

City of the Mind Short Guide

City of the Mind by Penelope Lively

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Contents

City of the Mind Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Themes.....	6
Key Questions.....	7
Literary Precedents.....	9
Related Titles.....	10
Copyright Information.....	11



Characters

City of the Mind is one of a handful of Lively's novels possessing a male protagonist, the others being *Treasures of Time* (1979), *According to Mark* (1984), and *Cleopatra's Sister* (1993). Like his counterparts in these novels, Matthew Halland is a complex, fully human character who appealingly blends sensitivity and high-mindedness with full-blooded maleness (although holding romantic, idealistic ideas about love and sex, he cannot help but at times give in to the randiness that besets him now that he lacks a steady sexual partner). Matthew also serves, as do many of Lively's both male and female protagonists, as the spokesperson for the author's ideas about history, time, and reality. Like Lively, he has a deep respect for the past but is distressed by the contemporary fad of turning it into something picturesque and quaint. And he is given to frequent Livelyesque insights concerning the protean nature of reality and the artificial structure of clock time.

There are a number of characters who figure in the main narrative — Matthew's colleagues and clients, his ex-wife, a woman friend he occasionally goes to bed with, and a woman he meets halfway through the novel and begins to fall in love with — who are well sketched but whose minds we do not fully enter. The only other consciousness we are exposed to is that of Jane, Matthew's small daughter, and it is in good part through this exposure that Lively illustrates the way children's perceptions of time and reality are so much less structured than adults'. Each of the four subnarratives set in the past has a protagonist: Jim Prothero, a volunteer neighborhood warden during the World War II blitz whose neighborhood was the old City of London; a Victorian street urchin named Rose who roamed the alleys of Covent Garden; the nineteenth-century paleontologist Richard Owen, whose home was located in what is now the Royal College of Surgeons in Lincoln's Inn Fields; and Martin Frobisher, the Elizabethan navigator who set sail from the Thames in search of the Northwest Passage. Their consciousnesses are rendered, but none of these characters is fully developed. For the most part, they serve merely as means to express Lively's themes about the ghosts of past inhabitants reverberating in contemporary London.



Social Concerns

Set in late 1980s London and featuring as its protagonist a prototypical modern man, *City of the Mind* explores many contemporary social concerns and dilemmas. Having recently gone through a painful divorce, forty-yearold Matthew Halland is beset with feelings of dislocation and confusion and spends much time pondering what went wrong in his marriage and how a once passionate love can mysteriously dissolve. His distress is sharpened by the fact that his wife now has custody of their eight-year-old daughter, and Lively poignantly renders the all too common situation of the divorced father forced to feed his paternal emotional cravings on the thin meal of biweekly visitations.

Matthew's daily life is characterized by the rush and frenzy typical of modern urban existence. As an architect, he is forever driving about the city visiting sites and clients, getting caught in traffic jams, anxiously checking his watch. He finds himself reflecting wistfully on earlier eras when "people wandered through capacious and unstructured days, tipping only from morning to night, and season to season." The moral dilemmas he faces in his work are also a product of the modern urban situation. For example, he becomes embroiled in a conflict with an unscrupulous developer whose goal of making money outweighs his conscience regarding the working-class tenants being evicted from the buildings he plans to gentrify. And Matthew, sharing Lively's respect for history, finds himself torn between pride in the steel and glass highrise he designed for the Docklands — the old wharves district on the banks of the Thames that is undergoing massive conversion to a high-tech business and financial area — and qualms about participating in this wholesale ripping up of the past and altering of an area's character. Matthew is thus beset with the daily anxieties and ethical questions spawned by urban development and modern life.

Techniques

In *City of the Mind* Lively uses an unusual narrative structure, which readers accustomed to conventional novels may find jarring and distracting. The main narrative, about Matthew Halland and his professional and personal life, makes up the bulk of the work, but it is sporadically interrupted by segments of the four subnarratives concerning past inhabitants of London.

Lively deftly engineers these shifts between main narrative and subnarratives using a series of hinges, or linking motifs. The hinge is usually an emotion or insight Matthew experiences that is similar to one experienced by an earlier denizen of the neighborhood in which he finds himself. Lively's method is to cut at this point from the main narrative to the counterpart moment in the subnarrative and to play the latter scene out, in lengths varying from a paragraph to several pages, before returning to the interrupted main narrative.

Thus, for example, just after Matthew, strolling through Covent Garden, is seized by an inexplicable, almost mystical urge to purchase a posy of violets, the narrative cuts to the Victorian urchin Rose, who sniffs out the hopeful fragrance of violets lurking amidst the stench of garbage and sewage. Again, as Matthew gazes at the Thames from his Docklands building, musing on the way the river reaches out to the sea and to the globe beyond, the narrative jumps back 400 years to Martin Frobisher, standing in the same spot and absorbed in similar reflections about the beckoning unknown worlds to which the river leads.

Again and again in this manner, Lively shifts the focus from Matthew to an earlier character unknown to him.

The technique thus helps to create the novel's themes about the presence of the past and about the web connecting all lives that have been lived in a place.



Themes

A major focus of this novel is London itself. Lively foregrounds and personifies the city, describing it as "throb[bing]" and "pulsing" and portraying it as being fueled by the energies of the myriad individuals who inhabit it. This impression of the city's richness and texturedness is in part effected by the frequent cataloguing of the sights, sounds, and smells that bombard Matthew on his daily traversings of the city: the various ethnic restaurants, the cacophony of languages, the pastiche of architectural styles from different eras.

One of Lively's purposes in foregrounding London is to demonstrate the weblike quality of the city, that is, the way its inhabitants' lives are inextricably and imperceptibly interconnected. Lively achieves this effect by frequently sliding from a close-up view of Matthew's activities to an aerial perspective, from which we can observe "the city's mysterious intestinal life" and detect the mazelike pattern Matthew creates as his path intersects with the paths of other people. This maze includes not only present inhabitants but the ghosts of past inhabitants as well. Using an unusual technique whereby the main narrative is continually interrupted by narratives about prior inhabitants of the neighborhoods Matthew visits, Lively suggests that echoes of these former lives continue to reverberate and to affect future dwellers. The presence of the past, always a theme in Lively's novels, here thus takes on almost mystical dimensions.

Another major concern of the novel is the paradoxical subjective-objective nature of reality. The title implies, and Lively herself has stated, that the work's main thesis is that London, like any city — and like reality itself — exists only in the mind of the beholder.

She utters this idea through Matthew, who remarks to a colleague, "This city is entirely in the mind. It is a construct of the memory and the intellect. Without you and me it hasn't got a chance."

What Lively is getting at here is a point she expresses in many of her novels: One's perception of a place is shaped by one's mental cargo, especially by one's knowledge of history and literature; only young children, the primitive, and the completely uneducated can see reality in a raw, anarchic way. In a sense, then, she is asserting the philosophy of solipsism, the theory that the self is the only reality.

But on the other hand, in this novel Lively also suggests that reality has an existence apart from the mind beholding it. An omniscient narrator presents episodes from the past (narrated in the intermittent subnarratives) of which Matthew has no knowledge, thereby indicating that the past has an actual, objective existence. Also, a recurring motif is the vastness of the star-filled night sky, and a number of the scenes are set against this backdrop, with the effect of dwarfing Matthew's concerns and significance. Lively explicitly points to the paradox of reality and the dialectic between mind and object when she describes Matthew Halland as "a person of no great significance, and yet omniscient" and Martin Frobisher, the Elizabethan navigator featured in one of the subnarratives, as "a pinpoint in infinity, and a universe."



Key Questions

Like *Moon Tiger*, *City of the Mind* invites fruitful, controversial discussion, with some readers appreciating the book's tricky narrative shifts and others exasperated and confused by them. Thus, debate over whether the subnarratives are essential to the novel's artistic and thematic coherence will probably be central to any discussion of *City of the Mind*. But leaving aside the narrative technique and the ontological issues it raises, the book can be discussed for the social and moral concerns presented in the main narrative: the problematic nature of marriage, the emotional havoc wrought by divorce, the ethical problems created by urban development, and so on.

1. Why do you think Lively includes the four intermittent subnarratives? Do they contribute thematically to the novel (and if so, how)? Or do they detract from the artistic and thematic coherence of the novel?

2. Although the shifts between main narrative and subnarratives may strike some readers as jarring, close examination reveals that there is a certain coherence knitting together these different narrative strands: a similar experience, emotion, or insight linking Matthew to an earlier inhabitant of the region of the city in which he is currently present. What is the purpose of this kind of linkage? Is it done effectively, or does it seem merely decorative or tricky?

3. Why is this novel entitled *City of the Mind*? What are various meanings of this title in reference to the novel?

4. *City of the Mind* begins and ends with mention of stars, and there are numerous references to stars throughout the novel (for example, the episode in which Matthew and Jane visit a planetarium). How does this star motif contribute thematically to the novel?

5. Critics have praised Lively for accurately portraying a range of professions in her novels (including history, journalism, archaeology, botany).

How convincing is her portrait of an architect in *City of the Mind*? What details does Lively include to convey a sense of the particular concerns and satisfactions that come with this career?

6. If you have read other novels by Lively, how is Matthew similar to other protagonists? In particular, how is his attitude toward history and toward the past similar to theirs? Is Matthew too similar to other protagonists, especially other male protagonists? That is, does Lively keep creating the same protagonist over and over again? Or is Matthew unique?

7. Time is a major concern in this novel. What are some of the ideas about time that are treated in it? Consider the juxtapositions of different times (achieved by interweaving the time-present main narrative with the time-past subnarratives); Matthew's sense of being

simultaneously in many times as he listens to radio news from various parts of the world; and Matthew's, Jane's, and other characters' thoughts about time.

8. Characterize Lively's portrait of London in this novel. Does she see it as a thriving, vital place or a decadent, chaotic place? What details create this impression?

9. Although Lively is a nonreligious person and although she generally writes in a realist mode, one sometimes detects mystical elements in her novels.

What are they in this novel? Do they clash with the otherwise realistic nature of the novel? Or do they fit in thematically?

10. A major concern of the main narrative is romantic love. Matthew muses a great deal on the dissolution of the love between himself and his former wife, Susan, and on the budding of love between himself and Sarah Bridges, whom he meets several months after his divorce. How realistic are these portrayals of the souring of romantic feeling and of the growth of romantic feeling? Does Lively portray love in an authentic way or a clichéd way?

Literary Precedents

In theme and technique, this novel reveals the influence of modernism, recalling in particular James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). In both of these works, an accumulation of metaphor and personification effects the same kind of foregrounding of the city (Dublin and London, respectively) that Lively achieves in *City of the Mind*. And Lively's description of Matthew as being swept up in the city's "current," "torrent," and "streaming allusive purpose" echoes Woolf's of Clarissa Dalloway, who is swept up by the "waves of ... divine vitality" that roll through London's streets. Both Woolf and Lively, although agnostics, regard this phenomenon in an almost mystical light: Clarissa believes that although she will one day cease to exist, "somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she [will survive]," and Matthew has certain moments of epiphany when he suddenly glimpses "his scattered hours — irretrievable, enshrined" spread throughout London. Furthermore, the palpability of the city in *City of the Mind* is achieved in much the same way that it is in *Ulysses*: both Matthew Halland and Leopold Bloom are peripatetic protagonists whose occupations entail frequent traversing of the city and hence much immersion in its variegated sights, sounds, and smells.

Although the main narrative about Matthew contains the traditional realist features of plot, character, and verisimilitude, the intrusions of the subnarratives serve to undermine this realism and foreground the ontological issues the novel raises about the nature of reality. *City of the Mind* thus belongs to the handful of Lively's novels in which modernist and postmodernist tendencies predominate.

Related Titles

Of all Lively's novels, *City of the Mind* is closest in kind to *Moon Tiger* (1987) and *Cleopatra's Sister*, especially the latter. In all three novels Lively uses unconventional narrative structures and raises radical questions about the nature of reality and the nature of time; and in *City of the Mind* and *Cleopatra's Sister* she intersperses the main narrative with narratives taking place on a different ontological plane, thereby continually undermining the realism of the main narrative. However, *City of the Mind* can also be categorized with the other novels that feature male protagonists (*Treasures of Time*, *According to Mark*, and *Cleopatra's Sister*), for Matthew shares many traits with them.

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