This article is more than **3 years old**

Interview

# Penelope Lively: 'I was a traumatised teenager'

Rachel Cooke

**The Booker-winning author on starting late as a writer, her clear recall of growing up in Cairo, and the TV programme that kept her going during lockdown**

Penelope Lively, the author of many novels and short story collections, is the only writer to have won both the Booker prize (in 1987, for her novel *Moon Tiger*) and the Carnegie Medal, an award that recognises an outstanding book for children and young adults (in 1973, for *The Ghost of Thomas Kempe*). Among her memoirs is *Oleander, Jacaranda*, about her childhood in Cairo before and during the second world war. Her latest book, *Metamorphosis: Selected Stories*, spans 40 years of writing. She lives in London.

**You edited *Metamorphosis* yourself. Was it hard to choose which stories to include?**
In a way it was easy. I kept thinking, "Oh my God, not that one!" I did feel I was exercising editorial judgment. There are two new stories, written in 2018. At the time, they were a problem: they're quite long, but they were too short to be published as novellas; effectively, they'd been shoved in a box. I thought: "Oh good, we can use those, too."

**Do stories come from a different place to novels?**
They're two completely different operations. The novel is hacking away at a block of stone. You're hunting for what's inside, and you'll be doing so for a couple of years. For me, short stories just arrive - or they don't. They're nearly always derived from life as it is lived: a sudden flash of inspiration, or recognition.

**Which other short story writers do you admire?**
It's such a flexible form. The sort I *don't* like are the Roald Dahl kind, where there is always a sting in the tail. Isn't there one where the murder weapon is a frozen leg of lamb? I find that irritating. I do admire Chekhov, but only up to a point. His stories don't seize me in the same way as William Trevor's. Jane Gardam and Helen Simpson are marvellous.

**Selecting the stories must have given the opportunity to consider a long career. How does it look to you now?**
When I started, publishers didn't expect a breakthrough with a first or second book. They were prepared to stay with an author for a long time. They seem to be more driven by marketing now, and a lot of extremely good writers' careers have tapered out because of this demand for the starry, attention-seeking book. I started quite late. I didn't publish my first children's book until I was nearly 40. That's almost unheard of now. People must publish before they're 25.

**What about the move from books for children to adult fiction? Was that difficult, or entirely natural?**
I'd begun to realise that I couldn't do everything I wanted to do as a writer if I wrote only for children. There is a wonderful Auden

Explore our developer-friendly HTML to PDF API Printed using PDFCrowd HTML to PDF

quote: “There are good books which are only for adults. There are no good books which are only for children.” I felt that was quite right. So I thought I’d have a go. At the time [*The Road to Lichfield*, which was shortlisted for the Booker prize, was published in 1977], an editor said that he thought I should publish for adults under another name. I could see what he was doing. He was belittling children’s literature. He was saying I wouldn’t be taken seriously. I said: “No way.”

**Your Egyptian childhood has often bubbled up in your fiction, and does so again in one of the new stories. Is it still as vivid to you as ever?**
Yes, I have it in my head with absolute clarity. I could draw a map of our garden in Cairo to this day. I knew at some point I wanted to use it in a book, but that didn’t happen until I went back to Egypt as an adult. I found the house that I’d lived in, and I began to see how I might use it in a novel - the novel that became *Moon Tiger*.

**Do you think your childhood - the feeling of being an outsider, looking in - played a part in your becoming a writer?**
The polyglot, cosmopolitan world of Cairo was all I’d ever known as a child. I’d never been anywhere else. I was English in a society that was Islamic and also very French. I remember my astonishment on first coming to England and realising that everyone spoke English. It sounded very odd to me. But to answer the question: yes. Writers are always trying to imagine worlds that aren’t theirs. If you’re a woman, for instance, you need to write about men as well. There isn’t a way round that.

**Was your return to England at the age of 12 a huge shock?**
I was a traumatised teenager, wrenched from one place and brought to a completely different one. Until then, I’d never been to school; I’d only had my nanny, Lucy. It was just before the end of the war, and it was freezing cold. I was saved by my beloved grandmother in Somerset, who accepted this waif, and digested her into her life. I stayed with her in the holidays. My poor father was a single parent, and he was at work, so I would have been on my own all day if I’d been with him.

**What about your mother?**
She didn’t ask for custody when my parents divorced. She’d met another man, and didn’t come back to England for two years, by which time I was a different person. I should say that she wasn’t being particularly neglectful. She’d only ever looked after me on Wednesday afternoons, when Lucy had time off, which was just what women of that class did then.

**Was it very unusual, in those days, to be the child of a divorce?**
Yes. In my boarding school there was only one other girl in the same situation. When I arrived, I was summoned by the headmistress, who said: “You have divorced parents, that’s not very nice, and you mustn’t talk about it.”

**After university how did you see your future?**
The expectation was that women would marry. I had a job in Oxford, working for a don. I remember my father driving me to Paddington to get the train back to Oxford after a visit. At the traffic lights he said: “Shouldn’t you be thinking about getting married?” But then I did marry [Jack Lively, an academic, died in 1998]. I started writing when my youngest child was at primary school, though I felt very diffident about it.

**What was it like to win the Booker prize?**
I wasn’t expected to win, and I wasn’t expecting to win. Jack said: “I don’t think you’ll win, but just in case, you’d better think of something to say, and don’t drink too much.” The result was that I now remember, having been swept away in this flurry, pathetically asking if I could perhaps have a glass of wine. But there’s a lot of luck to it. You haven’t written the best book. You’ve simply written a book about which the judges have been able to come to some sort of agreement.

**What kind of lockdown did you have?**
I didn’t love it. I was worried about members of my family; I missed seeing people. I can’t read for as a long as I used to, so I also watched a lot of television. I discovered *Spooks*. There was the marvellous matter of the weeks when I went all the way through *Spooks* - and then, to my horror, it ended.

**Are you writing now?**
No, I’m not. If I have an idea I might suddenly start, but for heaven’s sake… I’m 88.

• *Metamorphosis: Selected Stories* by Penelope Lively is published by Fig Tree (£20). To support the *Guardian* and *Observer* order your copy at guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply

This is the archive of The Observer up until 21/04/2025. The Observer is now owned and operated by Tortoise Media.

## At this dangerous moment for dissent

I hope you appreciated this article. Before you close this tab, I wanted to ask if you could support the Guardian at this crucial time for journalism in the US.

When the military is deployed to quell overwhelmingly peaceful protest, when elected officials of the opposing party are arrested or handcuffed, when student activists are jailed and deported, and when a wide range of civic institutions - non-profits, law firms, universities, news outlets, the arts, the civil service, scientists - are targeted and penalized by the federal government, it’s hard to avoid the conclusion that our core freedoms are disappearing before our eyes - and democracy itself is slipping away.

In any country on the cusp of authoritarianism, the role of the press as an engine of scrutiny, truth and accountability becomes increasingly critical. At the Guardian, we see it as our job not only to report on the suppression of dissenting voices, but to make sure those voices are heard.

Explore our developer-friendly HTML to PDF API Printed using PDFCrowd HTML to PDF

Not every news organization sees its mission this way - indeed, some have been pressured by their corporate and billionaire owners to avoid antagonizing this government. I am thankful the Guardian is different.

Our only financial obligation is to fund independent journalism in perpetuity: we have no ultrarich owner, no shareholders, no corporate bosses with the power to overrule or influence our editorial decisions. Reader support is what guarantees our survival and safeguards our independence - and every cent we receive is reinvested in our work.

The Guardian's global perspective helps contextualize and illuminate what we are experiencing in this country. That doesn't mean we have a single viewpoint, but we do have a shared set of values. Humanity, curiosity and honesty guide us, and our work is rooted in solidarity with ordinary people and hope for our shared future.

**It has never been more urgent, or more perilous, to pursue reporting in the US that holds power to account and counters the spread of misinformation - and at the Guardian we make our journalism free and accessible to all. Can you spare just 37 seconds now to support our work and protect the free press?**

**We value whatever you can spare, but a recurring contribution makes the most impact, enabling greater investment in our most crucial, fearless journalism. As our thanks to you, we can offer you some great benefits - including seeing far fewer fundraising messages like this. We've made it very quick to set up, so we hope you'll consider it. Thank you.**

**Betsy Reed**
*Editor, Guardian US*

Support $5/monthly

Recommended

**Support $15/monthly**

Unlock **All-access digital** benefits:

- Far fewer asks for support
- Ad-free reading on all your devices
- Unlimited access to the premium Guardian app
- Regular dispatches from the newsroom to see the impact of your support
- Unlimited access to the Guardian cooking app, Feast

Support once from just $1

Continue → Remind me in October VISA mastercard AMERICAN EXPRESS PayPal

Explore more on these topics

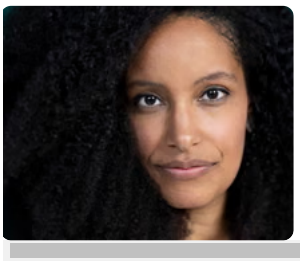
Fiction | Books interview | Penelope Lively | interviews

Share

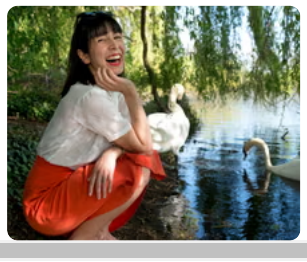
Reuse this content

## Books interview

Novelist Kiley Reid: 'Consumption cannot fix racism'



Kaliane Bradley: 'I dreaded the book going to people I know'



Novelist Oisín Fagan: 'I was at the altar of literature and had its fire in me'

Author Vincenzo Latronico: 'I left Italy out of sadness'

Poet Jasoı 'We belon

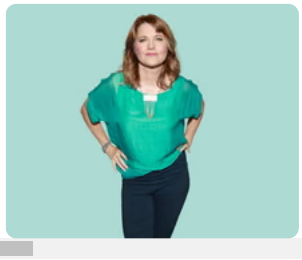
Explore our developer-friendly HTML to PDF API Printed using PDFCrowd HTML to PDF

## More from Arts

Music
'March of commercialisation': writing is on the wall for Berlin's nightclubs


Film
'I held on to what's important': Kim Novak on Hitchcock, Trump and her Venice lifetime achievement award

Television
Lucy Lawless: 'I've got bag lady hair. I look like I've just had sex in a dumpster'



Film
No Other Choice – sensational state-of-the-nation satire from Park Chan-wook
★★★★☆

Film
After the I Roberts fa Guadagni campus a
★★☆☆

## Most viewed

**Across The Guardian** | **In Books**

1. Senior Pentagon official had affair with 'notorious' astrologer who stalked him, lawsuit says
2. Lucy Lawless: 'I've got bag lady hair. I look like I've just had sex in a dumpster'
3. Detainees report alleged uprising at 'Alligator Alcatraz': 'A lot of people have bled'
4. 'Racist as hell': Trump's cabinet is almost all white, and he keeps firing Black officials
5. Collapse of critical Atlantic current is no longer low-likelihood, study finds
6. Mother of boy, 15, held at gunpoint by US immigration agents files $1m claim
7. Louisiana judge orders return of devices to ex-priest caught having sex on church altar
8. 'A perfect symbiosis': planting vines and other ways hot cities are creating cool spaces
9. 'I felt like the walls were closing in. All I could see was Fred West's face': how one woman escaped Britain's worst serial killers
10. Hypercapitalist hellhole or city of dreams? Behind the cliches, let me show you the real Dubai

Explore our developer-friendly HTML to PDF API
Printed using PDFCrowd
HTML to PDF