



How Far Can You Go?

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David Lodge looks at the effect of the permissive society on the wider Catholic Church during the 50s, 60s and 70s. The novel centres on the lives of Polly, Dennis, Adrian and Angela as they comically come to terms with changing mores and their beliefs.

How Far Can You Go? Details

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From Reader Review How Far Can You Go? for online ebook

Ailsa Jo. says

For one thing, DL really enjoys projecting himself into one or a few of his contrasting male characters, and there's always a cheeky, atheistic intellectual who mocks another pathetic, unprosperous college professor. ??Of course, in the end the pathetic one always will get an enlightenment to compensate himself, while the desire to change, to revolt die down.

??

??This book is all about the Catholics in the '60s, how their religious belief shatters under the pressure of maturity and domestic life. The foremost propellor in this case is unmet sexual desires, demonstrated under various case scenarios. Dennis is never sexually appeased, while his family suffers from tragical loss; Michael always wanting to be more erotically consummated; Polly is not certain whether she's traditionally cut out or just not bold enough; Miles being repressed for nearly half a century; Adrian being discouraged from the first attempt of pursuit...

??My favourite characters in this book are Tessa and Michael. But I'll grant you, every character is reeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeally funny.

??Tessa has experienced a confused period when her husband Edward couldn't perform a masculine role in bed due to back injuries. She practiced yoga and jazz dance to placate herself. When she had the chance to leave home for a week to attend a literature course, jee, she was so horrified by the sexual maniacs who tried to have some fun during the time-out. I laughed so hard when Paul (or Peter, or Paulo, or whatever that young man's name is) exposed himself stark naked after Tessa went to fetch coffee, only to find himself screamed at and covered with scalding hot coffee. Oh it's hilarious.

??Michael, on the other hand, falls into the more pathetic-old-man category. He went to London to check out his bowels, and carried with him a whole "barrel" of climacteric stools! When the scent went about, oh it's just so embarrassingly funny. In Deaf Sentence and his other works, DL just loves to create such I-don't-know-how-to-deal-with-it-oh-god-save-me scenarios. Old men are just so helpless. 23333

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??DL discusses the many twists and turns within the Catholics church, the change in Pope's decrees, the change in the Catholic practices, the change in the media outcry. While most of the argument finally centres on the issue of abortion, the tension lurks in every aspect of this religion. How to interpret the resurrection (whether literally or metaphorically), how to perform sermons, how to organize Sunday masses, etc., etc. Ruth, the most determined nun, felt for the first time in her heart the power of the belief in a prayer group in the States, which is quite unconventional, when you consider the fact that she has spent quite a life time in a proper convent.

??

??Anyway, this book successfully reflects a Britain at a time of confusion and disbelief. Till this day there's still no answer, whether we can find salvation in this life time.

Trin says

This 1980 novel by Lodge (whom you may have noticed I've been reading a lot of and enjoying this year) follows a group of young English Catholics over a period of about 20 years, enabling us to see the ways their religion affects their lives (and their lives affect their religion), particularly in the shadow of Vatican II. I'm not Catholic, so partly this book was entertaining from an anthropological standpoint. Lodge, on the other hand, *is* Catholic, so you know that he's drawing at least somewhat from his own experiences—as a bit of

authorial insertion he employs makes clear. This device doesn't work for me as well as some of the other creative twists on the standard novel Lodge has pulled in other works; even when done well, authorial insertion makes me a little uncomfortable. (I'm looking at you, Douglas Coupland and Stephen King.) But that's not the bulk of what this novel is, which is both funny and sad, with Lodge's typical skill at capturing human motivations and, well, pathetickness, in a wry, intelligent way. Reading it, I thought this novel came from much earlier in Lodge's career than it in fact does—it was actually written *after* *Changing Places*. It feels a bit rougher to me than some of the others, and explores in less detail subjects he tackles elsewhere, like in *Paradise News*. Still, it was highly readable and hard to put down. I'm very much enjoying having a different Lodge novel to read every few weeks, and will be sad when I run out.

Vlad Dasca says

Sweet, at times funny, at times sad and serious, yet it manages in a tremendously light-hearted manner to start an interesting train of thought about life, love, morality and the benefits of a good fuck

Stela says

A-l citi pe Lodge nu e niciodat? atât de simplu pe cît pare la prima vedere. Ironia ?i verva povestirii te pot impiedica uneori s? treci de primele niveluri de lectur? ?i te pot face s? ui?i, mult mai u?or decât în cazul altor scriitori dubla?i de critici literari, c? autorul ?tie s? mînuiasc? toate uneltele narative, c? un artificiu literar nu e niciodat? folosit empiric sau innocent, c? exist? ni?te sfori care manevreaz? personajele ?i un subtil deus ex machina care împinge inexorabil ac?iunea spre un deznod?mînt.

Numai c? de data aceasta Marele P?pu?ar s-a hot?rât s? se deconspire, s? ias? la lumina reflectoarelor conform bunului obicei postmodernist, transformîndu-se în narator-personaj-romancier-critic literar, într-o polemic? indulgent? cu sine ?i cu cititorul, care are ca rezultat o ludic? reinterpretare a metaromanului ca gen.

Prin urmare, descoperim în *Cît s?-ntindem coarda* (cel pu?in) trei planuri compozit?ionale : unul, s?-i spunem „documentar”, oferind o gr?mad? de informa?ii interesante despre încerc?riile de modernizare ale Bisericii catolice de-a lungul a vreo 23 de ani (din 1952, cînd începe ac?iunea, pîn? în 1975, cînd se încheie mai mult sau mai pu?in), unul fic?ional, urm?rind destinul unor personaje în rela?ie cu aceea?i Biseric? catolic? ?i unul autoreferen?ial, în care naratorul ne dezv?luie sau se preface c? ne dezv?luie tehnici narative ?i/sau de interpretare, se reinventeaz? ca personaj etc.

Ca în orice roman realist care se respect? (?i realismul este numai una dintre iluziile pe care Lodge le într?ine cu acea aparent? seriozitate care este una dintre m?rcile lui stilistice) planul documentar este mascat subtil de cel fic?ional, în contextul în care personajele sînt variante ale credinciosului catolic din a doua jum?tate a secolului al XX-lea: preotul (Austin Brierley), c?lug?ri?a (Ruth), cucernica (Angela), convertitul homosexual reprimat (Miles), libertina (Polly) etc. ?i prin urmare mai greu de ?inut minte individual ?i mai u?or de asimilat ca personaj colectiv.

Principala problem? pe care eroii trebuie s-o rezolve este împ?carea înv???mintelor biserice?ti cu descoperirea propriei sexualit??i. Dac? la început concep?ia lor despre lume este ferm? în naivitatea ei (omul

se află între Rai și Iad și doar credința și obedienea îl pot salva), pe măsură ce capacitatea experienței cunoștințelor pierde virginitatea și fac copii (cam în această ordine), preceptele religioase tind să piardă din importanță, pînă când “într-un anumit moment din anii '60, iadul a dispărut”. Cum să arătă, pe măsură ce capacitatea conștiință de sine, eroii renunță la gesturile dogmatice (participarea la toate slujbele), se revoltă împotriva unor decizii (d. e. enciclica papei care interzicea contracepția) și le încalcă (începând să folosească anticoncepționale), și căută forme proprii de exprimare spirituală (devin membri ai unei biserici experimentale: Catolicii pentru o biserică deschisă), sau chiar renunță la biserică (probabil Austin Brierley se căsătorește, Ruth pleacă în pelerinaj și are o epifanie în Disneyland (!)) etc. Toate acestea se petrec treptat, personajele având parte de experiențe adesea comice, de-a lungul cărora teme serioase ca prima iubire, boala, cunoștința, religia și moartea sănătatea cu umor și adesea cu tandrețe.

Oricât de interesant și spumos amuzantă ar fi această analiză a sufletului catolic ea este doar un pretext pentru realizarea celui de-al treilea plan, insinuat treptat în narativă. La început, este doar o sugestie: romanul începe într-un glorios stil balzacian, cu acea grijă pentru detaliile arhitecturale și temporale în scopul ancorării ferme a acțiunii în spațiu și timp și cu celebrul artificiu compozitional care adună personajele la un loc (o slujbă la biserică) pentru a le prezenta pe toate odată. Dar naratorul omniscient dispare repede, fără să cindă locul pentru o vreme unei voci pretins critice, care sănește să ne atragă atenția asupra semnificațiilor numelor și a detaliilor vestimentare, uneori în cel mai absurd stil (colorești: d. e. Adrian, “cel cu ochelari (=vederile limitate), îmbrăcat cu palton de gabardin și cordon (=reprimare a instinctelor, hotărâre și spirit autoritar).”

Naratorul se identifică mai încolo cu romancierul însuși, atunci când evocă scrierea unui cititor ceh care să apară în romanul Muzeul britanic să aibă rîmat (motivul cărării cărării în carte, desigur), îl numind “o carte extrem de surizătoare”, ce scopul de a oferi o cheie de lectură cititorului:

Cartea de față nu este chiar un roman comic, dar am încercat să o fac să surindă cât am putut de mult.

În altă parte, același cameleonic narator, pentru a justifica de ce a expedită într-o singură frază relația sexuală (“o dată sau de două ori pe săptămână”) dintre Dennis și Angela, citează clasificarea evenimentelor narate fără de un critic francez, care afirmase că romancierul poate: a) povesti o dată ce se petrece o dată; b) povesti de nări ce se petrece o dată; c) povesti de nări ce se petrece de nări; d) povesti o dată ce se petrece de nări.

În ultimul capitol naratorul întră de-a binelea în roman, devenind o „voce înregistrată pe bandă” dintr-un scenariu transcris de Michael după emisiunea filmată de subiectul lui Polly. Este vocea care anulează granița dintre text și metatext, voce pe care celelalte personaje o ascultă (fără să poată identifica) vorbind despre asemănarea dintre relația lor cu religia și relația cititorului cu romanul:

Nu mai trebuie doar să credem, ci și să știm că credem, să ne trăim credința și totuși să-o privim din exterior, conștiință că într-o altă epocă și într-un alt moment istoric am fi crezut în ceva diferit [...] fără să avea sentimentul că acest adevărat ne anulează credința. Este la fel ca atunci când citim un roman sau – dacă tot vorbim de același roman – atunci când scriem unul și ne menținem o conștiință dublă asupra personajelor – care sănătate, cum ar veni, atât reale cât și fictivă, libere și condiționate – și înțind că, oricât de captivante și convingătoare ni se arată pe reale, nu vrem să citim (sau să scriem, în funcție de situație) numai povestea, ci și o parte din acea serie nesfârșită de povestiri cu ajutorul cărora omul a căutat și va căuta întotdeauna să dea

un sens vie?ii. Si mor?ii.

În fine, în capitolul final naratorul se include firesc printre personajele al căror destin prezent și viitor îl deconspiră (în același stil realist care vrea să prelungească iluzia că viața lor, ca și-a să, va continua și după ce romanul s-a încheiat):

Eu predau literatura engleză la o universitate din cîr?mid? ro?ie, iar în timpul liber scriu încet-încet romane și sănătate în criză de timp.

Cuvintele de încheiere sănătate numai aparent o parodie a stilului naiv din cronicile de odinioară, căci acel “Rămas bun, cititorule!” este în definitiv o ultimă ierarhie la rampă a celui mai complex personaj din opera: naratorul proteic.

Mark McPhee says

"So they stood upon the shores of Faith and felt the old dogmas and certainties ebbing away rapidly under their feet and between their toes, sapping the foundations upon which they stood, a sensation both agreeably stimulating and slightly unnerving. For we all like to believe, do we not, if only in stories? People who find religious belief absurd are often upset if a novelist breaks the illusion of reality he has created. Our friends had started life with too many beliefs - the penalty of a Catholic upbringing. They were weighed down with beliefs, useless answers to non-questions. To work their way back to the fundamental ones - what can we know? why is there anything at all? why not nothing? what may we hope? why are we here? what is it all about? - they had to dismantle all that apparatus of superfluous belief and discard it piece by piece. But in matters of belief (as of literary convention) it is a nice question how far you can go in this process without throwing out something vital."

Adrien says

See: *Therapy* review. Quite liked it.

Iuliana says

Loved the book! Could not get enough of D. Lodge's humorous, ironical and sometimes cynical approach of Catholicism, in particular, and religion (or is it faith?) in general, viewed, reviewed, analyzed, scrutinized, criticized while dealing with the torments his characters are dealing with, trying to cope in a world of religious beliefs and practices which not only restrict, but sometimes crush the freedom and nature of human spirit as it develops itself, trying to move from the stages of curiosity and need to understand the changes one's body and spirit naturally undergoes while gradually moving from the cocoon to the butterfly stage - the

stage of understood, explored and assumed maturity (by understanding and accepting one's being), as opposed to the changing world outside the conformity and strictness of the church or traditional home. Lodge's prosaic style guards the reader from any potentially unwanted over-sentimental approach of his character's bumpy voyage through the wild-wood of experiences in the 1960s, when the clash between religious strictness, on the one hand, with the sense of guilt or punishments clad in different forms it gives rise to when one even dares to look through the window of life with different eyes than the ones they were taught when brought up, and the liberation from all sorts of prejudices, stigma, stereotypes and behaviors which the '60s fostered, on the other hand, could give rise to and make room for the feared but somehow inevitable (in a well-defined world of punishment) personal drama.

The book seems to be preaching against the idea of an immutable, absolute religious perspective on life - this one or the afterlife (this is what one of the characters tacitly accepts when musing on her being Catholic, saying that she might as well have been of different religion by birth), or even religious at all, especially if we look at how the line between what is acceptable and what is not in the Church's eyes can move depending on the social, etc. events, movements. The author's ludic style plays a major role in this respect. The ending best sums this up: nothing is carved in stone, the future is uncertain.

Nigel says

The Catholic Church meets the Permissive Society. This book follows the lives of a group of devout Roman Catholic students from the 1950's through to 1980. Using their lives and with a backdrop of other key events during that period (Prague Spring, Aberfan etc) David Lodge shows how the RC church has struggled to meet the challenges it has faced and has had to change its teachings, practices etc. Interesting and in parts very amusing.

Lauren Robertson says

Very funny and very clever.

Ecaterina says

- lectur? lejer?
- ai ce înv??a despre dogma romano-catolic?
- urm?re?te evolu?ia pe mai multe decade a unui grup de prieteni ce la început sunt conservatori
- emancipare
- probleme în via?a intim? a cuplurilor c?s?torite
- cât po?i întinde coarda când vine vorba de problematici religioase
- î?i d? un vag sentiment de parc? ai urm?ri un serial

Bob says

I am fairly sure I read this years ago under its UK title "How Far Can You Go?" (there is probably some fly-on-the-wall amusement to be gotten from the publisher meetings where these sorts of changes are

negotiated).

Exploring much of the same terrain as "The British Museum Is Falling Down" but with a larger scope, Lodge follows 10 Anglo-Catholics from the mid-50s to mid-70s: four (eventually) married couples, their undergraduate priest who ultimately leaves the priesthood, and the odd man out who takes two decades to admit he is gay.

The original title refers more directly to the preeminent concern of their late adolescence, having sex, and follows them through their first time travails (some do wait until their wedding night), approaching the act with zero information.

Besides sex, the characters tussle with their faith in many other areas of life, and through them we observe the unfolding of the larger history of the Church at the time - the Second Vatican Council, the *Humanae vitae* encyclical of 1968 (in which the failure to allow any kind of contraception caused many Catholic women to give up waiting and go on the pill).

Eventually, the early 70s arrive, the mass is in English, guitars are strummed, the wafer is taken in the hand - if you lived through it, I don't have to remind you.

The characters are sympathetic, and there is plenty of humor but not approaching farce as there are convincingly rendered tragic moments as well.

C.N. says

Excellent portrayal of how Vatican II shook things up. Human loves have always been out of order unless they are directed by God. God is one of order. The hope of this book is that every age will have its downfall temporarily. But in the end, things will be brought upright again. We have our moments of outrage and reform and then realize the downfall of how far we take it. Something is usually birthed from it--some good, some bad. Therefore continuous revision. That is why I am quite glad the Holy Spirit is the overseer of all things and the God of truth will fill all things and all worlds will be the way they ought to be.

Dorina says

Great book offering an incredible (funny) insight into the Catholic religion and the way it changed in the past century. I'm curious how a Catholic reader would find it (funny? offensive? true?) but for a non-Catholic one it is definitely an interesting read and a learning experience.

Carolyn says

How Far Can You Go? chronicles the progress of a circle of British Catholic university students in the 1950s and follows their lives (almost exclusively their sex lives) through the tumultuous '60s and '70s. In explicit detail, Lodge describes their early forays into heavy petting and masturbation followed by their loss of virginity, all interwoven with their feelings of (Catholic) guilt, remorse, and their struggle to follow Church teaching on sexuality.

Lodge compares this moral struggle to a game of Snakes and Ladders: ". . . sin sent you plummeting down toward the Pit; the sacraments, good deeds, acts of self-mortification, enabled you to climb back towards the light. Everything you did or thought was subject to spiritual accounting. . . On the whole, a safe rule of thumb was that anything you positively disliked doing was probably Good, and anything you liked doing enormously was probably Bad, or potentially bad—an 'occasion of sin.'" Salvation and damnation are depicted as merely a game at which Catholics play.

As the couples mature and marry, they change with the times, adopting relativistic views on everything from sexuality to liturgy. Lodge mixes the liberalization of practices and doctrines, leading the reader to believe that the Church and its unchanging teaching on sexual morality is culpable for the drudgery of child-rearing, mass laicization of priests, the characters' sexual and familial dysfunction, their general screw-ups and mishaps, as well as adultery, homosexuality, sexual inhibitions, mental illness, and even disabled children.

Artificial contraception, specifically the birth control pill, becomes the lynch pin on which their personal ethics hinge. As its acceptance grows, Lodge describes the parallel changes in society at-large and within the Catholic Church following the Second Vatican Council and Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humana Vitae*.

The question, "How far can you go?" becomes broader than groping genitals and illicit trysts, expanding to a loss of the sense of sin, the existence of Hell, and the acknowledgment of Truth and authority. Clearly, Lodge believes there is a tipping point, though he leaves determination of its whereabouts to the reader. "But in matters of belief (as of literary convention) it is a nice question how far you can you go in this process without throwing out something vital." The ultimate question, asked by one of the characters in the final pages, is "Why be a Catholic at all?"

Most depressing is that every character sees faith as merely a legalistic bargain with God, not a relationship with a loving Father. Faith becomes, at its essence, merely a game - Snakes and Ladders. Even the unnamed bishop sees the hubbub over *Humana Vitae* as no more than a political obstacle.

In the end, the couples have replaced one misery (the rigors of self-discipline) for another (the effects of sin).

While frank discussion of Church teaching, struggles with chastity, Pharisaic legalism, and human sexuality are worthwhile and important, I found this treatment bleak and disheartening. While others have hailed *How Far Can You Go?* as a brilliant black comedy, I found the humorous elements and wry caricatures rooted in a cynicism that comes at the expense of Truth.

Lodge's writing is crisp and engaging. The narrative is interrupted at various points, however, as the author interjects a personal six-page diatribe, expounding on his contempt for natural family planning, surmising that ". . . *Humana Vitae* itself is a dead letter to most of the laity and merely an embarrassing nuisance to most of the clergy."

How Far Can You Go? is valuable only as a window into a bygone era, an era in which the pill was considered a panacea for long-suffering, fertile Catholics. An era, thankfully, supplanted by the papacy of St. John Paul II, who asked the more meaningful question, "How do I love?"

Read my full review at <http://www.catholicfiction.net/book-r...>

5greenway says

Ended up surprised by how good this was. At times, early on, it was amusing, bleakly funny, but with the impression of being a slight kind of thing. I'm not sure when, probably about halfway through it all just locked into place and became unputdownable. Probably the warmth and skill in sketching out all the people, the light touch with the tragedies and farces. Really enjoyable; funny and affecting.
