



Passing On

Penelope Lively

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Booker-Prize winning author Penelope Lively is that rare writer who goes from strength to strength in book after perfectly assured book. In *Passing On*, she applies her distinctive insight and consummate artistry to the subtle story of a domineering and manipulative mother's legacy to her children. With their mother's death, Helen and Edward, both middle-aged and both unmarried, are left to face the ramifications of their mother's hold on their lives for all of these years. Helen and Edward slowly learn to accept what has been lost in their own lives and embrace what can yet be retrieved. "The richest and most rewarding of her novels." - The Washington Post Book World

Passing On Details

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Roger Pettit says

"Passing On", by Penelope Lively, is a very good novel. It is perceptive and intelligent and is beautifully written. At first glance, it seems to be a very slight book. But, in fact, it packs a much greater punch than many more seemingly weighty novels. It is very English in nature: its themes are the effect of the death of a close family member on those still living; emotional and sexual repression; and the impact of wealth and of class divisions. The characterisation is excellent (apart from a slightly unconvincing portrayal of a young male punk), as is the plot. All in all, a very enjoyable and thought-provoking read. I am now keen to read this author's other novels. 9/10.

Anita says

I deeply enjoyed this book, which is my first introduction to Penelope Lively's world view. I want more!

Mickey says

This is my third reading of the lovely, slow-moving story of a middle-aged brother and sister living their lives following the death of their rude, brusque, unloving mother. The mother scoffed at them over every little thing, never praised them, bossed them and organized their lives. They are somewhat lessened by her actions, but have managed to come through with their own quiet personalities intact. They live in a Cotswold village, own their house and a piece of wilderness land attached to the house. Through directions in her will, their mother seems to manage their lives even from the grave.

They each have jobs and occasional bits of excitement in their lives, but really, they come to be pretty well satisfied with their quiet, slow, dull lives.

I love Penelope Lively's books, and enjoyed this one through each reading.

Alan says

I greatly enjoyed reading this very British book that explores the lives of two intelligent but introverted people, a brother and sister, who find themselves in a position to re-invent themselves after the death of their elderly, oppressive mother. This book is much more about the understated British style of writing, sort of like a 20th century Jane Austen, than the story. The characters are ordinary people facing ordinary problems of aging, lack of money, difficult family members, and trying to understand and meet the expectations of others. Yet, through the author's eyes, they are observant and reflective, helping the reader experience and appreciate the challenges of social life of people in an English village in the 1980's.

Katrina says

Lively is becoming one of my favourite authors.

<https://piningforthewest.co.uk/2018/0...>

Paul says

This novel is about a brother and sister, Helen and Edward Glover living in a South English village in the late 1980s. They are around fifty and have never married. We start at the funeral of their mother; she has dominated their lives and been a controlling and malign influence. Their younger sister Louise was the only one who escaped. Edward appears to be quite a neutral character, obsessed with nature and conservation. Helen, who is the main narrator has more of an edge, illustrated by her thoughts about her mother at the funeral:

"Eternal life is an appalling idea, especially in mother's case."

There follows an interesting study of loss, especially of a dominating character:

"During the ensuing days Helen felt as though her mother were continuously present in the house as a large black hole. There was a hole in Dorothy's bedroom, in the bed where she was not, on which, now, the blankets were neatly folded and the cover spread. There were various other holes, where she stood at the kitchen table preparing one of those unappetizing stews, or shouting instructions from the landing or inspecting a caller at the front door. There were perambulant holes in which she creaked down the stairs or came in through the front door. Almost, Helen stood aside to let her pass or maneuvered around her large black airy bulk as she occupied the scullery or the narrow passage by the back stairs. It was weeks before Helen could walk straight through her, or open her bedroom door without bracing herself for the confrontation."

The old and roomy house they live in is attached to a small patch of woodland called The Britches which is where Edward spends much of his time documenting the wildlife. There is a local builder who wishes to purchase the land and who had been frustrated by the siblings mother Dorothy.

As time goes on both Edward and Helen begin to change as their mother's influence fades. This is where the novel is interesting. Lively is showing that even for those in later middle age can develop and experience life. The drawback is some of the choices she makes for her characters, counter to that it does show mistakes are possible at all ages. Helen falls in love with her late mother's solicitor, Giles, who is silver haired and smooth talking. Lively portrays the obsession with another human being that can take over your life very well. She also sets the Gloves in sharp contrast with the acquisitive society around them; they simply aren't interested in possessions. The woodland could be sold for building purposes and make their lives more financially comfortable, but neither Helen nor Edward are interested.

There is a spoiler ahead; Edward's latent homosexuality and his acknowledgement of his feelings are, I think, meant to illustrate the ongoing problem of homophobia at the time. Edward was brought up at a time when such activities were illegal. Edward's character is a good examination of repression, however the working out at the end left me angry. Not everyone who has repressed their true nature because of the society around them is going to make their first reaching out to another a fourteen year old! This just suggests that those who are gay are actually a danger to children if feelings are repressed. It was clumsily handled and for me let down what was actually a good analysis of loss and growth.

Liz says

Why are so many books by contemporary English writers so full of lonely people?

Lucy Shahar says

What a wonderful novel! I'm not sure I've read Penelope Lively before. She creates quirky and vulnerable characters, in this case, a middle-aged brother and sister trying to come to terms with the death of their mother, a horrible woman. A dominating and domineering personality, she injured them psychologically in many ways. They are sensitive, intelligent and hungry for love. Lively writes with considerable insight about many of the issues we all deal with: disappointment in love, attempts at human connection and the attempt to overcome established ways of behaving in the world.

Marianne says

Such a wonderful book! Suzanne Berne recommended it to me (herself a wonderful novelist, in my opinion). I'm a big Penelope Lively fan, and this book--about an unmarried woman and her brother, dealing with the aftermath of their dead mother's control of their lives--was, as all Lively books are, a very satisfying read. It is both thought provoking eminently readable: I looked forward to going into my bedroom to read it at the end of the day.

Tam May says

2.5 stars

Some spoilers

I really wanted to like this book because I've heard so much about Penelope Lively as a contemporary psychological fiction writer and the blurb for this book intrigued me. It's exactly the kind of story I like, full of possibilities. Unfortunately, this book feels very short, in my eyes, on delivery.

First off, there was a lot of telling. a LOT. I realize this is partly Lively's style but I would say the majority of the book was telling. And when there was finally a rather long passage of more showing (a conversation between brother and sister getting out in the open something about their feelings about their mother), a lot of it was just random thoughts with no direction. This is another problem with the book - it has no real story to hang on to. It has a situation (narcissistic mother who keeps middle-aged children under her thumb dies, what do they do now?) but no actual storyline. As a writer of psychological fiction, I don't buy into the idea that you don't have to have a plot because you're dealing with inner worlds. There still needs to be a story, a direction, something for readers to follow. Otherwise, like this book, it becomes a rambling bit of interesting incidents and thoughts with nothing to tie them together.

Finally, I had a HUGE problem with the whole homosexuality thing. Not only was Edward portrayed in an insultingly stereotyped way (homosexual as inherently unhappy, weird, unlikeable and sexually deviant) but the issue of sexual molestation of a minor was treated as trivial. No one in the book (not Edward or his sister

or the boy's parents) seemed to realize that it wasn't that Edward was attracted to another male but that he tried to molest a teenager. It was treated like it was no big deal. I get that the book was written in the mid-1980's when there was less awareness of the psychological consequences of sexual molestation on children and teens but it still seems to me unlikely that everyone would be so dismissive about it even for that time.

Overall, the book was an interesting premise and there were some great character explorations but some major issues with it for me.

Jen says

Penelope Lively is so good. I'd say this book is strong with dialogue and characters, but give it low marks for plot/slow pacing at points. I really sympathized with Helen and so wanted more for her in life.

I was conflicted about some events toward the end, with Edward - you don't want him to suffer, yet his actions really should have been reported to authorities. Penelope Lively seemed to have little sympathy for a youngster that should not have been treated as he was, and that bothered me. the way it was portrayed seemed to make light of something quite serious. Take it from the imposed-upon youngsters of the world. I wonder if it was partly a sign of the attitudes at time it was written.

Annelies says

What happens if a mother with a strong hold upon her two middle-aged, unmarried children, dies? In this book Penelope Lively gives us an ironical and in the meantime a bit sad view of them. As always, she uses a strong psychological approach. Both figures are a bit sad, there doesn't happen much in their lives, they still live as one did 'In the old times'. But it is only On the first view that there seems to happen not a lot. Step for step, the autor builds the psychological tense to an unexpected climax.

I just loved the personages. All personages seems to be a little awkward, none seems to be quite normal. But it is done with so much subtlety that it doesn't prohibit you to feel a bit sorry for them.

Darren says

4*

Emma Williams says

Oh wow I loved this. Searingly well-observed, so painful and so beautiful. A truly crafted novel.

Ellen says

This was really an interesting novel, and I enjoyed Lively's style very much. It's the first of her books that

I've read and I'm very impressed.

As a psychological study of two siblings whose mother has recently died the novel succeeds wonderfully. The sister, Helen, tries to hold things together, but ends up becoming nearly obsessed with a married man. The brother, Edward, reels toward a breakdown as he attempts to cope with the realization that his life is out of whack with reality and that he's denied his true nature throughout his life. These are two middle-aged people who seemingly have drifted through life, without having made conscious choices of the directions of those lives.

In a way this novel read in a similar way to one of Anita Brookner's; I'm very fond of her novels as well. For more about Brookner, see:

<http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/...>

In any case, I plan on reading more of Penelope Lively's books. She's one of Britain's best novelists from everything I've heard from friends and have read about her books.
