

Berlin intercultural reading groups, Jan Bild

Deaf Sentence by David Lodge

The title Deaf Sentence is a brilliant pun – the adjectives deaf and death – when spoken sound so similar. Deaf Sentence could be misinterpreted as death sentence because the hard of hearing find consonants the most difficult sounds to identify. Consonants are voiced at a higher frequency than vowels. It's consonants we mainly depend on to distinguish one word from another.

Going deaf can be like a slow death sentence :

Deafness is a kind of pre-death, a drawn-out introduction to the long silence into which we will all eventually lapse.

Frustration and misunderstandings are inevitable. Ordinary social situations such as parties, going to the theatre and eating out, become ordeals rather than pleasurable activities. Normal easy relationships need more care. Lots of patience is required on both sides to communicate.

David Lodge hones in on such taboo subjects as death and deafness with sensitivity and humour. We all admired his skill at creating laugh- out- loud moments from such grim topics. Because he is having to cope himself with growing deaf, he has had first hand experience of many of the situations he describes. This gives him added ammunition to hit home the full humiliation and embarrassment of being deaf. Everyone in the groups had some experience of either being deaf themselves, or of deaf partners, friends or grandparents. And we all felt he was superb at getting across the dilemma of being deaf.

“Deafness is comic, as blindness is tragic,”

Desmond Bates his protagonist, is merely hard of hearing, which makes him even more of a joke. Without a hearing aid, the silence can be comforting (*'Am I half in love with easeful deaf?'*),

But deaf people inevitably come across as *'withdrawn, unsociable, curmudgeonly'*.

With a hearing aid in place, the world becomes bewilderingly hyper-real. Loud parties are the worst; the Lombard reflex causes individuals in crowded rooms to amplify their voices, with such high level background noise, Desmond is either forced to talk non stop or mimic comprehension. People seem to be talking in

Dadaist poems. '*Sadness*' becomes '*badness*'; '*spoiled by tourism*' is heard as '*soiled by Cubism*'.

Desmond thinks he overhears a recommendation of a new book about his condition, *Being Deaf*, until a trip to Waterstone's reveals this to be Jim Crace's novel *Being Dead*. Such a skewed conversation opens the novel. A tall, bespectacled, grey-haired man (Desmond) is 'nodding sagely' at a young blonde (Alex). Desmond cannot understand a word, but pretends to agree wholeheartedly. He later learns he's offered to help a graduate student with her dissertation. Desmond is a professor of linguistics, a fact that only serves to heighten the pathos of his condition.

Further comic misunderstandings are generated by the highly disturbed American doctoral student, Alex Loom. She likes committing indiscretions: stuffing her knickers into Desmond's pocket, inviting him to her room for a spanking. She constantly lies, and then threatens sexual blackmail. Alex is writing her doctorate on suicide notes, an unusual subject, but giving us another aspect of death to consider. Some of us found her superfluous and irritating. Others were amused and found her presence a release from the grimmer topics. But somehow, thanks to Alex, we found ourselves often laughing at suicide.

Lodge loves to teach as much as he likes to learn. He quotes literary deaf characters, like Eeyore from *Winnie the Pooh*. Eeyore, using one hoof to direct his ear towards sounds, is inclined to fall over. Lewis Carroll's Cheshire cat and old Mrs Bates from Jane Austen's *Emma* are featured, as is Philip Larkin. And he focuses on the two "Great Deafies"- Goya and Beethoven. Goya painted his greatest work when he went deaf, seeing human behaviour as violent, cynical and mad. Beethoven wrote a famous testament on the loneliness his deafness brought him, and how it made him appear grumpy and unsociable.

An afterword tells us that Lodge put his father and his own deafness to use in this book. The comedy and pain of both yield dividends that protect him from our pity. Some of the best scenes involve Desmond's 89-year-old father Harry Bates. He is unwilling to give up a routine of comfortable squalor. Illness and death movingly save him from the fate of a dreaded nursing home. Harry is an eccentric and inspiring old man. He was undoubtedly our favourite character.

The loneliness of old age is examined. (from the perspective of a very old widower like Harry who is missing his wife to that of a "younger" old man Desmond who is dealing with the emptiness of retirement), We don't often find sex between older couples featured in novels and it was heartwarming to have an affectionate and loving closeness shown between Desmond and his wife Fred. There is sex after fifty!

Having swapped roles, Fred being the career woman, and Desmond having retired, we worried that they were living increasingly separate lives. But Fred is tolerant and patient with Desmond. She encourages him to go to the lip reading class. She is very supportive when she has to take him to casualty on New Year's day. Their love is proved to be strong when the death of Desmond's father brings them even closer together. We were relieved that mad Alex hadn't succeeded in coming between them. Thank goodness, we felt, that Desmond was too wise to have been compromised by her.

A last-minute invitation from the British Council to lecture in Poland sends Desmond on a visit to Auschwitz, when the denouement of the novel brings a change in style. The tone becomes darker and more serious. By now, it is clear that Lodge is considering all the different types of death: chosen death - suicide, and euthanasia-, when the truth about what really happened at Desmond's first wife's deathbed is revealed. The natural decline in old age and most unnatural of all - the extermination of victims in concentration camps.

(As I write this, I am disturbed to hear on the radio that the sign "Arbeit macht frei" over the front gate of the camp has disappeared), Desmond's visit to Auschwitz and Birkenau is of course harrowing to read. Lodge captures the chilling atmosphere on a grey cold Winter's day. And he expresses what every visitor must feel when they are in the presence of such past horror.

There are no adequate thoughts, no adequate emotional responses, available to the visitor whose life has contained nothing even remotely comparable. One feels pity of course, and sorrow, and anger, but these feelings seem as superfluous to the immensity of woe this place evokes as tears dropped into an ocean.

In the ruins of the gas chambers somebody had placed a lone red votive candle.

Its feeble flickering flame was the only light in this part of the camp, and the only sight of life in this landscape of death...I hoped it would last through the night. I stood for some minutes watching the flame.. then I retraced my steps. I was the last person out of Auschwitz that day.

The answer to death is life - and Desmond is given the wonderful news of the birth of his grandchild when he returns to the hotel. Light relief for the reader but so realistic that shortly afterwards he has another message. This time that his father has collapsed and is in hospital. The great- grandchild arrives as the great-grandparent prepares to leave this world. As so often happens in life.

We read this novel in the weeks before Christmas and were very amused by the Xmas family scenes. Some empathised with Desmond's hatred of Christmas.

History repeats itself once as tragedy and the second time as farce, but Christmas repeats itself as surfeit, I remarked, looking round the drawing room at people in various attitudes of torpor, inebriation, indigestion and boredom, clutching new books they would never read, gadgets they would never use, and items of clothing they would never wear. "Speak for yourself, darling" Fred said. "We enjoy it. Don't we Lena?"

Fred's snobbish mother Cecilia does not approve of Desmond's father Harry.

Cecilia sometimes looks at him with a kind of horrified distaste, like a lady of the manor who finds that the under-gardener has unaccountably been invited into her drawing room by a member of the family and cannot be ejected. He for his part regards her as a "stiff old bird" whom it is his duty to cheer up with quips and anecdotes. He calls her Celia. When she corrected him once, he said Cecilia was one syllable too many for an old man with false teeth.

So rich is this novel in humour it is hard to do it justice in a short feedback. The above scene is one of my favourites. I can picture the scene so clearly and feel so very fond of Harry. He really is so very endearing. He tries so hard to get Cecilia to lighten up. We all loved him and could feel Lodge's affection for him. Desmond's trips to London to see him were a mixture of duty and love and we have all been in the same position. The descriptions of the lunches they share together in the local Sainsbury's are also very funny.

Everybody in the four groups loved reading Deaf Sentence. One of us said that he loved absolutely every sentence because it was so beautifully written. Members who are hard of hearing commented that they felt they were reading their own stories. Some felt relieved to be able to laugh at their own shortcomings. Lodge has written a masterpiece on deafness - heightening perception of the condition and giving every reader sympathetic understanding of how it must be to be deaf. Those trying to cope with deaf and ageing parents said that they felt they would be more tolerant since reading Deaf Sentence and were able to face the coming Christmas celebrations with enthusiasm and humour. A fitting outcome.

Wishing everyone a very happy and tolerant Christmas!!

Highly Recommended

Expert and enjoyable. with many laugh-out-loud moments. Pitch perfect writing. Very moving and entertaining.