go in search of Lodge’s own writings on the matter of Rummidge vs. Birmingham. Six years on, sitting once again in the musty but homely third floor of the university library, I put down my chewed *Bic* Biro and browsed the shelves of the English Literature section. I scanned the non-fiction shelves for Lodge’s many works of literary criticism, then leafed through the dozens of best-selling novels by the same hand. After a while I began to realise I wasn’t going to find what I was looking for on any of these shelves. Nice though it was to be back, I wasn’t that awe-inspired, bookish student anymore – I realised I wasn’t going to find the answer to this question on a page.

“You could never call it elegant or beautiful. It never will be”, Lodge said, after agreeing to meet me again. “It simply doesn’t have the cultural riches and architectural interest of

London, and for a second city it has always seemed a little impoverished". Despite being born and bred in South London, Lodge has now lived in Birmingham longer than any other city. And although he'll never feel quite like a native, he told me he certainly has no wish to move, and now thinks of himself as a kind of "adopted Brummie", having written about it so often in a "fictional disguise". As any Brummie knows, (whether you're a native or just a dishevelled student passing through) there are many secret charms to Britain's second city. And, even as most balti-swigging students eventually evolve into more refined human beings, so "Brum" has also improved itself drastically in the thirty years since Rummidge was conceived.

As Lodge observes, there is always much to do there; "more than most people have time for", and you can easily afford a more civilised quality of life than you'd manage in London. The last ten years in particular have seen huge improvements to the city centre – Lodge highlights the Centenary Square development as the most significant, in creating a central public attraction for the city's people to visit.

Lodge once noted that Mrs Elton is notorious for being one of Austen's most obnoxious characters, so much so that we ought to take anything she says with a sprinkling of salt. But there's other ways to see that she is wrong. Go and wander along the meandering canals in the city centre. Stroll into Brindley Place, with its water-side culture of cafés, theatres and art galleries. Drop in to the new Mail Box and Bull Ring shopping centres. Or take any bus down the Bristol Road and go to the green campus quadrangle. Stand under "Old Joe" – the University clock tower – on a sunny day, and listen to him chime.

Legend has it that some undergraduates applied to study at Birmingham as a result of having watched the television adaptation of *Nice Work*. Maybe they were furnishing a hope that they might be taught by a lecturer like Dr. Robyn Penrose, the inspirational heroine of the novel. Or perhaps they were pleasantly surprised by the scenery, as I was on my first visit; seeing what the characters Robyn and Vic in *Nice Work* see

when they gaze out of Robyn's office window:

"The students in their summer finery were scattered like petals over the green lawns, reading, talking, necking, or listening to their discoursing teachers. The sun shone upon the façade of the library, whose glazed revolving doors flashed intermittently like the beams of a lighthouse as it fanned readers in and out, and shone upon the buildings of diverse shapes and sizes ... It shone on the botanical gardens, and on the sports centre and the playing fields and the running track ... It shone on the Great Hall where the university orchestra and choir were due to perform ... and on the Student Union with its Council Chamber and newspaper offices, and on the art gallery ... It seemed to Robyn more than ever that the University was the ideal type of a human community, where work and play, culture and nature, were in perfect harmony."⁶

Written over thirteen years earlier about fictional Rummidge, this affectionate eulogy seemed even more poignant when Professor Lodge chose to read it out on our graduation day in 2001. As it happened, he was being crowned Doctor of Letters on the same day, having been involved with the University ever since his academic career began there in 1960. His words served then – as they do now – as a stirring snapshot in time. There we were in the *real* Great Hall – elegantly gowned, and praying inwardly that we wouldn't trip up in our heels on the grand staircase when our time came. Sitting listening to Lodge's fictional portrayal of that time and place, nostalgia binding us to his every word, suddenly the similarity between Rummidge and Birmingham was uncanny.

But times change. Lodge isn't writing about Rummidge any more – he's moved on, along with the rest of us. His latest academic novel *Thinks* ... is set in the University of Gloucester. His hair is a little thinner than when I first met him. I'm not quite so scared of my own shadow as I was then. And the university itself feels different today from the one I

knew five years ago. The computer revolution is the first big change to hit you when you're back on campus – you can't go ten yards without bumping into a Cyber Cluster of some sort. And, after three years of working for Lodge's publishers, I'm now also heading somewhere pretty different.

But it's nice to think that, somehow, Lodge's Rummidge helped me to find some direction, helped me to decide what I wanted to do. Or was it Birmingham? Either way, my memories of life at university, and the years beyond have all been enriched by Lodge's writing. Rummidge, although an imaginary world, was rooted topographically in the reality in which my own three-year adventure was set. So much so that it must now be difficult for any Birmingham alumni not to mistake one for the other. As Lodge admits in an article written ten years after the last page of *Nice Work*, "The membrane between fact and fiction, between 'Birmingham' and 'Rummidge' has undoubtedly become thinner and more transparent with the passing of time".⁷ For me, looking back, the membrane is barely there at all.

Notes

- 1 David Lodge, *Small World*, author's note (London: Secker & Warburg, 1984).
- 2 David Lodge, *Nice Work*, author's note (London: Secker & Warburg, 1984).
- 3 David Lodge, "Fact and Fiction in the Novel", in *The Practice of Writing* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1996), p 34.
- 4 David Lodge, *Small World* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1984), p 158.
- 5 David Lodge, *Small World* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1984), p 3.
- 6 David Lodge, *Nice Work* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1984), p 249.
- 7 David Lodge, "Fact and Fiction in the Novel", in *The Practice of Writing* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1996), p 34.