

Inner Resources



By Ruth Latta

David Lodge's novel, *Deaf Sentence* (Penguin, 978-0-141-03570-4, \$17, pb) was recommended to me by an eighty-eight-year-old friend who wears hearing aids. "In a humorous way," she said, "he shows what hard-of-hearing people like myself are up against. *Deaf Sentences* centres around Desmond Bates, a former linguistics professor who retired early because of deteriorating hearing. As the novel opens, Desmond is at a party, pretending he can hear the pretty young woman who is talking to him. Although his state-of-the-art hearing aid damps down background noise, he still cannot hear her properly, but he fakes it. In saying, "Yes" and "Absolutely," he unwittingly commits to supervising her doctoral thesis.

Desmond attends a lip-reading class, which he finds childish but necessary. He worries about his 89-year-old father who won't wear a hearing aid and lives alone. Trying to think positively, Desmond remembers great men like Beethoven, whose *Pastoral Symphony* is "an evocation of sounds" that the composer hadn't heard in a decade. "Did Goya, I wonder, think he owed his greatness as an artist to his deafness?" Desmond muses.

Desmond's frustrations with hearing loss are drawn from David Lodge's experience. Now 74, Lodge was born to working class parents in London, U.K. He grew up during World War II, served in the military, and studied English literature. After a distinguished career as a scholar and novelist, he retired to write full time in 1987, and was made an Honorary Professor of Modern English Literature at Birmingham University (U.K.). Among his books on literary theory are two, *The Art of Fiction* (1992) and *The Practice of Writing* (1996) which are of immense interest to would-be novelists.

Lodge is famous for humorous novels in academic settings. His best-known is *Changing Places* (1975) a prizewinning tale about two frisky professors, one American, one British, on an exchange program. The same fictional locales appear in several of his books. He created a fictional English city named "Rummidge," modelled on Birmingham, and the imaginary U.S. state of Euphoria, situated between "North California" and "South California."

More recently, Lodge has been exploring themes related to aging. In *Thinks* (2001), a middle-aged bereaved novelist, Helen, accepts a position as writer-in-residence at a university, where she refuses to face her suspicions about her late husband, and falls into the arms of a predatory professor.

In *Therapy* (1995), Lodge drew on his own experience as a successful playwright and screenwriter to create a fictional middle-aged sit-com writer, Tubby Passmore, who is depressed. While trying various contemporary cures, Tubby thinks back to his teen years, remembers someone important to him, and dares to revisit the past.

Thinks, *Therapy* and *Deaf Sentence* show older adults drawing upon their inner resources and moving from confusion to clarity. While novels are not intended as self-help books, a story can provide insights as to how (and how not) to cope with life's challenges. I'm grateful to my elderly friend for introducing me to *Deaf Sentences*, and plan to read more of Lodge's work.

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