

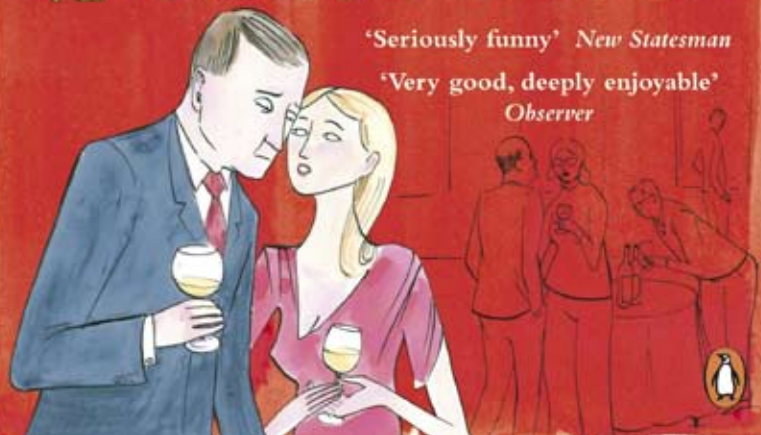
David Lodge

a novel

deaf sentence

'Seriously funny' *New Statesman*

'Very good, deeply enjoyable'
Observer



Deaf Sentence
by
David Lodge

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I

The tall, bespectacled, grey-haired man standing at the edge of the throng in the main room of the gallery, stooping very close to the young woman in the red silk blouse, his head lowered and angled away from her face, nodding sagely and emitting a phatic murmur from time to time, is not as you might think an off-duty priest whom she has persuaded to hear her confession in the midst of the party, or a psychiatrist conned into giving her a free consultation; nor has he adopted this posture the better to look down the front of her blouse, though this is an accidental bonus of his situation, the only one in fact. The reason for his stance is that the room is full of noise, a conversational hubbub which bounces off the hard surfaces of the ceiling, walls and floor, and swirls around the heads of the guests, causing them to shout even louder to make themselves heard. This is known to linguists as the Lombard Reflex, named after Etienne Lombard, who established early in the twentieth century that speakers increase their vocal effort in the presence of noise in the environment in order to resist degradation of the intelligibility of their messages. When many speakers display this reflex simultaneously they become, of course, their own environmental noise source, adding incrementally to its intensity. For the man now almost nuzzling the bosom of the woman in the red blouse, as he brings his right ear closer to her mouth, the noise reached some time ago a level that makes it impossible for him to hear more than the odd word or phrase of those she addresses to him. 'Side' seems to be one recurring word – or is it 'cider'? And 'flight from hell' – or was it 'cry for help'? He is, you see, 'hard of hearing', or 'hearing impaired' or, not to put too fine a point on it, deaf – not profoundly deaf, but deaf enough to make communication

imperfect in most social situations and impossible in some, such as this one.

He wears a hearing aid, an expensive digital device, with little beige plastic earpieces that fit snugly in both ears like baby snails in their shells, which has a program for damping down background noise, but at the cost of also damping down foreground sounds, and at a certain level of decibels the former completely overwhelms the latter, which is now the case. It is not helpful that the woman seems to be an exception to the rule of the Lombard Reflex. Instead of raising the pitch and volume of her voice like everybody else in the room she maintains a level of utterance suitable for conversation in a quiet drawing room or a tête-à-tête in a sparsely peopled tea-shop. They have been talking, or rather *she* has been talking, for some ten minutes now, and strive as he may he cannot identify the conversational topic. Is it the art on the walls – blown-up coloured photographs of urban wasteland and rubbish tips? He thinks not, she does not glance or point at them, and the intonation of her speech, which he can just about register, does not have the characteristic declarative pattern of art-speak, or art-bollocks as he sometimes disrespectfully calls it to tease his wife. It has rather the tone of something personal, anecdotal and confidential. He glances at the woman's face to see if it gives a clue. She fixes him earnestly with her blue eyes, and pauses in her utterance as if expecting a response. 'I see,' he says, adjusting his countenance to express both thoughtful reflection and sympathy, hoping that one or the other will seem appropriate, or at least not grotesquely inappropriate, to whatever she has been saying. It seems to satisfy her, anyway, and she begins speaking again. He doesn't resume his former posture: there really is no point in aiming his right earpiece to receive her speech when the party babble is pouring into the left one, and if he should try to cover his left ear with his hand it would only produce a feedback howl from his hearing aid as well as an eccentric-looking posture. What to do now? What to say when she pauses again? It is far too late to confess, '*Look, sorry, I haven't heard a word you've*

said to me for the last ten minutes' (a quarter of an hour it might be by now). *'I'm deaf, you see, can't hear a thing in this din.'* She would reasonably wonder why he hadn't said so before, why he let her go on talking, nodding and murmuring as if he understood her. She would be annoyed, embarrassed, offended, and he doesn't wish to appear rude. She might be one of his wife's customers, for one thing, and for another she seems rather nice, a young woman maybe in her late twenties with bright blue eyes, a pale smooth complexion, shoulder-length flaxen hair centre-parted and straight-cut, and a naturally shapely figure – he can tell from the shadowy separation of her breasts just visible at the unbuttoned opening of her blouse that they are not artificially enhanced by silicone, or thrust forward and upward by underwiring, but have the trembling plasticity of real unfettered flesh, with a faint surface transparency of the skin like good porcelain – and he doesn't wish to make a bad impression on a comely young woman who has taken the trouble to talk to an old fart like himself even if it is a random encounter unlikely ever to be repeated.

She pauses again in her monologue and looks expectantly at him. *'Very interesting,'* he says. *'Very interesting.'* Playing for time, waiting to see if this will do, he puts his wine glass to his lips, only to discover that it is empty and that he has to tip it up into an almost vertical position and hold it there for some seconds in order to make the dregs of Chilean Chardonnay trickle down into his throat. The woman watches with curiosity as if she thinks he is going to perform some kind of trick, balancing the glass on his nose for instance. Her own glass of white wine is almost full, she has not taken even a sip from it since she started talking to him, so he cannot suggest they get themselves refills from the bar, while to go off on his own to recharge his glass, or to propose that she accompany him on this errand, seem equally discourteous options. Fortunately she seems to appreciate his plight – not his real plight, his total ignorance of what she has been saying, but his need for another drink – and smiling she says something with a gesture at his empty glass which he is fairly

confident of interpreting as encouragement to go and get himself a refill. 'I think perhaps I will,' he says, 'Can I get you another?' Stupid question, what would she do with two glasses of white wine, one in each hand? And she is obviously not the kind of person who would eagerly gulp down one drink while you fetched her another. But she smiles again (a nice smile, disclosing a row of small even white teeth), declines with a shake of her head, and then to his dismay asks a question. He can tell it is a question by the rising intonation and the slight widening of her blue eyes and arching of her eyebrows, and it evidently demands an answer. 'Yes,' he says, taking a chance; and as she seems pleased he boldly adds: 'Absolutely.' She asks another question to which he also replies in the affirmative, and then, rather to his surprise, extends her hand. Evidently she is leaving the party. 'Very nice to have met you,' he says, taking the hand and shaking it. It is cool and slightly damp to the touch. 'What did you say your name was – I'm afraid with all this noise I didn't quite catch it.' She pronounces her name again but it is hopeless: the first name sounds faintly like 'Axe', which can't be right, and the surname is completely inaudible, but he can't ask her to repeat it *again*. 'Ah, yes,' he says, nodding, as if pleased to have pocketed the information. 'Well, it's been very interesting talking to you.'

'Who was that young blonde you were deep in conversation with?' Fred asked me in the car on the way home. She was driving because she hadn't had much to drink and I had had quite a lot.

'I've no idea,' I said. 'She told me her name, twice in fact, but I couldn't make it out. I didn't hear a word she was saying. The noise . . .'

'It's all the concrete – it makes the sound reverberate.'

'I thought she might be one of your customers.'

'No, I've never seen her before. What did you think of the exhibition?'

'Drab. Boring. Anybody with a digital camera could take those pictures. But why bother?'

'I thought they had a kind of interesting . . . sadness.'

That is a condensed account of our conversation, which actually went something like this:

'Who was that young woman you were deep in conversation with?'

'What?'

'You were deep in conversation with a young blonde.'

'I didn't see Ron. Was he there?'

'Not Ron. The blonde woman you were talking to, who was she?'

'Oh. I've no idea. She told me her name, twice in fact, but I couldn't make it out. I didn't hear a word she was saying. The noise . . .'

'It's all the concrete.'

'There's nothing wrong with the heating, in fact it's always too bloody hot for my liking.'

'No, *concrete*. The walls, the floor. It makes the sound reverberate.'

'Oh . . .'

(Pause.)

'What did you think of the exhibition?'

'I thought she might be one of your customers.'

'Who?'

'The young blonde woman.'

'Oh. No, I've never seen her before. What did you think of the exhibition?'

'What?'

'The exhibition – what did you think?'

'Drab, boring. Anyone with a digital camera could take those pictures.'

'I thought they had a kind of interesting . . . sadness.'

'Can badness be interesting?'

'Sadness, an interesting sadness. Are you wearing your hearing aid, darling?'

'Of course I am.'

‘It doesn’t seem to be working very well.’

She was absolutely right. I tapped the earpiece in my right ear with my fingernail and got a dull dead sound. The battery had packed up and I hadn’t noticed. I don’t know at what point in the evening it happened. Maybe that was why I didn’t hear what the blonde woman was saying, though I don’t think so. I think it must have happened when I went to the Gents, which was after she left. It was quiet in there and I wouldn’t have registered the loss of volume, or I would have attributed it to the quietness of the Gents compared to the cacophony in the gallery, and when I went back to the party I didn’t even attempt to have a conversation with anybody but pretended to be interested in the pictures, which were in fact not at all interesting, for their sadness or badness or any other quality, but merely banal.

‘My battery’s packed up,’ I said. ‘Shall I put a new one in? It’s a bit tricky in the dark.’

‘No, don’t bother,’ Fred said, as she often does these days. She’ll come into my study, for instance, when I’m working on the computer, without wearing my hearing aid because it turns the soothing mutter of the keyboard into an intrusive clatter as loud as an old-fashioned upright Remington, and she’ll say something to me which I don’t hear, and I have to make a split second choice between either halting the conversation while I scabble for my hearing aid pouch and insert the earpieces or trying to wing it without them, and usually I try to wing it, and a dialogue follows something like:

Fred: Murr murr murr.

Me: What?

Fred: Murr murr murr.

Me: (*playing for time*) Uh huh.

Fred: Murr murr murr.

Me: (*making a guess at the content of the message*) All right.

Fred: (*surprised*) What?

Me: What did you say?

Fred: Why did you say ‘All right’ if you didn’t hear what I said?

Me: Let me get my hearing aid.

Fred: No, don't bother. It's not important.

We drove the rest of the way home in silence. I went to my study to put a new battery in my right earpiece, or 'hearing instrument' as the User's Guide rather grandiloquently calls it. I get through an amazing number of batteries because I frequently forget to switch off the hearing instruments when I put them away in their little zipped and foam-lined pouch, and then, unless Fred should happen to hear them making the high-pitched feedback noise they emit when thus enclosed and draws my attention to it, the batteries run down uselessly. This quite often happens at night if I take them out in my study or in the bathroom before going to bed and leave them there where Fred can't hear them whining to themselves like mosquitoes. It happens so often in fact, even after I have made a special effort to do the opposite, that I sometimes think there is some kind of hearing-aid imp who switches them on in the night after I have switched them off. I simply can't believe it when I open the pouch in the morning and find them switched on when I have such a clear memory of switching them off. There must be a kink in my neural pathways which makes me unconsciously switch them on again after consciously switching them off, a reflex motion of the thumb which slides the battery covers into the 'On' position even as I place them in their little nests of synthetic foam to sleep. The Bates Reflex, named after Desmond Bates, who established early in the twenty-first century that users develop an unconscious hostility towards their hearing aids which causes them to 'punish' these devices by carelessly allowing the batteries to run down. Actually it's self-punishment because the batteries are quite expensive, nearly four pounds for six. They come in a little round transparent plastic pack with six compartments, ingeniously mounted on a cardboard base like a carousel, which you rotate to expel a new battery through a hinged flap at the back. Each battery has a brown plastic tab adhering to it which stops the electricity leaking

away, or so I understand, and which you must remove before inserting the battery into your hearing instrument. These sticky little wafers are quite difficult to detach from your fingers and dispose of. I tend to transfer them on to whatever surface is to hand, so my desktop, files, ringbinders and other home office utensils are covered with tiny brown spots, as if soiled with the droppings of some incontinent nocturnal rodent. The instructions on the back of the pack tell you to wait at least one minute after removing the plastic tab before inserting the battery into the hearing instrument (don't ask me why) but it often takes me longer than that to liberate myself from the tab.

When I had replaced the battery I went into the drawing room, but Fred had gone upstairs to read in bed. I knew that was what she was doing even though she hadn't said so, in the way married couples know each other's habitual intentions without needing to be informed, which is particularly useful if you happen to be deaf; in fact if she had informed me verbally of her intention I would have been more likely to get it wrong. I didn't want to join her because I can't read in bed for more than five minutes without falling asleep, and it was too early for that, I would only wake up in the small hours and lie there tossing and turning, not wanting to get up in the cold dark but unable to drop off again.

I thought about watching the *News at Ten* but the news is so depressing these days – bombings, murders, atrocities, famines, epidemics, global warming – that one shrinks from it late at night; let it wait, you feel, till the next day's newspaper and the cooler medium of print. So I came back into the study and checked my email – 'No New Messages'; and then I decided to write an account of my conversation, or rather non-conversation, with the woman at the ARC private view, which in retrospect seemed rather amusing, though stressful at the time. First I did it in the usual journal style, then I rewrote it in the third person, present tense, the kind of exercise I used to give students in my stylistics seminar. First person into third person, past tense into

present tense, or vice versa. What difference does it make to the effect? Is one method more appropriate to the original experience than another, or does any method interpret rather than represent experience? Discuss.

In speech the options are more limited – though my step-grandson Daniel, Marcia’s child, hasn’t learned this yet. He’s two years old, two and a half, and has quite a good vocabulary for his age, but he always refers to himself declaratively in the third person, present tense. When you say it’s time for bed, he says, ‘Daniel isn’t tired.’ When you say, ‘Give Grandad a kiss,’ he says, ‘Daniel doesn’t kiss granddads.’ Pronouns are tricky for kids, of course, because they’re shifters, as we say in the trade, their meaning depends entirely on who is using them: ‘you’ means you when I say it, but me when you say it. So mastery of pronouns always comes fairly late in the child’s acquisition of language, but Daniel’s exclusive use of the third person at his age is rather unusual. Marcia is anxious about it and asked me if I thought it was possibly a symptom of something, autism for instance. I asked her if she referred to herself in the third person when speaking to Daniel, like ‘Mummy is tired’, or ‘Mummy has got to make the dinner’, and she admitted that she did occasionally. ‘You mean, it’s my fault?’ she said, a little resentfully. ‘I mean he’s imitating you,’ I said. ‘It’s quite common. But he’ll soon grow out of it.’ I told her that Daniel’s sentences were remarkably well-formed for his age, and that I was sure he would soon learn to use pronouns. I actually find it charming, the way he says, ‘Daniel is thirsty,’ ‘Daniel doesn’t tidy up,’ ‘Daniel is shy today,’ with a perceptible pause for thought before he speaks. It has an almost regal gravity and formality, as if he were a little prince or dauphin. Dauphin Daniel I call him. But young parents, educated middle-class ones anyway, are very jumpy these days, they get so much information from the media about all the things that could be wrong with their child – autism, dyslexia, attention deficit disorder, allergies, obesity and so on – they’re in a constant state of panic, watching their

offspring like hawks for warning signs. And it's catching: I'm far more anxious about the baby Anne is expecting than I was about any of Maisie's pregnancies. Thirty-seven is late to give birth for the first time.