

Author Spotlight

PENELOPE LIVELY



Penelope Lively was born March 17, 1933 in Cairo, Egypt. After spending her childhood and close to the end of WWII in Egypt, Lively was sent to London at the age of 12 after her parents divorced—her mother ran off with another man and left her in the care of her father. She graduated from St. Anne’s College, Oxford, in 1954. She is the author of many prize-winning novels and short-story collections for both adults and children. Her first book, the children’s novel *Astercote* (1970), was followed by more than 20 other novels for children, many set in rural England, including the award-winning books *The Ghost of Thomas Kempe* (1973) and *A Stitch in Time* (1976). She is a popular writer for children and has won both the Carnegie Medal and the Whitbread Award. Her only vice, aside from a glass or two of wine in the evening, is gardening. She married Jack Lively (who died in 1998) and has two children. She currently lives in the London borough of Islington.

A British writer of over fifteen well-plotted novels and several short stories that stress the significance of memory and historical continuity, Lively’s fiction is also characterized by an absorption in the influence of the past on the present. She has twice been shortlisted for the Booker Prize for her first novel, *The Road to Lichfield* (1977), and again in 1984 for *According to Mark*. She later won the 1987 Booker Prize for her highly acclaimed novel *Moon Tiger*.

Moon Tiger is the story of Claudia Hampton, an intelligent and deeply flawed woman whose life is chronicled from various points-of-view that shift freely between past and present. The book opens with Claudia, elderly and irascible, making plans to write a history of the world from her room in a nursing home. Having had a long career as a writer of popular histories, Claudia is well equipped for the task, and *Moon Tiger* itself can be seen as the world history of Claudia’s ambitions. It is precisely by making this identification that the book’s themes come into relief: the ephemera of memory, the unrelenting march of time, the fragility of any single human perspective, and the collectivity of historical narrative.

Lively’s prose is sharp, precise, perfectly pitched, but shrinks from flashiness in a way that has sometimes been mistaken for cozy or middlebrow. The novel that put her on the map and the one which many critics consider her best, *Moon Tiger*, formally quite daring, was even criticized for being a “housewife’s” book (*NYT Book Review*, 5/4/17). At 86, Lively has no intention of retiring from writing, “I wouldn’t know what to do if I wasn’t writing and I’d feel very restless. I know if I start something new I may never finish it, but it’s what you do. A writer writes.”

Prepared by Maureen Socha
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Discussion Questions for *Moon Tiger*

- 1) Claudia acknowledges that she could be accused of solipsism: “There are plenty who would point to it as typical presumption to align my own life with the history of the world” (p. 2). Discuss how she tries to circumvent this charge. Does she succeed?
- 2) The author subtly employs different narrative devices in the kaleidoscopic text, including an omniscient narrator who provides different accounts of the same event. When Gordon and Claudia discuss the birds and the bees (pp. 26-27), we first read a Gordon-centered version, followed by a Claudia-centered version. What is the difference between these two versions? What is the author implying with this technique?
- 3) When little Lisa is told dragons do not exist, she states: “But if there is a word dragon, then once there must have been dragons” (p. 9). This beginner’s ontological argument is relevant to Claudia’s alleged agnosticism, which usually follows on the heels of invoking God’s name. Why does Claudia mention God so often? Why does she stress her lack of faith? Can you blame something that doesn’t exist? (p. 56-57)
- 4) “I was not a good mother, in any conventional sense. Babies I find faintly repellent; young children are boring and distracting” (p. 42). Do you agree with this self-evaluation? Talk about Claudia’s other relationships: daughter, sister, lover, and friend. In a conventional sense, was she “good” at any of these roles? When Claudia apologizes to Lisa for being a bad mother, Lisa “wishes Claudia had not said what she has.” (p. 182). Why does this complicate the situation for Lisa?
- 5) Throughout Claudia’s history, she encounters several non-English people, each one given distinct behavior. What are the stereotypes of Americans? New Zealanders? Russians? French? Do you think Claudia exhibits stereotypical English behavior?
- 6) Contemplating the Russian images conjured up by meeting Jasper’s father, Claudia thinks: “What he brings is in my head, not his. But isn’t that interesting? Time and the universe lie around in our minds.” Extrapolate this concept of personal history to that of reading a book: Do you think any meaning derived from the text is produced strictly by the story? Is the meaning extracted from the story? How much does interpretation depend on what’s already in the reader’s head?
- 7) Momentarily paralyzed when picked up at the station by her brother, Claudia is unable to walk. “To do so is to step back — back into other Claudias, back toward other Gordons. But those Claudias and Gordons are no longer there.” (p. 135). Do you think one’s identity can be seen like this, as a succession of defined ‘selves’ along a line? Or do you think one’s ‘selves’ flow together like a river? How does Claudia relate to older selves? (p. 206)

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Discussion Questions for *Moon Tiger* continued

- 8) Destiny, according to Claudia, is “overrated” (p. 37). Why? Discuss her notion of free will. When, if ever, does Claudia relax her antagonistic stance toward fate?
- 9) Thinking back on her passionate affair with Tom, Claudia says there is “no chronology.. It is a time that is both instant and frozen, like a village scene in a Breughel painting.” (p. 73). This passage seemingly indicates that a painting, or a static image, imitates heightened memories. Do you agree? Are memories jumbled or linear? Claudia suggests that “inside the head, everything happens at once” (p. 68). Does this mean words inadequately chronicle history?
- 10) “They will disintegrate before a few hundred bigoted avaricious adventurers...Civilisation comes to Mexico” (p. 155). Compare Claudia’s statement mocking European colonizers to ones made by Tom while in Cairo: ”You can always tell how civilised a country is by its treatment of animals,” says Tom. “The Middle East rates about as low as I’ve seen so far” (p. 105). What’s holds these two views together? Does anything make them incompatible? Describe Tom and Claudia’s general outlook on Cairo.
- 11) Explaining her incestuous relationship with Gordon, Claudia declares that “incest is closely related to narcissism” (p. 136). Is the reverse of this true? Gordon and Claudia have a competitive relationship, which is common among siblings. Discuss how this competitive spirit escalates into incest. Does Claudia think of Tom when she’s with Gordon? What about when she’s with Jasper?
- 12) “You have been my alter ego, and I have always been yours. And soon there will only be me, and I shall not know what to do’ (pp. 185-86). In this case, Claudia means that Gordon has been like a second self. Yet she never tells Gordon about Tom. What’s the significance of this? How do you think Gordon would have reacted?
- 13) Claudia denies that Laszlo was a surrogate son (pp. 178-79). But clearly she treats him better than she does her own daughter. Why do you think she behaves this way? Is it consistent with how she treats everyone else?

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Discussion Questions for *Moon Tiger* continued

- 14) When younger, Claudia rages against her inability to cope with the vast incongruity of history: “History is disorder, I wanted to scream at them — death and muddle and waste” (p. 152). But on the deathbed Claudia has resigned herself to this predicament and cynically says: ‘mythology is much better stuff than history. It has form; logic; a message’ (p. 7). Do you think this resignation demonstrates wisdom gained from experience? Is it a form of giving up? Either way, is this an inevitable part of one’s life cycle?
- 15) On the set of the Aztec movie adapted from her book, Claudia “cannot believe her own presence at this expensive charade. She is amused but also a little queasy” (p. 157). Throughout the book Claudia is fascinated and repelled by reproductions of history. Why? Discuss how this relates to the diary she rereads on her deathbed. Why is Tom’s description sacred to Claudia? Why does she find what she considers to be authentic history so liberating?

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