



Nice Work

"A funny, intelligent, superbly paced social comedy"
—THE NEW YORK TIMES

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When Vic Wilcox, MD of Pringle's engineering works, meets English lecturer Dr Robyn Penrose, sparks fly as their lifestyles and ideologies collide head on. But, in time, both parties make some surprising discoveries about each other's worlds - and about themselves.

Nice Work Details

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Carmen says

The last in what is loosely termed "The Campus Trilogy" by David Lodge. The books are only distantly linked, it's nice to read them in order but not strictly necessary, and each can stand on its own two feet, I believe.

This time we follow two very different characters. Robyn is an idealist: a feminist professor of literature, in a non-relationship with her long-time partner, Charles. Vic is a man's man: a managing director of a factory, macho, hard-working, a laborer who has money because he's in management. He's married with three kids and drives a company car. They meet in a fiery clash of wills.

Robyn's University signs her up for a shadow program - once a week she travels to the factory as Vic's shadow. She follows him everywhere and watches him work. They immediately get into numerous arguments about work, wages, unions, strikes, working conditions, and labor laws. At first put off by her staunch, loud, in-your-face feminism, Vic slowly finds himself increasingly charmed by her intelligence, courage, brashness, and independence.

For her part, Robyn is receiving a crash course on 'the real world', away from the vaulted towers of intellectualism. She learns some hard lessons about industry and cutting corners and looking at the big picture. In turn, Vic is learning to value the individual, and see that justice and learning are valuable things.

This isn't some sappy romance. Even though Vic and Robyn start falling for one another, they are real people with real lives and real problems. Vic is married, Robyn is with Charles in an 'open' relationship that isn't so open since they're both only seeing each other. Both characters have to struggle with having their worldview altered, and have to go through the pain of rethinking long-held beliefs.

Not only do they share viewpoints, looking at the world through each other's eyes, but they also (by the end of the novel) switch financial statuses.

I really like how Lodge treated his characters, making them stubborn and vulnerable. Neither was anywhere close to perfect, and seeing their small drama played out was very realistic and touching. No Mary Sues, Gary Stus or pat endings here.

This is also a comedy, of sorts. While this is not nearly as funny as some other books by Lodge, this book has a kind of lighthearted tone that makes it easier to read than if Lodge were preaching to us.

NICE WORK is still Lodge's best novel and the one you should read if you have to choose one.

Jan-Maat says

In NICE WORK David Lodge introduces the campus novel to the 19th century industrial novel.

The excuse for this unnatural pairing is a work exchange scheme and true to the late 1980s setting the basic assumption is the Lecturer from a thinly disguised Birmingham University English department has plenty to

learn from industry, while the opposite, not not never, could be so. Lust, however, intervenes to shake up all the best laid plans of mice and men...

Background splashes of colour from the industrial setting make an interesting contrast with 19th century industrial novels like North and South or Hard Times. Here that earlier boundless self confidence has been replaced by a rearguard action fought against seemingly inevitable industrial decline. Ah, actually due to the almost divine intervention of Melvin Bragg. I had a thought about this. To wit the 19th century took notice of the emergence of industrial Britain and novelists including a Bronte, Gaskell, Dickens, among others sought to explain it and give warning (view spoiler) to the rest of the country dozing in its rural idle watching herds of yokels fumble with steam machinery.

Lodge, true professor of English literature that he was, applied *North and South* to the boundless faith of the Thatcher era in entrepreneurship in the face of the realities which determined the experience of asset stripping and being out performed on a quality basis by more or less everyone. On which basis it amuses me here that the male main character - or hero- drives a Jaguar, a former boss of mine did too, it would be an exaggeration to say that his car was constantly broken down, seen plainly it was occasional sufficiently functional for him to be able to drive it to the nearest garage. It gave every indication of consuming replacement parts as I do bread, except with slightly less mercy.

The lead female character - or heroine is a southerner, she functions as his muse or perhaps Athena to his Odysseys, she is certainly to read as divine in her beauty and temper, this is however a literary joke since her narrative function is to be the Deus ex machina (view spoiler) in a 'realistic' ie believable way in a modern novel by virtue of an inheritance which as a good God out of the machine should saves the day for British industry and allows for the revival of fictionalised industrial Birmingham.

Cunning reworking of Lizzie Gaskell's novel with added literary jokes and a university. But rather like the Borges story of the man who rewrote Don Quixote dragging *North and South* into the late 20th century casts a grim light on the Thatcher era, while Gaskell felt that romance could unite the country and love lead to mutual respect and understanding, Lodge offers divine intervention as the only hope for manufacturing revival putting me in mind of the Phoenix consortium - although that came much later.

Hannah says

This book, as its been said by many, is a brilliant piece of social commentary. What is less often said is that it follows in the tradition of many a great title - Mrs Gaskell's Mary Barton and North and South, , Forster's Howards End, Charlotte Bronte's Shirley and Dicken's Hard Times to name a few - as a "Condition of England Novel" (you can read more on that here: <http://www.victorianweb.org/genre/din...>). The titles I mention are studied by Robyn Penrose in novel, herself an expert in the Condition of England genre. (Note 'Howard's End' in particular, for 'Nice Work' is often considered a modernisation of the text - the similarities having read both are endless).

I read this book as part of my studies on the Condition of England Novel, and if I'd seen it in a bookshop I doubt I'd have picked it up. All the worse for me. Its a very interesting book written at a very turbulent time in British industry and education. I would recommend some background reading on the Thatcher period if you draw a blank on the subject, otherwise the book itself would be sufficient. The interactions between Robyn Penrose and Vic Wilcox, their relationship, and each on their own, are fascinating characters who struggle to see eye-to-eye, and it is the challenge that presents that makes them so drawn to each other. I also

enjoy the sojourns into each characters little world. If I'm honest, I am much more sympathetic to Robyn - that may be because she's female and has similar values to mine, but ultimately I think its because we come from the same 'cultured' world of academia. I, like her, have no real experience of industry aside from growing up in a mining town and seeing the affects that can have on a community.

My only criticism of the book is its ending. As with all Condition of England novels, their is no real solution. As Robyn herself says:

"In short, all the Victorian novelist could offer as a solution to the problem of industrial capitalism were: a legacy, a marriage, emigration or death."

Its the get-out solution; Robyn got her legacy (and a shot at emigration). I'm not quite sure what Vic got, but his marriage seemingly improved.

Guenevere says

Smart book. Very clever. Lots of moments of, 'ooooooh, I see what you did there!' Wildly feminist professor meets traditionalist industrial business man via crazy shadow scheme in time of state budget cuts and overall economic downturn. Riddled with literary references and social critique focused on academic life, industry, and business practices it also includes clever commentary on gender roles and family dynamics.

Manny says

In this witty novel, Lodge engineers a confrontation between Robyn, a young, left-wing female literary theorist, and Vic, an older, conservative, senior manager type. There's a government initiative where Robyn is supposed to "shadow" Vic one day a week, an arrangement that initially neither of them can stand. Each of them thinks the other's world is absurd and pointless. I liked the book partly because I have also spent my professional life flitting between industry and academia. I can absolutely understand Vic's criticisms of academics. They're helplessly disorganised; most of what they do makes no sense and is just empty posturing; they're trapped in a rigid power structure, where the people in charge are mostly tenured professors whose minds atrophied long ago; and why are they inflicting all this pain on themselves anyway, when there's no money to be made? But Robyn's criticisms of the business world also make sense. They're equally trapped by the constant requirement to turn a profit, so they never have time to reflect on whether things could be different. Ultimately, what they do makes no more sense than academia.

It's amusing to see each character's life through the other's eyes, and I particularly liked the ironic presentation of Robyn's feminist views on sex and relationships. (She can explain to you, with footnotes from Lacan, why "love" is just a bourgeois construct, and she thinks penetrative sex is wrong on theoretical grounds). But the passages that have most firmly struck in my memory have to do with literary theory. Lodge just adores literary theory, and he is so ingenious about working bits of it into his novels so that you can also appreciate what a fun game it is. There's a discussion near the end about the technical concept of "aporia". Robyn is explaining it to Vic, and she quotes the following line from Tennyson's *Locksley Hall*:

Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change.

As she says, the line brilliantly exploits the novel image provided by railways, which had just been invented. (Stevenson's "Rocket" was built in 1829; Tennyson wrote the poem in 1835). But there's a problem. Trains don't run in grooves, but on rails, so the image is fatally flawed. Despite this, it's *still* a great line! Robyn has

clearly used the example many times before in academic settings. But Vic asks whether Tennyson might not have been thinking of trams, which do run in grooves? Hm! That hadn't occurred to her.

I thought of this discussion the other day when we watched *Despicable Me*. My favourite scene was the one where Gru, the supervillain with the well-hidden heart of gold, has been persuaded to read *Sleepy Kittens* to the three little orphan girls. The text, presented in its entirety, is purposely constructed to be as idiotic and saccharine-sweet as possible. Gru starts reading:

Three little kittens loved to play
They had fun in the sun all day

"This is GARBAGE!" growls the supervillain. "You LIKE reading this?" It is garbage. But the film shows you how the little girls see it, and for them it's the story they've had read to them every day at bedtime. They view it uncritically, and for them it's full of love and comfort. Gru unwillingly continues to read, stroking the kittens' fur and making them drink their milk as instructed, and by the end he's been won over. Even so, it's still garbage.

Is this another example of aporia? Damned if I know: my knowledge of literary theory is pretty much limited to what I've gleaned from David Lodge novels. But I wished Robyn and Vic had been sitting next to us, so I could have listened to them bickering about it on the way out.

Jacquelynn Luben says

I read *Nice Work* before, a long time ago, but I still found that the humour tickled me on the first couple of pages: the wife's bedside reading – Enjoy your Menopause – and her pride in her en suite are two gems. I loved the fact that one of the loos was avocado – a joke that was possibly lost on me, twenty years ago.

Nice Work is an intelligently written novel, the conflict between the two main protagonists being a sort of representation of right and left politics of the UK. But Robyn and Vic don't fit so precisely into those roles, for as time passes, you see more subtlety in their personalities. Vic wants to run his own business and create his own products, rather than being MD of a company, and Robyn begins to see the flaws in some of her own arguments, and to realise also how very privileged she is to be in academia – in fact how very privileged are the academics with, at that time, their security of tenure in the universities. There are some nods to Postmodernism and Modernism and literary criticism. I found that interesting, since I studied the former two briefly as a module in my degree course about ten years ago. I have to admit, though, to having failed to comprehend some of these references totally, though I don't think that mattered too much.

There were interesting parallels to be drawn with today's student protests, and Robyn's dream of the university being opened up to everyone reminded me of a scene in *A Very Peculiar Practice* – a TV drama probably from same era. When I completed my modular degree, at the Department of Continuing Education in a local university, I felt that it had achieved that dream, but I suspect this is not the case, any longer.

I did feel it was a clever and enjoyable novel, with lots of ideas contained in it, that made you think carefully about these conflicts, and lots of humour too. Just at the end, I thought the prose deteriorated a little, almost as if the author was impatient to be finished now that he had exhausted the ideas, and was eager to wrap up the story, which he did by some very tidy tying up of loose ends. Perhaps a fraction too tidy.

K says

Don't take my four stars as a wide endorsement -- I recognize that not everyone would enjoy this as much as I did (especially with the tiny print -- I really am getting old). But I'll tell you about the book, and about why I appreciated it.

I've now read a few novels which would fall into a category I recently discovered -- a "novel of ideas." My sense of these novels is that plot, and certainly characterization, unfortunately tend to be secondary to setting up debates between characters representing particular viewpoints and having the two sides hash it out. I enjoy debates and ideas as much as the next person and probably more than some, but they're not what I read a novel for. I'm not opposed to including them as long as plot and characterization are done well. That has not been the case in most of the "novels of ideas" I've read.

This book was an exception. This was actually a story(!) about a struggling temporary professor who ends up shadowing a factory manager, each of whom had their own layered personality and set of circumstances, and about the complicated relationship which develops between them. Yes -- there was a focus on the relative merits and demerits of academia versus industry, a topic frequently debated by the central characters. At the same time, I never felt like I was reading a polemic rather than a novel. And unlike many other novels of ideas I've read, the debates were actually interesting and engaging in their own right rather than feeling like a boring-ish distraction from a non-existent story.

It's probably not the easiest book to get into, and it was written in the 80s which makes it a bit dated and quaint. But I ended up enjoying it, and I think others might as well.

Richard Derus says

Rating: one disgusted star of five

The Publisher Says: Vic Wilcox, a self-made man and managing director of an engineering firm, has little regard for academics, and even less for feminists. So when Robyn Penrose, a trendy leftist teacher, is assigned to "shadow" Vic under a government program created to foster mutual understanding between town and gown, the hilarious collusion of lifestyles and ideologies that ensues seems unlikely to foster anything besides mutual antipathy. But in the course of a bumpy year, both parties make some surprising discoveries about each other's worlds--and about themselves.

My Review: Annoying git meets termagant. They hate each other, they...oh what's the difference, everyone knows what happens, and frankly who the hell cares? I detested this book, I thought the author's pseudo-arch (how's that for a horrid combination?) faux Firbank twaddle was the literary equivalent of thorazine.

Do not purchase. If given as a gift, get the fireplace tongs and remove it from your living environment. DO NOT BURN as the miasma could prove lethal to small children.

Not recommended.

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Alex says

The cap to David Lodge's Campus Trilogy is neither as neat nor as funny as its predecessors, but *Nice Work* is not without its enticements. The melding of the Rummidge University with its grey industrial heart is a firm idea, and Lodge handles matters of class differences astutely.

The two lead characters are sympathetic in their own separate ways and are justifiably drawn together, and Lodge foreshadows their conclusions without being obnoxious about it. Probably the most interesting point that Lodge has to make is that neither of his leads approaches issues of immigration and race from the "right" angle, each condescending in their own separate ways. Lodge refuses to provide real answers for these character's prejudices and shows that even good intentions can be demeaning in their own way.

However, as a result we end up with a book that is more nice than it is sharp, whose ending is swathed in a blanket of possibly baseless hope rather than the harsh reality that had loomed over it from the start.

Vanya says

I started to read this book rather accidentally. I found it in one of my university departments and having read the back cover, I didn't expect much from the book, but I gave it a try. And it was absolutely worth it.

The story revolves around two completely different people, who at first don't enjoy each other's company, but as the story unfolds they get along quite well and realize that they have much to learn from each other. There is not much action in this novel. Lodge concentrates on describing these two protagonists and later their relationship. I really enjoyed this thorough description. I haven't read many books like *Nice Work* so it turned out to be quite amusing.

Another thing I want to mention is the British style of narrating and the outstanding humor. For me as a non-English speaker, it was an opportunity to plunge in the British atmosphere.

Mark says

Funny, moving and, in the long run, feel good. Vic Wilcox a workaholic managing director of a small engineering firm who is opinionated, dismissive and seeking to be upwardly mobile for the sake of his wife ends up sharing his Wednesdays with a 'shadow' from the local University on a project to get business and university inter-relating. (A tad prophetic Mr Lodge). The shadow in question is a self-opinionated, elitist snob called Robyn Penrose who specializes in English literature but especially women studies. The stage is set but rather than it being a tired rehash of archetypes and obvious clashes this is a clever challenge; Well it was to me. It made me stop mid sigh or eyebrow raise at something one or other of them was saying when you suddenly start hearing them thinking or questioning themselves and then I found myself thinking oh actually you have a point or I found I began to warm to them as Lodge has created two really attractive personalities. A man and a woman with faults and frailties who came across as genuine seekers after the right thing to say and do. There were all sorts of issues raised; amongst them, the elitist use of language and concept, the blind alley of aggressive posturing in disputes, the need for continual exploration of

relationships, especially those we think we have sorted. I really enjoyed this novel. Funny, thought provoking and oddly topical even though written almost 25 years ago

Jenny says

Reading this book reminded me of studying French Literature in college in the mid 1980s. The literary theory reminds me of those courses -- particularly deconstructing modern poetry and reading 19th century French novels. The descriptions of the manufacturing plant and Vic's behavior remind me of my chemical engineering classes -- I remember researching something for a project in mining journals and finding every volume full of advertisements for machinery featuring large rocks with scantily clad women leaning against them. Now, since these were technical journals with peer reviewed articles, the young women wore shorts and plaid tops tied to show off bare midriffs rather than underwear but they would have fit in well at the trade show in Frankfurt in the book.

I can see how these aspects of the book could seem dated. However the relationship that develops between two very different people and changes them both is a timeless theme and is well done here. Although both Robyn and Vic change, the change is gradual, not sudden or out of character. Each also remains true to themselves in the end as well which made the book more realistic to me.

Arax Miltiadous says

σχεδ?ν 4*, ?λα δικ? του και χαλ?λι του εφ?σον με ?κανε να γελ?σω και μου ?φτιαξε αισθητ? την δι?θεση, ?τσι σαν καλοκα?ρι.

Ωρα?ο, καλογραμμ?νο αν?γνωσμα, εμβαθ?νει ρηχ?ς σκ?ψεις εν? απλοποιε? τις βαθ?τερες.

Εμποτισμ?νο με σ?τιρα και μπ?λικο χιο?μορ πραγματικ? ρ?ει υπ?ροχα!

Αν το βρε?τε κ?που αρπ?ξτε το (τ?ρα που τα λ?με βασικ?, και το οποιοδ?ποτε του ?διου καθ?τι αξ?ζει πραγματικ? να διαβαστε?) μιας και εφ?σον, στα ελληνικ? τουλ?χιστον, ?χουν μεταφραστε? απ? την Bell και ε?ναι ?λα εξαντλημ?να.

Callie says

This book changed the way I thought about people in industry vs. academia. Definitely worth a read. Plus it's really funny.

Mariann says

<http://www.hyperebaaktiivne.ee/2018/0...>

1986, Rummidge. On tööstusaasta ning kellelgi tuleb hiilgav idee saata mõni ülikooli töötajatest kohalikku tehasesse töövarjuks. Valituks osutus Robyn, noor neiu, kes on ajutiselt tööl, kuid ihkab kogu hingest püsivat õppejõu kohta. Naine loodab, et hea käitumine toob talle Philip Swallow silmis plusspunkte. Varjutatavaks on Vic Wilcox, Pringle'si tegevdirektor. Kuigi Robyn on spetsialiseerunud industriaalromaanile, šokeerib tehasekeskond teda ning naine üritab sekkuda, põhjustades tööliste streigi. Tal õnnestub olukord lahendada, kuid on selge, et suhted Viciga jäavat keerulisteks. Muidugi ilmub raamatus välja ka Morris Zapp.

"Väärt töö" pakkus mulle kolmest raamatust kõige vähem huvi. Pidin end sundima, et teos ometi läbi saaks. Esiteks, jäid kaugeks käsitletud teemad ning teiseks, ei meeldinud mulle tegelased ega tegevusliin. Siiski suutis lõpplahendus mind positiivselt üllatada.

Soovitan raamatuid neile, keda huvitab eelmise sajandi lõpu akadeemiline maailm. Minu jaoks jäi küll enamik käsitletud teemasid kaugeteks ning raske oli süveneda, kuid silmaringi laiendamise mõttes oli igati vahva lugemine ja mõnest naljast sain ikka aru ka.
