

The Mum of Modern Tart: an Essay on Going Deaf

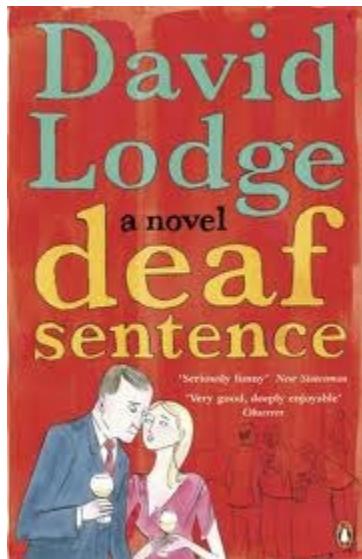
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To my wife, Carol: companion, critic, mother of my children – and now my ears.

Introduction: *Deaf Sentence*, David Lodge



I've just finished reading a novel called *Deaf Sentence* written by David Lodge, published in 2008 by Penguin. The story is about a fictional University professor called Desmond Bates who is slowly going deaf (like me and like the book's author), and who is forced into early retirement because he can no longer make out questions asked by members of his audience. (I had the same trouble in the closing stages of my teaching career). There are other parallels between Desmond and me in the book and I had thought just to write a short critique of *Deaf Sentence* but, as you will see, the essay developed into more than this.

The Story



The story opens with a nightmare situation for people who are hard of hearing: a social gathering where someone engages you in conversation, and you've no idea what this person is saying, but it's too late to back out. Things are alright at the beginning of the conversation, but as the background noise rises, you lose track and start bluffing. You look for signs that identify the topic and how to respond: body language, facial expressions, intonation, sideways glances, and an occasional word that gets through around which you desperately try to assemble a sentence or fit into an earlier context – anything that will allow you to maintain a semblance of outward intelligence. Inwardly, despair is setting in, coupled with a broad mix of other emotions: embarrassment, isolation, misery, exasperation and, ultimately, the ignominy of encroaching deafness. Tactically, you resort to bland interjections that you hope are harmless – 'Really?', 'How interesting', 'Yes', 'No', 'Absolutely', 'Mmm', and so on. I have been in this situation several times over the

¹ I wrote this essay in 2009, not long after I had retired and was still coming to terms with my partial deafness. The essay was prompted by my reading of *Deaf Sentence* and the realisation of the many parallels between the incidents described by the author, David Lodge, and my own experiences. Here is my original essay, corrected and updated with additional 2023 content in the form of footnotes.

last few years. It's no joke. I hate it. I now avoid large groups of socialising people. Two people are okay if the room is quiet and I am one of them; three is stretching it, and four's the limit. Above that, I put a *how-interesting* look on my face and abandon any attempt to interact. My wife fills me in afterwards.²

Back to the story. Desmond Bates is being spoken to by an attractive female student (it can't be said that he is *chatting* with her), and he agrees to something, but he's unsure what it is. It turns out that the student wants Desmond to take over the supervision of her PhD. She is studying the linguistic properties of suicide notes. Before his premature retirement, Desmond was a Professor of Linguistic Discourse, and the book has several interesting asides on specific aspects of linguistics.

Given that I'm an amateur grammarian, these asides interested me but I will not dwell on them in this essay. Later, when Desmond finds out what he has agreed to and further finds out more about the nature of the female student, he realises that he's in trouble. And so the story develops and I'll leave you to unravel its twists and turns as and when you read the book, as I hope you do.

Common Situations for *Deafies*

The author, David Lodge, bases his observation of people who are hard of hearing (he calls them *deafies* in the book) on his own hard-of-hearing problems. Like me, it was a gradual occurrence that began to affect how he (David Lodge/Desmond Bates; the story is partly autobiographical on this topic) behaved in public and in private with his wife and other close acquaintances. At one point, he states that the most common reaction to anything said to him was 'What did you say?', 'Say again' or, more simply, 'What?'

I can attest to this and sometimes I wonder if it is now an automatic response. Does partial deafness make you mentally lazy? Do you become so used to not hearing the entire sentence that you automatically request a replay to fill in the gaps? I'm not sure, but I suspect that the *What Reflex*, as I call it, becomes as much a habit as it is a necessity. You stop concentrating until the next sound hits your ears. Then, you ramp up slowly, necessitating the replay.

Returning to the large social group problem, Desmond, the narrator, discusses the *Lombard Reflex*. Étienne Lombard (1869 – 1920) observed that when members of a large group of people are talking to each other in a room or other forms of a closed environment, each speaker will automatically raise their voice to be heard. This is the *Lombard Reflex*, and if every speaker in the room does this, the general noise level rises to the detriment of the *deafies* in the room (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lombard_effect). This is why Desmond's conversation with the female student starts well but quickly deteriorates to the point where he understands nothing of what she is saying. Instead, he leans closer and closer, not to hear her better but because he can see more down the front of her blouse!

Deafies exhibit a similar *Lombard Reflex*: they automatically raise their voice when speaking in a quiet room to a non-deafie. I have been told to 'Keep your voice down!' when I thought I was talking normally. I am not aware that I am speaking with a raised voice, but apparently, I am and certainly cannot whisper. This can also lead to a source of embarrassment, as indeed it does in the book when, at a New Year's Eve party, in a whispered aside to his wife, Desmond offers to perform a specific sexual act later on, probably in the hope that it will be reciprocated. Unfortunately, the whisper is more like a public announcement,

² These days (2023), I'm very careful about joining any social group. I apply my Rule of Four; not more than four people in the group. And to the other three people, I ask that only one conversation takes place at any one time. If we are sitting around a square table, one person on each side of the table, and the person on my left talks to the person on my right, I cannot hear what the person opposite me says if he or she tries to cut across the sideways conversation. Another problem I have is if one person hijacks what another person is recounting. Hijacking is a common issue with couples who have been together a long time, married or as partners. Not only does it hurt my neck to keep switching from one speaker to another, the change of voice causes me to lose continuity. By the time I've caught up, whoever they are talking about is now a pronoun and I have to stop and ask who 'he' or 'she' is!

As a result, my social groups are restricted to family and very close friends who appreciate my difficulties and, sometimes, take care to accommodate my limitations. I say sometimes because in the heat of the moment, they forget and then I'm lost for a while.

much to his wife's fury. Later that evening the act, and its reciprocal, doesn't happen. Desmond falls asleep in an alcoholic haze. Poor Desmond!

Room layout, décor, and foreground/background noise are also critical to a deafie. If a room has many sound-absorbing materials such as cushions, carpets, and soft coverings on the floor, furniture, walls and even ceilings, sound does not bounce off and re-enter the ears out-of-sync with the original sound input. If the room has lots of shiny echo-creating surfaces – marble worktops, tiled floors, smooth ceilings, reflective walls, mirrors, and pictures/photographs covered with glass - then I'm done for. Under these conditions I can only describe the sound I receive as a cacophony: a harsh medley of undecipherable white noise. Your mouth has to be within a metre of my ear and you have to speak clearly and slowly for me to understand what you are saying. For anything else, you might as well be speaking in Arabic, Cantonese, or Russian, none of which I understand.³

The problem is compounded if there is any form of background noise – background music as in some restaurants or from a radio/MP3/CD player at home, background TV (unless the sound is muted), or vehicle noise from a road if walking on a pavement. Once the nerve cells in the cochlea no longer function as they should (see later), or the auditory nerve becomes deformed or severed (or whatever happens), the brain seems incapable of distinguishing between foreground and background sounds. I've noticed this and Desmond confirms it in one of his discourses in the book.⁴

Another situation in the book that has happened to me is what happens when the hearing-aid batteries pack up. I get a periodic *beep-beep* warning sound that drives me up the wall and must drain whatever life is left in the battery. Either you don't have spares on you, or the situation does not allow you to change batteries. My most recent occurrence was when I was walking alone in the rain in a forest on the Cotswold Way UK National Trail. I was running out of daylight with at least three miles to reach the B&B. I abandoned the trail, made for a nearby village, entered the local pub and asked the publican if he could get me a taxi. He laughed and explained that there were no taxis in the village but offered to take me to the B&B in his car. That's when my batteries packed up - both of them - and by now, I was bundled into his small car with all my kit, furiously searching for the piece of paper containing the address and location of the B&B and with no chance of changing the batteries. The publican was in a hurry and it was getting dark. Changing hearing-aid batteries is fiddly and requires good lighting. Moreover, I was sitting in the car's front seat, hugging my rucksack on my lap, and the publican was asking me all sorts of questions about my walk.

Eventually, the publican found what we thought was the right road but needed help finding the B&B. He knocked on the door of a house and spoke with the couple who came to the door. Through the little part of the conversation I heard correctly, I discovered that the road I wanted was not the one I was in but the couple would take me there and help me find the B&B. Because of the state of my boots and wet walking gear, I declined the invitation to 'step inside for a minute' and could still not change the batteries. In fact, I changed the batteries when, finally, the couple dropped me off at the B&B and I reached the sanctuary of my room for the night. The situation was a nightmare, further compounded by my forgetting to take my mobile telephone to the local pub later on to call my wife and tell her I was safe and well. I received a Grade A reprimand when I eventually called her late at night back at the B&B!

In the book, Desmond tells a similar story of battery failure, although in a different setting – a house full of very important guests, and he believes he has run out of spare batteries. (He hasn't: he can't find them. His wife finds them, eventually.) He solves his problem by downing a lot of wine and talking loudly and non-stop to his guests, leaving no room for interruptions. It's an amusing part of the book. I may have opted for the same solution if I were in a similar situation. Or go to bed with a large glass of wine and a pretend headache.

³ I have subsequently written an article about sound absorption and how to reduce sound reflection in a home's social rooms: lounge, kitchen and dining room. You can read a summary here <https://ben-bennetts.com/2018/12/09/improving-sound-absorption-in-the-home/> which will lead you to a more-detailed article available for download from my website.

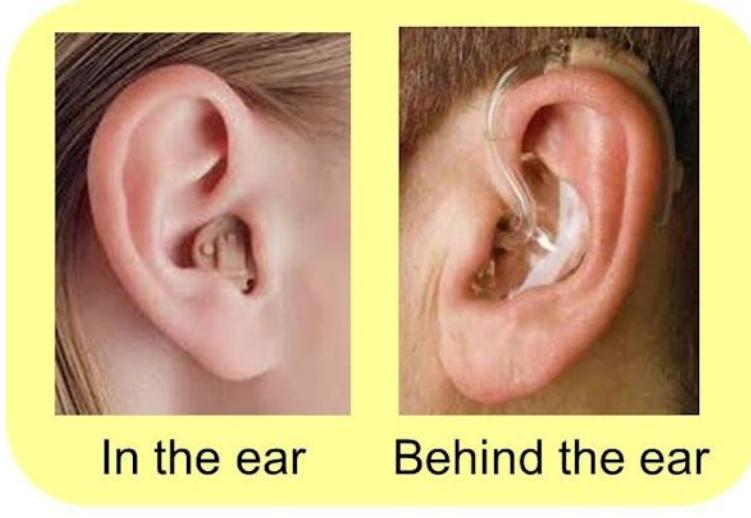
⁴ Restaurants and pubs/bars can be a problem. They are often noisy with muzak background noise (I sometimes ask for the muzak to be turned down or, preferably, off) and, again, I pick such venues very carefully – no muzak, sit in a corner with my back to a wall rather than to the room. (Hearing aid microphones are along the top or to the back of the aid which means they pick up sound from behind. Sitting with your back to a wall reduces that type of interfering background noise as long as the wall doesn't reflect too much of the sound impinging on it.)

(There's a humorous passage in this part of the book where Desmond converses with a stout female guest. Desmond thinks that the woman works in advertising, and he dissects the *Hello Boys* advertisement for the *WonderBra* brassiere. He speculates as to who 'the boys' are in the ad, and, at one point, he says that the model is obviously talking to her breasts. It turns out that the recipient of this observation is the headmistress of a primary school who has had a double mastectomy and now wears prosthetic breasts!)

Encroaching deafness is insidious. You do not realise what you are missing as you don't hear it any more. For example, without, or sometimes even with hearing aids, I don't hear cars approaching from behind, birdsong and other sounds of nature, cyclists approaching me from behind while I am out walking (why don't cyclists ring bells?), and so on. Desmond talks about the problems he had with questions from his student audiences: inaudible questions, compounded by perceived mumbling or hands over the mouth. I had the same issues when I was delivering short classes to groups of electronics designers and test engineers in industry. My problems were worse, however. Often, my audiences were foreign nationals, groups for whom English was a second or third language and who spoke English with heavy accents. Indian, Chinese/Taiwanese, and Korean accents were always the worst, and nowadays I have no chance when someone from an Indian call centre calls me on the telephone. Either I don't answer the phone or pass the caller to my wife.

Comparing Deafness with Blindness

Desmond launches into an interesting comparison between deafness and blindness. 'Deafness is comic; blindness is tragic,' he says. There's a certain truth to this – I do try to interject humour whenever a situation arises that highlights my deafness problem, but often the humour is a disguise for the other emotions I mentioned earlier. But there is no doubt that of the two afflictions, deafness is not as debilitating as blindness. Although they are both primary senses, I consider the visual sense more important than the aural sense. Also, blindness is an affliction immediately recognised by the sighted. We see the white stick, the harnessed guide dog, or dark glasses on a cloudy day and instantly adjust our attitude toward the blind person. We feel sympathy and act accordingly: we want to help; we move aside; we avert our eyes so as not to intrude. Not so people who are deaf or hard of hearing.



In the ear

Behind the ear

Modern hearing aids are placed either in the ear or behind the ear, and their presence is not immediately apparent to a casual observer. In-the-ear aids are virtually invisible, and behind-the-ear aids have become less noticeable simply because everyone walks around with some gizmo in their ears – earphones connected to an MP3 player or a Bluetooth transmitter/receiver connected to a mobile phone. As a result, we may be conscious that the person we are talking to has something in their ear, but the exact nature of what is in the ear is not questioned. The hearing aid has become invisible simply because it's indistinguishable from other modern-day ear paraphernalia.

In the book, the narrator talks about famous artists who went deaf before their creativity had run its course – Beethoven, a composer of aural images; Goya, a composer of visual images; Larkin, a composer of poetic images. How did deafness affect such artists? In fact, how did Beethoven compose such sublime music as his symphonies and, later, his quartets – music that I have loved and can no longer listen to with pleasure? (More later on this.)

Of the three artists most affected, Beethoven must have suffered the most simply because he could never appreciate the full effect of his musical compositions. I would agree with this but given that any artistry is a combination of many different senses, poets like Larkin and painters like Goya must also have suffered because they could never experience the results of their labours with all senses firing, as it were. A poem read on a warm summer's evening in a beautiful garden with songbirds tweeting in the background will sound different to the same poem read on a platform of a London Underground Tube station at rush hour. (My analogy, not the book's narrator.)

In the book, Desmond talks particularly about a painting by Goya called by various names: *The Dog* or *Dog Overwhelmed by Sand*. He claims that the true meaning behind this painting is that it sums up Goya's anguish of being deaf. My curiosity was piqued. Here is the picture.



Goya's *The Dog*, main painting and detail.

I would like to see the original painting (it's in the *Museo del Prado* in Madrid), but I can see that there is a certain helplessness and fear to the expression on the dog's face at what appears to be a wall of sand descending from above and we could understand an allegory with a wall of silence descending on those of us who are going deaf.

'What you said was not what I heard.'

There are many instances in the book where Desmond does not hear what is said but hears something else. In one of the book's funniest passages, he is conversing with a woman who has just returned from a holiday in France. Here is the passage:

'The pastime of the dance went to pot,' Silvia Cooper seemed to say, 'so we spent most of the time in our shit, the cows in-laws finding they stuttered.'

'What?' I said.

'I said, the last time we went to France it was so hot we spent most of the time in our gîte, cowering indoors behind the shutters.'

'Oh, hot was it?' I said. 'That must have been the summer of 2003.'

'Yes, we seared our arses on bits of plates, but soiled my cubism, I'm afraid.'

'I'm sorry?'

'We were near Carcassonne. A pretty place, but spoiled by tourism, I'm afraid.'

'Ah, yes, it's the same everywhere these days,' I said sagely.

'But I do mend sherry. Crap and Sargasso pained there, you know. There's a lovely little mum of modern tart.'

'Sherry?' I said hesitantly.

'Céret, it's a little town in the foothills of the Pyrenees,' said Mrs Cooper with a certain impatience. 'Braque and Picasso painted there. I recommend it.'

'Oh yes, I've been there,' I said hastily. 'It has a rather nice art gallery.'

'The mum of modern tart.' (Museum of modern art, in case you haven't worked it out!)

'Quite so,' I said. I looked at my glass. 'I seem to need a refill. Can I get you one?'

And on that note, Desmond beats a hasty retreat.

I have many personal examples of 'What you said was not what I heard.' Here is a recent happening.

Last month, I attended a committee meeting of the Titchfield Village Trust, an organisation of volunteers who look after the cultural, social and aesthetic interests of the residents of Titchfield, my local village. Before the meeting started, I explained that I had a hard-of-hearing problem and was met with the usual wise nods and sympathy, as always. By the way, once made, such wise nods and sympathy are instantly forgotten by everyone who made them. It's a fact of life, I've decided.

Anyway, back to my story. About halfway through the meeting and after I had spoken about my topic (the state of the Titchfield Canal and its pathway), I sat back and tried to make sense of what was being debated by the group of eight or nine people in the room. As usual, there were several threads of conversation going on and, as usual, I had no idea what all the discussion was about, but suddenly, the room went reasonably quiet and a voice said, quite loudly, 'Now, let's talk about the night of the Titchfield murder.' Whoa! I sat up. Murder? In Titchfield? Unprecedented since 1891 when a deranged Alice Hinton murdered her three children in a cottage on what is now Titchfield Village Green. I was now desperately trying to make sense of the multiple crisscrossing conversations. Eventually, I called a halt and asked for more information about the murder.

'What murder?' someone said. 'We're talking about the site for the Titchfield MUGA!'

A MUGA is a Multi-User Group Activity Park – what we used to call a playground before some politically correct jobsorth decided that MUGA sounded better and had more syllables when spelt out in full. At that point, I relaxed dejectedly, and I've since resigned from the Trust committee. Funny? Yes. Sad? Also, yes. That's what happens when you start to go deaf. The incident reminds me of a very old joke from my youth:

Young man to hard-of-hearing attractive young woman. 'Tickle your tits with a feather?'

Young woman. 'What? How dare you!'

Young man. 'What's the problem?' I said, "Typical city weather."⁵

⁵ I have since collected example of my own mishears. You can read them here: <https://ben-bennetts.com/2022/04/06/what-you-said-was-not-what-i-heard/>

Communicating with *Deafies*

Desmond does not comment much on communication techniques but he does take up lip-reading classes (I'm currently investigating doing the same) and he comments on how lip-speakers (that's what the lip-reading teachers are called) enunciate each word clearly and how this is an excellent help to *deafies*. I recently attended a *Royal National Institute for Deaf (RNID)*⁶ seminar in London and there were British Sign Language experts and lip-speakers interpreting the on-stage speeches for the benefit of the profoundly deaf in the audience. These interpreters are fascinating to watch. Although they make no sound, they use the whole body to turn the spoken words into actions that profound *deafies* can understand. Their faces are highly expressive, especially the eyes and eyebrows; they wave their arms all over the place (even the lip-speakers); they bend their bodies; and so on. They are a treat to watch and I envy them their skills.

It's early days for lip-reading for me. I have started to read lips instinctively, but I need to make more progress partly because most people do not speak as a lip-speaker does and partly because, as I learned from the book, 30% of English words are not lip-readable. Here is one of my examples. It is impossible to detect the difference on the lips of the words *park* and *pen*. The *p* is instantly recognisable by the pursing and puffing of the lips, but what follows is not. The *k* in *park* is pronounced behind the teeth at the roof of the mouth, and the *n* in *pen* is pronounced with the tongue behind the teeth. Try it. Then, try to convey the difference between a *k* and an *n* by forward projection onto the lips. You'll end up with a funny face, and I still have yet to learn whether you said *park* or *pen*. As a result, if you say that you are *parking your pen in your pocket*, I will know what you said once you do it.

All this means that lip-reading will help, but 'it's not the magic bullet,' as Desmond says. But the descriptions of Desmond's visits to the lip-reading classes are insightful and funny, and I am now more motivated to find a local lip-reading class and join in. (I found one close to where I live and attended a meeting. It was hilarious. I have appended what happened.)

I mentioned earlier that even when you explain to someone that you have a hearing problem, the wave of sympathy is momentary only. Very few people continue to make an effort. My wife makes a considerable effort nowadays. It has been a long time coming, but I am grateful to her. She anticipates my difficulty and will now turn to me, unasked, in a group and tell me what has just been said. She said to me recently that she has become my ears. This is true. When I spoke the marriage vows 45 years ago,⁷ I was unaware that the girl by my side would become my ears 45 years later. Mind you, I've become her navigator when she's driving a car, so it's not all one-sided!

For those who have good hearing I say this to you: please slow down when you speak to me, please look me directly in the face, please do not place anything – a hand, a book – over your mouth, and please get as close as you feel comfortable. Under these conditions, I have a good chance of hearing and understanding what you say correctly. For those who do this, I say, 'Thank you.' For those who don't, I say nothing as I don't know what you said to me anyway! For those who are female aged 18 or older, undo the top two buttons of your blouse or, in some other way, make your chesty protuberances more enjoyable for me. I can always sneak a peek when I do not understand what you are saying! (Only kidding, dear, and does not apply to wives, sisters, sisters-in-law, daughters, daughters-in-law (past, present and future), granddaughters and thy neighbour's wife.)

One last point. Since communication is the spice of life, I have turned to other ways of communicating, especially the written word. Emails are a lifesaver. I write many emails rather than pick up the telephone: to my children, to my grandchildren, to my sister, to my cousins, to my friends, to my neighbours, and to anyone else with whom I interact. I enjoy the process of writing, and I make an effort to write unambiguously, informatively and, where possible, with humour. Writing has become essential to me in a way that I could not have foreseen when writing technical books and publishing research papers on my specialist electronics subject. Writing is now one of the primary ways I can continue communicating with others. Witness this essay.

⁶ RNID renamed itself Action on Hearing Loss in 2011 and, subsequently returned to RNID in 2020.

⁷ Coming up to sixty years in 2024!

The Beauty of Quietness

Somewhere in the book, Desmond expounds on what I call the *Beauty of Quietness*. Desmond calls it the *Deaf Instinct*. We are surrounded by noise everywhere we go, except in the confines of our own homes where noise is controllable to a large extent. One of the benefits of being hard of hearing is that a deafie can remove their hearing aids, whereupon the background noise collapses to something insignificant depending on the severity of the deafness. Desmond extols the advantage of being able to do this, and this, too, is something I can relate to. I am sometimes asked, 'What is the attraction of walking alone over long distances?' Apart from the usual answers of 'I enjoy it' or 'I enjoy getting back to Nature' or 'It's a challenge', there is another answer that I rarely give – 'I can enjoy absolute quietness if I turn off my hearing aids.' Think about it. When was the last time you experienced absolute quietness? I've experienced both recently: on an underground lake in Switzerland and on top of a mountain in Nepal. It's hard to experience complete silence if you have normal hearing. There's always some buzz in the background, and although the brain is good at tuning it out, it's still there, preying on our subconscious. Being a deafie brings back the beauty of quietness, and we may deliberately seek out quiet environments. Hence the name *Deaf Instinct*.

Other Topics in the Book

Although going deaf is the book's central theme, other storylines interested me. For example, the narrator describes the trauma – yes, it is a trauma – of retiring from a busy and intellectually stimulating career; in the case of the book's narrator, from being a Professor of Linguistic Discourse at a UK redbrick university; in my case, from a demanding career at the forefront of a highly-specialised branch of electronics engineering. What do you do when you switch off the stimuli of a professional career? I took up long-distance walking after a false start with golf; I write essays and articles on anything that interests me – politics, religion, descriptions of my long-distance walks, this essay; I send emails to people who may not have the time to read and digest their content (my busy children mainly); I research topics out of curiosity (why did my father receive a British Empire Medal in 1946?); I refine my knowledge of English grammar; I research the cause of my deafness (more later on this); and so on. The narrator also discusses what keeps him busy. I won't elaborate on his diversions but suffice it to say his comments struck other chords with me.

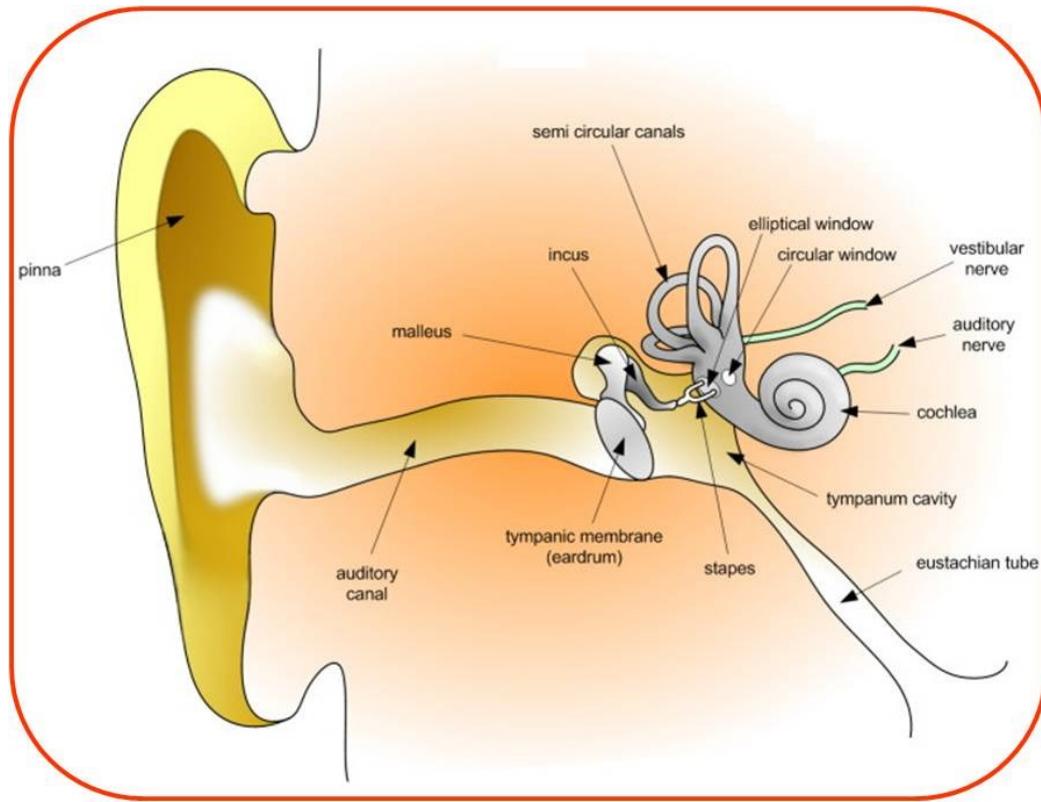
Humour in the Book

David Lodge is one of those rare authors who can insert humour into a narrative and invoke laugh-out-loud moments depending on your sense of humour. I'll extract one example that made me laugh heartily. This event occurs during the Family Christmas Dinner, where Desmond's ageing and incorrigible father has had too much to drink. Desmond's father was a musician in a 1940s-style swing band and can still recall many songs the band performed in its heyday. In the following extract, Desmond is narrating. Cecelia is Desmond's stuffy mother-in-law who disapproves of Desmond's father. Ben is one of Desmond's sons. Here goes ...

... the tune was imprinted on my memory from many playings of the old 78 vinyl disc on the radiogram at home, which Dad later transferred on to an audio cassette. He gave me a copy which I have somewhere 'The night, the stars and the music/ the magic of something something ...' Apparently, he (Dad) stood up and sang two choruses without missing a word or a beat, got a round of applause from the people in the kitchen, sat down, farted loudly because of the curry, looked over his shoulder and called out 'Taxi' (which made Ben laugh so much he choked on his lager), said he thought he better go lie down, tried to walk out of the kitchen unassisted, stumbled over the threshold, recovered his balance by throwing his arms around Cecelia who entered the kitchen at that moment with a tray full of dirty glasses, ...

And so it goes on predictably. It was the 'Taxi' bit that made me laugh out loud. I have been known to do the same under similar circumstances!

How the Ear Works and Why I May Never Hear Properly Again



This is the techie bit based on my research into my hard-of-hearing problem. I'll keep it simple but you'll need to refer to the picture. Or, you can skip this section.

All sound is a compaction and expansion of air caused by a noise stimulus. The noise is carried on an airwave that eventually enters the ear and hits the eardrum. The drum vibrates in sympathy with the multiple frequencies in the incoming noise and this vibration is passed through three small but connected bones, called the hammer (*malleus*), anvil (*incus*) and stirrup (*stapes*), and eventually causes tiny delicate nerve cells situated in the cochlea to vibrate. Each nerve cell, also called *cilium* (pl. *cilia*) or *hair cell*, responds to a different frequency and together they create coded electrical pulses that are transmitted along the auditory nerve to that part of the brain that receives the pulses and recreates the original sound inside our heads. Nobody understands this final part of the process.

Fundamental causes of hard of hearing are damage to or even destruction of some or all of the nerve cells in the cochlea or irreparable damage to the auditory nerve. A nerve cell can be damaged and even destroyed by loud noise entering the ear (a gun firing, high factory noise, an aircraft jet engine, loud music through headphones or in an enclosed space such as a car, and so on) and once the nerve cell is damaged, that's it. Your ability to hear the frequency represented by that nerve cell has been seriously reduced, and, in extreme cases, if the nerve cell is dead, you will never hear that frequency again.

Most human voices have a fundamental frequency range of between 85 Hz - 155 Hz (male) and 165 Hz - 255 Hz (female) but with all the harmonics that are required to produce tone and individual voice characteristics, the standard range for voice production stretches up to 3,400 Hz, and beyond. This means that if the damaged nerve cells represent frequencies that occur in the human voice range, it is possible that even though you hear the words, they will be distorted. Imagine trying to make out the sound of the letter *s* without the frequencies that represent the hissing part of the letter. Try saying *s* without hissing at the end. *Eh* ... You almost can't get started because the hissing sound dominates the pronunciation but *eh*... is what a deafie will hear if those particular nerve cells are severely damaged. No matter how loudly you hear the sound, you'll have great difficulty identifying it as the *s* sound. This is the type of hearing loss I have, and there is no cure. (There is research going on, some sponsored by RNID, looking at the regeneration of nerve cells using stem cells but the fruits of this research, assuming it does eventually bear

fruit, will not be available in my lifetime. I heard about this research at the *RNID* seminar I attended in London. It's also mentioned in David Lodge's book.)

Hearing aids are sophisticated amplifiers and although they do a good job of amplifying the sound that reaches my ears, they cannot compensate for the frequencies represented by the lost nerve cells. Everything is distorted to me. That's why you'll hear me say, 'It's not a volume problem; it's a clarity problem.' It's also why I now cannot listen to any form of music. A musical note from almost any instrument is rich in the frequencies (base and harmonics) that make up the note. That's one of the reasons why a piano note is different to, say, the same note played on a violin or an oboe. Any form of music, therefore, is comprised of notes made up of many different frequencies. If some of those frequencies are not transmitted in coded form to the brain, everything sounds different and, in many cases, wrong.

I am still researching the fundamental reasons for my deafness but I now suspect that it is caused by the loss of some of my nerve cells, many of which are in the range of frequencies used by the human voice. Hence, I have difficulty understanding what someone says to me.⁸

If you are becoming hard of hearing, I suggest you go to your general practitioner and request a National Health Service hearing test. You can also go onto *Action on Hearing Loss*'s website and take a free hearing test: <http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/>.⁹ You will know the signs: you need extra volume on the TV; you think that people are muttering; you cannot understand public announcements; you have difficulty in a crowded room; you constantly ask people to repeat what they just said; and so on. The hearing aids available on the NHS are excellent behind-the-ear digital aids and are free to qualified UK citizens. I have tried private and NHS aids and there's very little difference in comfort, performance and after-care. The main difference is the cost. The private ones can cost up to £3,500 for a pair.

How Deafness has Changed my Life

Encroaching deafness has changed my life in many ways. Here are some of them.

At home, I have a particular BT telephone with a volume control and a built-in graphic equaliser with combined bass and treble control. I can optimise the settings to suit my hearing, but most voices are still distorted and I usually avoid answering the telephone. As it turns out, most calls are for my wife anyway – she's the keeper of our social diary – so I usually do not have to speak on the telephone. But, when I do, it quickly degenerates into 'Say again?', or 'Can you send me an email?', or 'Can I pass you over to my wife?', or 'I'm sorry, I cannot make out what you are saying. Please call back when my wife is here.' (I recently shamed British Telecom into sending me an email with details of their latest broadband offerings. I sent them an email saying that their constant telephone calls with no email backup discriminated against people who are hard of hearing. The use of the D word, *Discrimination*, did the trick.)¹⁰

I seek out DVDs with subtitles, even those in which the actors speak English.¹¹ I am now adept at reading subtitles while watching the action on the screen and I invariably look for and read a synopsis of the story on Wikipedia before I watch the film. Even if the summary contains spoilers, knowing what will happen makes the movie more enjoyable. Horror, martial arts and action movies are among my favourite film types. Writing a sub-title for 'Argh' and 'Ker-plunk' is tough, but the body language says it all.

I avoid large social gatherings and never listen to music for the reasons cited earlier.

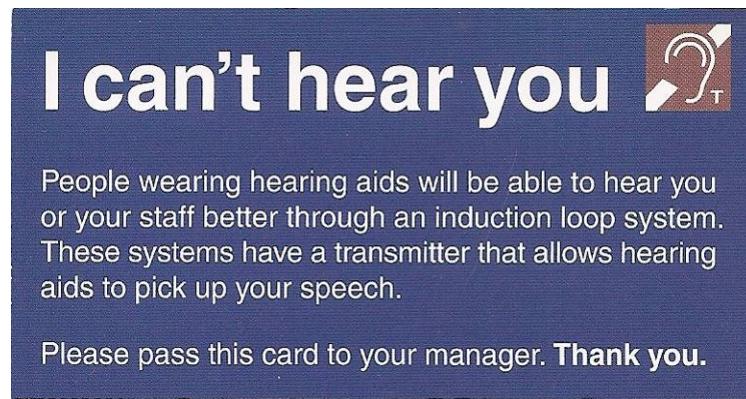
The hearing in my right ear is marginally better than in my left ear. This means that I now automatically position myself such that my right ear is closer to the speaker – in a restaurant (my back to a wall, right ear pointing into the group, my wife sitting on my right side so that she can tell me what's being said), out walking (a companion walker at my right shoulder, not left), and so on.

⁸ In 2012, I made a concerted effort to identify the cause of my distortion problem, especially as it related to my inability to listen to music – the music distortion problem. I published the results of my research in an essay titled *The Sound of Music: How Does Music sound to Me?* You can read this essay here: <https://ben-bennetts.com/2023/11/08/the-sound-of-music-part-1/> The essay has attracted comment from twelve others with the same music distortion problem and I have condensed their replies here: <https://ben-bennetts.com/2023/11/08/the-sound-of-music-part-2/> Clearly, I am not alone.

⁹ Now available here: <https://rnid.org.uk/information-and-support/support-for-businesses-and-organisations/help-your-staff-check-their-hearing-with-our-online-test/>

¹⁰ I ditched the BT phone when I acquired an Apple iPhone 6. The sound on the smartphone is acceptable but I still eschew its use for making or taking calls. I find the stereo sound output on my iPad Mini to be mostly okay for speech however and now speak to family members using FaceTime.

¹¹ For more on subtitles, take a look at: <https://ben-bennetts.com/2018/11/14/my-thanks-to-the-subtitlers/>



Action on Hearing Loss awareness card¹²

I've become apologetic about my deafness. Why? I don't know, but if I am spoken to by a shop assistant or someone wanting to strike up a casual conversation, I immediately point to my hearing aids and apologise for my affliction. Invariably, I say, 'It's my problem, not yours.' This sometimes induces embarrassment in the speaker, and then I feel guilty, but it's better than saying, 'Shout; I'm a deaf old bugger!', or something similar.

Sometimes, my deafness works to my advantage. On one of my last business flights to Dallas, a 9-hour flight from Heathrow, I sat next to a Muslim lady clad in a full burqa – no undone blouse buttons on this one! I dislike the burqa and the mental and physical imprisonment it represents, and I cannot conceive of having a conversation with someone when all you can see are their eyes, and then only if the person is looking at you. When the lady concerned tried to start a conversation, I pointed to my hearing aids and muttered something about being deaf. She got the message, and for 9 hours, she just sat there and didn't move other than for biological or physiological reasons. I felt guilty, but, for once, my deafness was an asset.

(I've discussed this incident more in my book on religion, [The Religion Business: Cashing in on God](#), Atheos Books, 2012.)

I rarely watch television these days. I see the pictures, but I cannot make out the words, especially if there is background music. It's worse if it's a talking head show – the news or a comedy quiz. Nowadays, I find out what's happening around the world by logging on to the BBC's online website or by reading an online newspaper.

I always try to carry a hat or an umbrella, or wear a jacket with a hood when out walking in case it rains. It does not do to get your hearing aids wet. They are delicate electronic instruments. Talking of which, I put the aids in my ears first thing in the morning and they stay there all day and are not removed until I finally retire at night. They are comfortable and unobtrusive, and I have been known to forget that they are in place before stepping into the shower. On the second occasion this happened, it took me ten minutes with a hair drier to coax them back to life.

When I leave the house, I check that I have the usual things: wallet, keys, cash, reading glasses - and, nowadays, spare hearing aid batteries.

The hearing aids amplify my voice. My vocal utterances sound weird to me; they may sound strange to others, I don't know. Try as I might, I cannot get used to how my voice sounds. I hope it's all in the mind.

Walking into a headwind is like walking with a miniature but noisy jet engine placed just behind each ear. The microphones in the aids are situated on top of the bit that sits behind each ear and they pick up the wind and convert it into a screaming banshee delivered straight into the ears, no messing. I usually have to switch off or remove the aids to preserve my sanity, and I've given up any ambition I might have had to own an open-top sports car!¹³

As mentioned earlier, I now rely on email as a prime means of communication. Thank goodness for Windows Mail¹⁴ and the Internet.

¹² Action on Hearing Loss has rebranded as RNID which offers a similar service: <https://rnid.org.uk/get-involved/create-a-personalised-digital-communication-card/>

¹³ Modern aids come with a noise-cancelling feature. The jet engines go away if I activate this mode of operation.

¹⁴ Now replaced with Mozilla's Thunderbird.

I miss the chatter between my granddaughters when I'm in their company. I hear it, but I don't catch all of it. They, in turn, are too young to appreciate the severity of my deafness and they are not yet sensitive to my needs (but are becoming so).¹⁵

The good news is that my hard of hearing qualifies me for a *Disabled Railcard* which, in turn, reduces my rail fare and those of a travelling partner by up to 25%. I show my card with pride. It sits next to my *Senior Citizen Bus Pass* in my wallet.

Conversation in a car is difficult because of the constant drumming of the tyres on the road. I am contemplating buying a personal induction loop system (*circa* £600) so that I can converse with my wife when she's driving and with any other passengers in the car.¹⁶

I am now wary about starting a casual conversation with anyone I don't know. There's a high risk that it'll lead nowhere, especially if there is any form of background noise. This is isolationist, I know, but it is better than starting something I cannot finish.

These are some of the ways in which my life has been affected by deafness.

Conclusion

The moral of this story is to take great care of the nerve cells in your ears. Do not expose them to loud music – in cars, in discos, through headphones, in a room. Turn the volume down. Always wear ear muffs if in the presence of loud, especially sudden, noises such as gunfire. Protect the nerve cells from damage and enjoy the clarity of your hearing. I cannot, and I miss it. I miss the ability to talk to my grandchildren on the telephone. I miss many things we take for granted until they are removed. Cherish your hearing while you have it.

Last; borrow or buy David Lodge's *Deaf Sentence* book and read it. It's incredibly accurate about the effects of deafness, funny in places, and a rattling good story.

Thanks for 'listening' to my story, prompted and supported by the book.

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¹⁵ My granddaughters are now sensitive to my needs now that they are all young adults.

¹⁶ Which I did in 2020 – a Phonak *SmartLink* FM transmitter and Phonak *MyLink FM* receiver and T-coil converter which my wife and I used fairly successfully on countryside walks and when walking along a busy, noisy road. These days, I would use a Bluetooth communication system.

Appendix: My First Lip-Reading Class

Ben Bennetts

8 February 2010

I attended my first lip-reading class last Friday. The meeting was a hoot, but I'll probably not go again. Here's why.

The class was held in a crowded classroom at a local Community School. Half the classroom was taken up by desks full of computing equipment. We, the student lip-readers, stuffed ourselves as best we could into the other half of the room. Around twenty people attended the class; mostly well into their 70s and 80s. It quickly became apparent that many older people use the class as an oldie social get-together. Everyone was on first-name terms. I was introduced as Ben, and then the lip-reader, a lady called Jane, not her real name, went around everybody in the room introducing them to me. The class was a 2-hour class, and by the time Jane had arrived slightly late, set up her portable induction loop system (the T-loop), unpacked her copious carrier bags, had a few private chats and then gone around the room with all the introductions, we were 30 minutes into the lesson!

As to the lesson, Jane picked a topical subject (last week, it was chocolate and the takeover of Cadbury's by Kraft) and worked her lesson around the topic. It's all a bit haphazard. At one point, we each took turns to stand before the class and mouth the sentence, 'My favourite chocolate is ...,' filling in the dots. The class then tried to read the lips and work out the name of the favourite chocolate without being distracted by ancient teeth or lack of, lipsticked lips (on the ladies) and hairy moustaches (on the men and some of the ladies, unfortunately). I was the second lip-speaker, and I chose *Kit Kat*. *Kit Kat* is tough to lip-read because most of the action is inside the mouth rather than on the lips. Try saying it slowly and well enunciated. There are two little flashes of the tongue at the entrance of the *ts*, and that's it. Nobody guessed my favourite chocolate, which is good because *Kit Kat* is not my favourite chocolate.

Jane did lip-speak to the class, and we collectively tried to guess what she said. I say 'guess' deliberately. One class member told me that only about 30% of what you say can be lip-read. Lip-readers stand a chance if the action is on the lips, like the letters *p* and *b*. However, if the action is further back in the mouth, like *k* or *a*, it becomes harder to create the underlying word.

David Lodge, in his *Deaf Sentence* book, says 30% of English words cannot be lip-read, so I'm not sure who's right – 30% can or 30% can't? Either way, a lot of lip-reading is inferred from context and situation. I found it quite hard to figure out the words even when Jane was lip-speaking, and she was a professional. When we each did our own thing in front of the class, my hit rate was less than 50%. *Whispa* was a tough one, as was *marshmallow*. (I know, marshmallow is not a chocolate but the old man who used this example in his public performance insisted on telling us a little story about how his 'sweethart' of years gone by used to like marshmallows and how if she didn't turn up at the appointed time, he would scoff the lot. Are you getting a feel for the nature of the class? There's a good sitcom here waiting for a scriptwriter. Now, there's a thought ...)

We had a break for about 25 minutes. At this point, I discovered that I should have brought my own coffee cup. Oops. I also found that the break was in a small anteroom and the noise level was high, much to my embarrassment as everyone wanted to talk to me. I was the new kid on the block. I was reminded of David Lodge's opening scene in *Deaf Sentence* when the hero, Desmond, was trying to make sense of the conversation with the young, attractive female student and ended up just looking down the front of her blouse while he muttered his 'Really?', 'How interesting', 'Yes', 'No', 'Absolutely', 'Mmm' replies. The problems for me were (a) there were no young, attractive female students and (b) I had no desire to look down the front of an 80-year-old woman's blouse. Anything that might have been interesting in that department had long since gone south.

The portable T-loop system was fascinating. This was my second experience using an induction loop system, and it works well if I want to hear a speaker. Jane clipped a microphone onto her dress and I switched my hearing aids to their T-loop setting. The problem was that although I heard her crystal clear, if someone in the group asked a question, I didn't hear it, and Jane was not professional enough to repeat the question for the benefit of others who didn't hear it. Strange when you think that she knew she had a room full of *deafies*. I heard a *mumble-mutter-mumble* and then her answer. Jane had moved on by the time I had reverse-engineered the answer to the *mumble-mutter-mumble* question.

Another problem with the T-loop was that even though Jane thought she was being silent when she lip-spoke, in fact, she wasn't. I could hear a faint whisper of what she was saying, which defeated the object of the exercise. In the end, I switched out of the T-loop setting. Later, I discovered that I should have switched my hearing aids to their MT (Microphone and T-Coil) setting. With this setting, I hear through

the T-Coil input (what Jane's saying) and the hearing aids' built-in microphone (what others say). But a portable induction-loop system could be ideal for when my wife and I are out walking as I'll be able to hear what she says when the width of the path prohibits side-by-side walking. (I have now invested in a portable Microphone/FM Transmitter/FM Receiver/T-Coil system, and I will write about it in a future essay. It significantly improves my ability to hear and understand others in some environments.)

Jane provided 45 minutes of tuition in the 2-hour lesson. I left thinking I could have worked out what she told us: the sounds on the lips versus the sounds inside the mouth. I didn't need her to tell me. But my main concerns about lip-reading are:

- not everyone is a lip-speaker; in fact, most people do not consciously slow down, speak up and properly mouth the words when they say them;
- lip-reading doesn't work for all basic phonemes (word sounds); only those on the lips;
- I need to be face-to-face, almost in private space, and looking at lips rather than eyes for lip-reading to have a chance of working;
- the classes now cost £40 for fifteen lessons, and I could not attend all the lessons because of trips to Switzerland to visit granddaughters, upcoming long-distance walks, and other commitments.
- As I said at the start, I probably will not go again. I do not need yet another social group; I didn't learn much from the class; I will not be able to attend a full term; I don't think that lip-reading will benefit me much in day-to-day conversations; and I suspect that my natural curiosity in grammar and linguistics will enable me to work it out for myself.

Postscript

I never returned to the class and my lip-reading skills still need to be improved and are constrained by the fact that most people do not speak as a lip-reader speaks.

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