

'One of Britain's most celebrated novelists'

FINANCIAL TIMES

# Moon Tiger Penelope Lively

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY  
ELIF SHAFAK



WINNER OF THE BOOKER PRIZE



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MOON TIGER

'Very clever: evocative, thought-provoking and hangs on the mind long after it is finished' *Literary Review*

'One of Britain's most celebrated novelists. *Moon Tiger's* multiple, shifting viewpoints weave an eloquent disquisition on memory, identity, age, love and regret' *Financial Times*

'Atmospheric, inventive. Few books I've read recently have given me so much pleasure' Sam Jordison, *Guardian*

'Funny, thoughtful . . . A perfect example of the Lively art' *Independent*

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Penelope Lively is the author of many prize-winning novels and short-story collections for both adults and children. She has twice been shortlisted for the Booker Prize: once in 1977 for her first novel, *The Road to Lichfield*, and again in 1984 for *According to Mark*. She later won the 1987 Booker Prize for her highly acclaimed novel *Moon Tiger*. She is a popular writer for children and has won both the Carnegie Medal and the Whitbread Award. She was appointed CBE in the 2001 New Year's Honours List, and DBE in 2012. Penelope Lively lives in London.

*By the same author*

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I was born in Cairo and spent my childhood there during the war. I have also to acknowledge the contribution of that *alter ego*, understanding little but seeing a great deal.

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# Introduction



Penelope Lively's Booker Prize-winning *Moon Tiger* is an extraordinary novel that will grab you from the very first line. 'I'm writing a history of the world,' the main protagonist says. 'And in the process, my own.' I remember reading this striking opening for the first time, many years ago now, and then pausing to absorb the fact that it was a woman who was uttering these unusual words. An elderly, ailing, dying woman is the last person we expect to make such a bold claim. 'Let me contemplate myself within my context: everything and nothing.'

This, we do not say out loud often as a society, but the truth is we are not used to women claiming to speak for all humanity, blending the personal and the collective with such confidence and ease that they become inseparable. If anything, we are used to the exact opposite. Women's memories are supposed to remain in a separate box altogether; closed, sealed and kept away from the grand narrative of history, which, for the most part, has been recorded and remembered as 'his-story'.

The French philosopher, writer and feminist Simone de Beauvoir passed away in 1986, only a year before *Moon Tiger* was published. I cannot help but wonder what de Beauvoir would have thought of Penelope Lively's gripping masterpiece had she had the chance to read it. I think she would have adored it. De Beauvoir wanted her readers to notice the **Copyrighted Material** to patriarchy. She was concerned about how, whilst men have access to

the 'universal subject', the one telling the comprehensive narrative, women were relegated to the peculiar, the partial, the subjective, the Other. The leading literary critic Toril Moi also expanded this question in her work, underlining how women are not expected 'to speak with the ambition of the universal, to speak in the outrageous hope that we will agree with them, a right that men have considered unproblematically theirs for so many centuries.' It is this deeply rooted, conventional duality that Penelope Lively dismantles right from the start.

By creating the unforgettable character of Claudia Hampton and placing her at the centre of the narrative, Lively transcends multiple boundaries at once. Intelligent, opinionated, fiercely independent, at times aloof, and at other times surprisingly vulnerable, Claudia is a captivating, albeit complicated, character. A popular historian and a once-upon-a-time war reporter, she has not only studied history, but lived through it. 'Was she someone?' one of the nurses asks. She was indeed. Scholar, doubter, observer, traveller . . . daughter, sister, mother, lover . . . she was 'myriad Claudias'. Now, in her old age, as she lies in a hospital bed reminiscing about her long, eventful life and the world surrounding it, we, the readers, embark on a fascinating journey that weaves history, memory and memoir. Personal recollections merge seamlessly with broader political, social, cultural events. Seamlessly but not chronologically. Memory is neither linear nor static. The past is not a straightforward succession of incidents and dates. The novel, in complete harmony with the non-chronological nature of human memory, moves back and forth between the subjective and the omniscient. It is no small risk for a novelist to venture this far beyond the traditional format and we are grateful that Lively took it to create a dazzling structure of her own. *Moon Tiger* is water-like: it flows in multiple directions at once, never losing focus, never dropping its pace. This is a novel that embraces and honours the nuances of life, its inherent multiplicity, the way only great literature can. 'The voice

of history, of course, is composite. Many voices, all the voices that have managed to get themselves heard . . . My story is tangled with the stories of others.'

I read *Moon Tiger* for the first time as a young aspiring writer in Istanbul, and then I read it for the second time recently in preparation for this introduction. What struck me was how vividly I still remembered the novel and its characters despite the passage of time. Some books we read, we enjoy, but then, somewhere, somehow, we gently leave them behind. Other books we read, we fall in love and we sense that they have shifted something inside us. These are the kind of books that stay with us forever. *Moon Tiger* is a companion for life.

It is the genius of Penelope Lively to make Claudia the historian such a complex character, reflecting and refracting the kaleidoscopic nature of history itself. Claudia has myriad qualities, some admirable, others difficult to like; she is a combination of good and bad, in varying degrees, just like all of us. Impossible to reduce to a single thread or adjective, she is deeply human. As she narrates, she is restlessly remembering, but can memory be trusted? Can it ever be complete? 'Shake the tube and see what comes out.'

Some literary critics have called the novel 'experimental', but Lively does not so much experiment with the form as remain truthful to the subject of her story. History speaks in multiple voices. It also speaks through silences – the forgotten, the erased. By incorporating shifting perspectives, random coincidences and 'what if . . .?' questions, *Moon Tiger* captures both the stories and the silences of the past. When all that we take for granted as a civilization is in a state of flux, the art of storytelling is our one anchor, the bond that connects us all. 'The power of language. Preserving the ephemeral, giving form to dreams, permanence to sparks of sunlight.' The narrative shuttles between past tense and present tense. The outcome is an exquisite, multilayered narrative. This is not a mosaic or collage where every piece is fixed. *Moon Tiger* reminds me

of the Turkish art of *ebru* – ‘painting on water’ – where pigments are dropped into water and allowed to dance, creating their own patterns and designs.

Poetic, sensual and philosophical all at once, Lively does not shy away from the harshness of politics. Yet, even when she is referring to the darkest chapters in human history, there is profound compassion and wisdom in her writing. A deep awareness of the pain, suffering and loss. Both Claudia’s and others’: ‘Mother, Gordon, Jasper, Lisa . . . Father, lost on the battlefield on the Somme. Mother, gentle, well-meaning and “retired from history”.’ Her brother Gordon’s face always mirrors, eerily, hers.

The most poignant parts of the novel are about Tom Southern, the British tank commander Claudia was in love with. Before the war started Tom used to love reading history, but then he stopped. ‘When the times are out of joint it is brought uncomfortably home to you that history is true and that unfortunately you are a part of it.’ *Moon Tiger* is full of such magnificent sentences that will make you want to read them again and again. A conscious pacifism runs through this book like an undercurrent in a river. An instinctive agnostic, Claudia says, ‘Wars are fought by children. Conceived by their mad demonic elders and fought by boys.’ Few authors can capture with such depth the existential angst felt in a fast-changing world. The moment we stop seeing history as something that has happened in some other time, far off, and realize that we are in the midst of history happening, now and here. In today’s broken world, *Moon Tiger* remains just as relevant and universal as the day it was written.

Literature helps us to pay attention to nuances, comprehend the fragility and resilience of human existence, and the ephemerality of time, not unlike the ash that accumulates as the *moon tiger* slowly burns. From wartime Cairo to the English countryside, there is immense research and life experience behind this book. *Moon Tiger* is Penelope Lively’s seventh novel. It won the Booker Prize, competing against a powerful shortlist featuring Chinua Achebe, Iris

Murdoch, Peter Ackroyd, Nina Bawden and Brian Moore. In 2018 it was shortlisted for the Golden Man Booker Prize, a special one-off award crowning the five best novels from the Prize's five-decade history. It is one of the best novels in world literature. While readers adored the novel, and appreciated its nuance and mastery, the same cannot be said of literary critics at the time, some of whom were patronizing and condescending. I cannot help but wonder, had Penelope Lively been a male author, if the novel would have been far more highly reviewed by those same people and its universality better acknowledged.

But the good thing about great novels by women is that they outlast the sexist elitism of their reviewers. They always do. *Moon Tiger* is an exquisitely written, profoundly evocative and timeless novel from an author who is a master of the art of storytelling.

Elif Shafak, 2024

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‘I’m writing a history of the world,’ she says. And the hands of the nurse are arrested for a moment; she looks down at this old woman, this old ill woman. ‘Well, my goodness,’ the nurse says. ‘That’s quite a thing to be doing, isn’t it?’ And then she becomes busy again, she heaves and tucks and smooths – ‘Upsy a bit, dear, that’s a good girl – then we’ll get you a cup of tea.’

A history of the world. To round things off. I may as well – no more nit-picking stuff about Napoleon, Tito, the battle of Edgehill, Hernando Cortez . . . The works, this time. The whole triumphant murderous unstoppable chute – from the mud to the stars, universal and particular, your story and mine. I’m equipped, I consider; eclecticism has always been my hallmark. That’s what they’ve said, though it has been given other names. Claudia Hampton’s range is ambitious, some might say imprudent: my enemies. Miss Hampton’s bold conceptual sweep: my friends.

A history of the world, yes. And in the process, my own. The Life and Times of Claudia H. The bit of the twentieth century to which I’ve been shackled, willy-nilly, like it or not. Let me contemplate myself within my context: everything and nothing. The history of the world as selected by Claudia: fact and fiction, myth and evidence, images and documents.

‘Was she someone?’ enquires the nurse. Her shoes squeak on

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the shiny floor; the doctor's shoes crunch. 'I mean, the things she comes out with . . .' And the doctor glances at his notes and says that yes, she does seem to have been someone, evidently she's written books and newspaper articles and . . . um . . . been in the Middle East at one time . . . typhoid, malaria . . . unmarried (one miscarriage, one child he sees but does not say) . . . yes, the records do suggest she was someone, probably.

There are plenty who would point to it as a typical presumption to align my own life with the history of the world. Let them. I've always had my followers, also. My readers know the story, of course. They know the general tendency. They know how it goes. I shall omit the narrative. What I shall do is flesh it out; give it life and colour, add the screams and the rhetoric. Oh, I shan't spare them a thing. The question is, shall it or shall it not be linear history? I've always thought a kaleidoscopic view might be an interesting heresy. Shake the tube and see what comes out. Chronology irritates me. There is no chronology inside my head. I am composed of a myriad Claudias who spin and mix and part like sparks of sunlight on water. The pack of cards I carry around is forever shuffled and re-shuffled; there is no sequence, everything happens at once. The machines of the new technology, I understand, perform in much the same way: all knowledge is stored, to be summoned up at the flick of a key. They sound, in theory, more efficient. Some of my keys don't work; others demand pass-words, codes, random unlocking sequences. The collective past, curiously, provides these. It is public property, but it is also deeply private. We all look differently at it. My Victorians are not your Victorians. My seventeenth century is not yours. The voice of John Aubrey, of Darwin, of whoever you like, speaks in one tone to me, in another to you. The signals of my own past come from the received past. The lives of others slot into my own life: I, me, Claudia H.

Self-centred? Probably. Aren't we all? Why is it a term of accusation? That is what it was when I was a child. I was considered difficult. Impossible, indeed, was the word some-

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times used. I didn't think I was impossible at all; it was mother and nurse who were impossible, with their injunctions and their warnings, their obsessions with milk puddings and curled hair and their terror of all that was inviting about the natural world – high trees and deeper water and the texture of wet grass on bare feet, the allure of mud and snow and fire. I always ached – burned – to go higher and faster and further. They admonished; I disobeyed.

Gordon, too. My brother Gordon. We were birds of a feather.

My beginnings; the universal beginning. From the mud to the stars, I said. So . . . the primordial soup. Now since I have never been a conventional historian, never the expected archetypal chronicler, never like that dried-up bone of a woman who taught me about the Papacy at Oxford time out of mind ago, since I'm known for my maverick line, since I've infuriated more colleagues than you've had hot dinners, we'll set out to shock. Tell it from the point of view of the soup, maybe? Have one of those drifting floating feathery crustaceans narrate. Or an ammonite? Yes, an ammonite, I think. An ammonite with a sense of destiny. A spokesperson for the streaming Jurassic seas, to tell it how it was.

But here the kaleidoscope shakes. The Palaeolithic, for me, is just one shake of the pattern away from the nineteenth century – which first effectively noticed it, noticed upon what they were walking. Who could not be attracted to those majestic figures, striding about beaches and hillsides, overdressed and bewhiskered, pondering immensities? Poor misguided Philip Gosse, Hugh Miller and Lyell and Darwin himself. There seems a natural affinity between frock coats and beards and the resonances of the rocks – Mesozoic and Triassic, oolite and lias, Cornbrash and Greensand.

But Gordon and I, aged eleven and ten, had never heard of Darwin; our concept of time was personal and semantic (tea-time, dinner-time, last time, wasting time . . .); our interest in *Asteroceras* and *Primocroceras* was acquisitive and competitive. For the sake of beating Gordon to a choice-looking seam

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of Jurassic mud I was prepared to bash a hundred and fifty million years to pieces with my shiny new hammer and if necessary break my own arm or leg falling off a vertical section of Blue Lias on Charmouth beach in 1920.

She climbs a little higher, on to another sliding shelving plateau of the cliff, and squats searching furiously the blue grey fragments of rock around her, hunting for those enticing curls and ribbed whorls, pouncing once with a hiss of triumph – an ammonite, almost whole. The beach, now, is quite far below; its shrill cries, its barkings, its calls are clear and loud but from another world, of no account.

And all the time out of the corner of her eye she watches Gordon, who is higher yet, tap-tapping at an outcrop. He ceases to tap; she can see him examining something. What has he got? Suspicion and rivalry burn her up. She scrambles through little bushy plants, hauls herself over a ledge.

‘This is my bit,’ cries Gordon. ‘You can’t come here. I’ve bagged it.’

‘I don’t care,’ yells Claudia. ‘Anyway I’m going up higher – it’s much better further up.’ And she hurls herself upwards over skinny plants and dry stony soil that cascades away downwards under her feet, up towards a wonderfully promising enticing grey expanse she has spotted where surely *Asteroceras* is lurking by the hundred.

Below, on the beach, unnoticed, figures scurry to and fro; faint bird-like cries of alarm waft up.

She must pass Gordon to reach that alluring upper shelf. ‘*Mind . . .*’ she says. ‘Move your *leg . . .*’

‘Don’t *shove*,’ he grumbles. ‘Anyway you can’t come here. I said this is my bit, you find your own.’

‘Don’t shove yourself. I don’t want your stupid bit . . .’

His leg is in her way – it thrashes, she thrusts, and a piece of cliff, of the solid world which evidently is not so solid after all, shifts under her clutching hands . . . crumbles . . . and she is falling thwack backwards on her shoulders, her head, her outflung arm, she is skidding rolling thumping downwards.

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And comes to rest gasping in a thorn bush, hammered by pain, too affronted even to yell.

He can feel her getting closer, encroaching, she is coming here on to his bit, she will take all the best fossils. He protests. He sticks out a foot to impede. Her hot infuriating limbs are mixed up with his.

‘You’re *pushing* me,’ she shrieks.

‘I’m *not*,’ he snarls. ‘It’s you that’s shoving. Anyway this is my place so go somewhere else.’

‘It’s not your stupid place,’ she says. ‘It’s anyone’s place. Anyway I don’t . . .’

And suddenly there are awful tearing noises and thumps and she is gone, sliding and hurtling down, and in horror and satisfaction he stares.

‘He pushed me.’

‘I didn’t. Honestly mother, I didn’t. She slipped.’

‘He pushed me.’

And even amid the commotion – the clucking mothers and nurses, the improvised sling, the proffered smelling salts – Edith Hampton can marvel at the furious tenacity of her children.

‘Don’t argue. Keep still, Claudia.’

‘Those are *my* ammonites. Don’t let him get them, mother.’

‘I don’t *want* your ammonites.’

‘Gordon, be quiet!’

Her head aches; she tries to quell the children and respond to advice and sympathy; she blames the perilous world, so unreliable, so malevolent. And the intransigence of her offspring whose emotions seem the loudest sound on the beach.

The voice of history, of course, is composite. Many voices; all the voices that have managed to get themselves heard. Some louder than others, naturally. My story is tangled with the stories of others – Mother, Gordon, Jasper, Lisa, and one other

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person above all; their voices must be heard also, thus shall I abide by the conventions of history. I shall respect the laws of evidence. Of truth, whatever that may be. But truth is tied to words, to print, to the testimony of the page. Moments shower away; the days of our lives vanish utterly, more insubstantial than if they had been invented. Fiction can seem more enduring than reality. Pierre on the field of battle, the Bennet girls at their sewing, Tess on the threshing machine – all these are nailed down for ever, on the page and in a million heads. What happened to me on Charmouth beach in 1920, on the other hand, is thistledown. And when you and I talk about history we don't mean what actually happened, do we? The cosmic chaos of everywhere, all time? We mean the tidying up of this into books, the concentration of the benign historical eye upon years and places and persons. History unravels; circumstances, following their natural inclination, prefer to remain ravelled.

So, since my story is also theirs, they too must speak – Mother, Gordon, Jasper . . . Except that of course I have the last word. The historian's privilege.

Mother. Let us take, for a moment, Mother. Mother retired from history. She withdrew, quite simply. She opted for a world of her own creation in which there was nothing except floribunda roses, ecclesiastical tapestry and some changeable weather. She read only the *West Dorset Gazette*, *Country Life* and the periodicals of the Royal Horticultural Society. Her greatest anxieties were concentrated on the vagaries of the climate. An unexpected frost could cause mild consternation. A bad summer was matter for gentle complaint. Fortunate Mother. Sensible, expedient Mother. On her dressing-table stood a photograph of Father, trim in his uniform, eternally young, his hair recently clipped, his moustache a neat shadow on his upper lip; no red hole in his stomach, no shit no screams no white singing pain. Mother dusted this photograph every morning; what she thought as she did so I never knew.

History killed Father. I am dying of cancer of the gut,

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relatively privately. Father died on the Somme, picked off by history. He lay in the mud, I have learned, all one night, screaming, and when at last they came for him he died on the stretcher, between the crater that had been his last bed and the dressing-station. Thinking, I imagine, of anything but history.

So he is a stranger to me. An historical figure. Except for one misty scene in which a poorly defined male shape stoops to lift me and puts me excitingly on his shoulder from whence I lord it over the world including Gordon down below who has not been thus favoured. Even then, you note, my feelings towards Gordon predominate. But whether this undefined male is Father or not I can't be certain; it could be an uncle, a neighbour. Father's course and mine were not long entwined.

So I shall start with the rocks. Appropriately. The rocks from which we spring and to which we're chained, all of us. Like wretched thingummy, what's-his-name, him on his rock . . .

'Chained to a rock . . .' she says. 'What's he called?'

And the doctor pauses, his face a foot from hers, his little silver torch poised, his name in gilt letters pinned to his white coat. 'Sorry? What did you say, Miss Hampton?'

'An eagle,' she states. 'Pecking out his liver. The human condition, d'you see?'

And the doctor smiles, indulgently. 'Ah,' he says. And he parts her eyelids, with care, and peers. Into her soul, perhaps.

Prometheus, of course. Mythology is much better stuff than history. It has form; logic; a message. I once thought I was a myth. Summoned to the drawing-room, aged six or so, to meet a relative richer and more worldly than Mother, of whom Mother was in awe, I found myself swept up, held at arms' length by this gorgeous scented woman, exclaimed at: 'And here she is! The little myth! A real delicious red-haired green-eyed little myth!' Upstairs, I examined my hair and eyes in the nursery mirror. I am a Myth, I am Delicious. 'That'll do,

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