Definition: Lively, Penelope from Philip's Encyclopedia


Summary Article: Lively, Penelope


In a long and prolific literary career (she has written over more than 40 works for adults and children), Penelope Lively has excelled in a number of genres: the ghost story, the romance, the historical novel, even science fiction. Her work for adults has been marked by a consistent spirit of experiment subtle enough to win the admiration of critics while never alienating a wider readership. Absorbing modernist and postmodernist modes, she is predominantly a realist writer whose work, both for children and for adults, questions our experience of time, memory, and history and challenges the codes and expectations of the "real."

From the publication of her first novel for children, Astercote (1970), Lively has enjoyed considerable recognition and success. Her fifth novel for children, The Ghost of Thomas Kempe (1973), won the Carnegie Medal while her ninth, A Stitch in Time (1976c), won the Whitbread Prize. Her first collection of short stories, Nothing Missing but the Samovar (1978a), won the Southern Arts Literature Prize. Her first novel for adults, The Road to Lichfield (1977), was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, as was According to Mark (1984a). She won the Booker Prize in 1987 for Moon Tiger, the deathbed reflections on her own life and on the life of the twentieth century of an English writer, for whom history is a shifting kaleidoscope, without one defining perspective. The novel focuses on a consistent theme of Lively's work: the individual's drive for narrative order and the need to accept the inherent dangers and limitations of this drive.

Lively is a child of the British Empire and an adult of its decline. Born in Egypt in 1933 (her father worked for a bank), she enjoyed, as she recounts in the first volume of her vivid, self-reflective memoirs, Oleander, Jacaranda (1994), the privileged life of a colonial family. What she retains from that period (the subtitle of her memoir is A Childhood Perceived) is the child's sense of the strangeness of things when they were unfettered by the codes of English culture and of English class. The most memorable characters in her fiction for children and for adults are those who exemplify or retain the primordial strangeness of childhood perception and who resist containing experience and events within the neat structures of narrative or explanation.

The world of colonial privilege ended with the divorce of her parents in 1945 and with her repatriation to England, even if the world of privilege did not. Educated at a private school and at Oxford (where she studied modern history), she found security in the upper-class world of her maternal grandmother and her large house in Somerset, powerfully evoked in the second volume of her memoirs, A House Unlocked (2001). Prewar Egypt and postwar Somerset are recurrent places in her writing, the one representing a vanished world, the other a vanishing one. Given the impact of World War II on her own life and on the confident imperial world in which she grew up, it is not surprising that World War II haunts her work as the decisive event in the lives of many of her characters and of their culture; but it is the

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lives of middle- and upper-middle-class women, as these changed in the wake of the political, social, and sexual transformations of the postwar period, that always take center stage.

From the beginning (in her fiction for children and for adults), her work has focused on the displacement felt by her characters not just in time but in space, reflecting a modern world where older structures have disappeared or are disappearing, where change and transformation are constant but where the present is always haunted by a profound awareness of the past. More recently, as in her novels The Photograph (2003) and Consequences (2007) and her antimemoir Making It Up (2005), she has explored the question of choices made and of imagined alternative lives, but these works continue a preoccupation at the heart of her work: the dual roles of circumstances and of chance in shaping lives.

SEE ALSO: Children's and Young Adult Fiction (BIF); Colonial Fiction (BIF); Historical Fiction (BIF); Modernist Fiction (BIF); World War II in Fiction (BIF)

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS


ALISTAIR DAVIES

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