

Deaf Sentence

D.Lodge

March 16–18, 2014

Vintage Lodge. Very competently executed with special attention to detail. Funny? yes, but not predominantly. Nevertheless it is a pleasure to read, not demanding in any way, you are being gently guided along a path, with few dreary patches of transportations. It is contemporary, with references to 9/11, to Al Quiada, iPods and other curses of modern life, which gives the tale a soothing familiarity. Will it serve as a relevant documentation of life as lived around 2005, for the instruction for future generations? Maybe it is too narrowly focused for that purpose, and maybe most of the subtle references will be unintelligible for future readers. And that which charms us now, will be of no interest whatsoever to our distant descendants? What we know we take an encompassing interest in, what we do not know we often pass over with impatient indifference. We are filled with sentimental thoughts when we browse through an old family album, much less so when the album happens to belong to strangers. Of course this is nothing remarkable. Most of contemporary fiction is doomed to oblivion, although at the time it is not always easy to predict what will be forgotten and what will prevail as so called classics. Lodge is pleasant but a bit lightweight, if it does not make an imprint on your memory now, why should it later?

The plot is simple. The protagonist, whom we will follow through the time-honored means of a diary, is going seriously deaf. This is of course not as serious as going blind, as we all imagine, but in fact it is far more socially insulating than blindness. Our social intercourse is through speech and listening, and when deafness makes this hard, and almost impossible, you are becoming isolated and excluded, which can be very hard to bear, unless you are to some degree autistic, when it can actually bring some relief. It is tempting to imagine that the choice of topic reflects recent, and maybe even pressing concerns of the author. Furthermore our protagonist is an academic, a linguist in fact, in early retirement. His wife eight years younger has a second lease on life as he retires and runs a very successful interior decoration business. Success has made her look younger and more attractive, while the protagonist has become older and more decrepit by his encroaching handicap. Obviously she has the advantage and calls the shots, and lucky he is indeed when she grants some sexual favors, most of his advances being rebuffed, and he occasionally suffers from erectile dysfunction, occasional enough as to make him note with satisfaction when he succeeds, which does not help matters. His potency is fragile enough for alcohol to make a crucial difference, tipping it over the wrong way. Drinking he starts to do more often than in the past to the scorn and disapproval of his spouse. May I need to add that they both have grown up children from previous marriages, hers ending in divorce, while his in the death of his wife from cancer (and as it will transpire later, he did aid in her suicide, of course as an act of love and caring). They both have an elderly parent to take care of. Her mother is doing just fine, while his father who is much older, is slipping into old-age dementia and is at the end of the book felled by a stroke and dies after a few weeks

of humiliating care in a run down hospital.

Now what adds some spice to the whole, rather dreary existence, because retirement turns out not to be a haven in which there is plenty of time to do research, is the presence of a young woman who wants him to guide her on her thesis work. In fact he finds that he has lost the aptitude for doing it anymore. His subject still fascinates him, but in a passive observing way, to actually get into the nitty-gritty of writing papers there is no longer sufficient motivation. He predictably gets sucked into seeing her, more by accident than design, somewhat comically tripped by his inability to hear properly when engaged in a cocktail conversation, to make commitments he had no intention of making. One thing leads to another, but when she puts her underwear in his pockets and invites him to come and spank her, he panics. Her allurements are however not received with indifference, in fact it excites him (and the reader?) but basically it is his timidity which holds him off from indulging in the temptation. His younger colleague, on the other hand, could not resist her advances when presented at an earlier stage before his own involvement and suffers the indemnity of being at her mercy having gone far too far (without even getting to properly penetrate her he bitterly complains) and pleading with his older colleague to help him. The woman is doing a thesis on suicide notes and out to pick the brains of older men to have them write her thesis for her. This slowly dawns on our protagonist. She also ingratiates herself with his wife (incidentally causing his wife to give him a carte blanche as to meeting and guiding her), buying expensive curtains on credit she is not able to honor. In fact at the end of the book, with the father safely dead, she sends him a suicide note on e-mail. He is naturally aghast hurries to her apartment, where he injudiciously has visited a few times. It turns out that she is not there, all her belongings are being seized for failure of meeting her obligations, and the protagonist is able to secure the expensive curtains his wife had sold to her. He also meets his younger colleague, who has hurried there for the same reason, but both decide that having both received the note, it cannot be for real, much to their relief, after all would they not consider themselves responsible?

Soon thereafter the book ends and we are as wise afterwards as we were before. It is like watching a movie on television. It gives you distraction for the time being, like eating chocolate, but is soon forgotten.

March 19, 2014 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se