

# **Moon Tiger Study Guide**

## **Moon Tiger by Penelope Lively**

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## Plot Summary

Moon Tiger is the story of Claudia Hampton, an intelligent and deeply flawed woman whose life is chronicled from various points-of-view that shift freely between past and present. The book opens with Claudia, elderly and irascible, making plans to write a history of the world from her room in a nursing home. Having had a long career as a writer of popular histories, Claudia is well equipped for the task, and Moon Tiger itself can be seen as the world history of Claudia's ambitions. This identification is not obvious. On a superficial reading, the novel is simply the story of Claudia Hampton, and nuanced and penetrating though it may be, it does not approach the breadth of a global history. But it is precisely by making this identification that the book's themes come into relief: the ephemera of memory, the unrelenting march of time, the fragility of any single human perspective, and the collectivity of historical narrative.



# Chapter 1

## Summary

The first chapter opens with the elderly Claudia Hampton announcing to her caretaker at a nursing home that she is writing a history of the world. Her nurse responds with polite condescension and later asks a doctor if her patient was ever “someone.” The doctor informs the nurse Claudia has written books and newspaper articles as well as having spent some time in the Middle East. Here, Claudia’s voice takes the narrative over in a series of free associations on the nature of historical knowledge. She plans to write a history that intertwines global history with her own life story, a move Claudia knows will be seen as self-centered. Claudia questions the negative valence attached to the idea of self-centeredness and sees in her own childhood the misguided admonishment of a self-centeredness that is not only natural but also universal. Claudia recalls that her brother Gordon, like herself, always disobeyed the conventional wisdom of their mother. She transitions from talking about the connection between the Palaeolithic and the 19th century to a childhood reminiscence of searching for fossils on a beach cliff with Gordon 60 years prior, when she was 10 and Gordon was 11. This memory, like so many others in the book, is told from more than one perspective. The story is first told from Gordon’s perspective and then from Claudia’s. Claudia and Gordon dig intently at the cliffside, each hoping to find more fossils than the other. They each stake out a piece of the cliff, but when Claudia tries to pass through Gordon’s space in search of a better spot, she falls down the cliff and injures herself. After this story is told from both perspectives, identical in essential facts but entirely different in their description of motive, the elderly Claudia’s voice returns, reflecting again on the many versions of history told by the people who experience and create it.

Claudia then recalls her parents. Her mother was a woman whose concerns were small and local: gardening, tapestries, the weather. Claudia’s father was killed on a World War I battlefield after excruciating suffering. Claudia has only the vaguest memory of him, and is not even entirely sure the man she remembers is her father. Here Claudia reaches a sort of dead end in her attempt to find the roots of her own life in the lives of her parents, who are essentially strangers to her, and she turns instead to rocks; rocks, she says, are both our origin and our burden. She tries to recall the name of the mythic Prometheus, who was chained to a rock for the transgression of stealing fire from the gods to give to humanity. Mythology, Claudia says, has form and logic: two attributes history lacks. In writing her history, Claudia will use many voices, none of them the dispassionate voice of the academic historian, whom Claudia criticizes for a certain narrowness of mind. She admires the liberality of the medieval chroniclers for whom the mundane and the extraordinary both existed side-by-side as historical events worthy of report. Claudia notes however rational we consider ourselves, our lives are as much shaped by a sort of magic as they ever were; she does not know, after all, how her television works, or how a computer chip does what it does. We all combine in ourselves qualities of the believer and the skeptic.



Claudia then recalls her daughter Lisa, a dull child among children, but a fascinating creature nonetheless because of her credulity and naiveté. A memory of Lisa's father, Jasper, cuts short Claudia's memory of Lisa. Jasper was Claudia's some-time lover, a half-English, half-Russian sophisticate who inherited his mother's English social confidence and his father's Russian cosmopolitanism. Claudia recalls the moment she told Jasper she was pregnant with Lisa while at the Ashmolean museum at Oxford. Again, the story is told from her perspective and from Jasper's. Claudia's version emphasizes her sexual attraction to Jasper and her ambivalence about pregnancy. Jasper's version emphasizes his irritation with her unwillingness to commit to a trip to Paris and his amusement with the novelty of her being pregnant.

Claudia mentions that, though Jasper was significant for her, he never dominated her life. She intimates there is another story having nothing to do with Jasper or their daughter Lisa that is actually her central story, but says she will postpone its narration. For now, she will deal with strata.

Claudia then shifts to admiring the Victorian civil engineer William Smith, whose examination of rock cores led him to draw important conclusions about geological history. Claudia talks of a Victorian photograph taken of a village street in Thetford. The photograph's exposure was so long many people passed through the scene and remained undocumented. Only the fixed structures—trees, unmoved carts, stores—were fixed in the photograph. Claudia reflects on the oddity of this fact, saying a human being may exist and leave no trace, while a decidedly less-complex and apparently less significant primordial worm may leave his mark for the ages in a patch of Cambrian mud.

Claudia recalls why she became a historian. As a thirteen-year-old student of history, she was instructed to copy from the board the so-called fact of Queen Elizabeth's benevolence. When Claudia asked her teacher whether Catholics agreed Queen Elizabeth was an admirable historical figure, her teacher tells her not to worry about it and simply to copy down the facts from the chalkboard. For Claudia, this was the moment when the uniformity of history was forever shattered into millions of discordant voices, and the moment when she became engrossed with listening to those voices and, ultimately, adding her own.

## Analysis

This chapter introduces the reader to the central conceit of the novel. Claudia Hampton will write a history of the world, in the process she will write her own, and one is to assume Moon Tiger itself is that history. Because Claudia rejects the facile interpretations of history that make of it one clear and univocal trajectory, her history will be told by many voices and will thus demonstrate the fact that history, and even particular human beings, are essentially plural. That is to say, there is not, in Claudia's view, a fact of the matter when it comes to history, or even people's characters, at least not a fact accessible to any individual. There are many world histories, just as there are



many Claudia's, and it is the task of the historian to tell these histories and paint an infinity of self-portraits in a way that is honest, even if incoherent.

Claudia repeatedly invokes a model of history and biography that is archaeological. She opts for strata and cores over linearity, and for this reason she feels a certain kinship with the Victorians, who for the first time pondered in awe the immensity of geological time and who learned about the past by examining drilled rock cores. Lively wrote the book in 1987, at a time when these postmodern ideas of history were very much at the fore of both academic and popular history. Lively does take the idea - that history is impenetrable to human analysis - a step further by suggesting the plurality of history is paralleled in the plurality of every human being. Claudia questions not only that there is a simple version of those events we normally term historical, but also that there is a simple version of the events making up our own personal histories. Because we can rewrite our own histories again and again, we can, in essence, create several versions of ourselves that coexist, even when they contradict each other. Moon Tiger is a reflection on this instability but it is also a reflection on the fact that certain core experiences are ineradicable. The core story Claudia alludes to in the first chapter will eventually emerge as the central structuring event of Claudia's life and will demonstrate, for all the plurality of history and biography, the reality of loss cannot be narrated away by any perspective.

## Vocabulary

triumphant, imprudent, primordial, semantic, alluring, quell, gorgeous, myth, permanence, restless, unshakeable, inadvertently, exposure, ammonite, incongruous



## Chapter 2

### Summary

The second chapter deepens the reader's understanding of Claudia's relationship with her brother Gordon through anecdotes and reflections that, again, shift freely in perspective and time.

When Claudia and Gordon were children, Claudia once prayed God would make her brother vanish. So intense was the competitive streak between the two Claudia was driven to send up this prayer when she was racing Gordon at the seaside as a nine-year-old. Claudia then remembers walking on the same shore years later and discussing the impending Second World War. The narration then shifts to 1946, at a lounge bar where Claudia, Jasper, Gordon and Gordon's wife Sylvia are talking. Gordon is intensely suspicious of Jasper and attempts to interrogate him but is too drunk to be truly intimidating. Jasper responds handily and maintains his decorum and cosmopolitan grace. Claudia and Gordon display their usual intensity and their dynamic leaves the dull Sylvia feeling irrelevant. Claudia dwells for a time on Sylvia, calling her 'profoundly stupid' and trying to describe why it is that Gordon and Claudia complement each other in a dreary way. Gordon, Claudia explains, is a deeply lazy person in spite of his inexhaustible intellectual energy. His capacity of emotional vitality is severely limited and so, in this sense, the torpid and boring Sylvia is a manifestation of Gordon's nature, even if at first the two seem ill-paired.

Claudia shifts from talking about Sylvia and Gordon to a memory of her nascent adolescent sexuality. When Claudia was 13 and Gordon was 14, a young Greek and Latin tutor was hired for the summer by their mother. The young man began by teaching only Gordon, but when Claudia was filled with a desire to impress the tutor, whom she found sexually attractive, she began to learn Latin and to compete with Gordon for the tutor's affections. Claudia describes the dynamic between the three as 'overheated' and then slips into another memory, this one of a moment between her and Gordon. When Gordon was 14, he was finally told how babies are made. Knowing Claudia was still ignorant of sex, he taunted her with the information; Claudia claimed to know the mechanics of sex but exposed her ignorance when she said a man puts his penis in a woman's belly button to reproduce. Gordon tells her that in fact the man puts his penis in a woman's genital area and, as he tells Claudia this, he pokes her crotch with his finger, creating in her a curious sensation, which, at the time, she is at a loss to explain.

### Analysis

This chapter is a prime example of Claudia's approach to narrative association. Though the story shifts perspectives and moves between past and present, it is not terribly challenging to follow the narrative because there is a straightforward thematic logic to the story's movement. This is to be distinguished from the complexity of writers who





also play with time and perspective, like Faulkner or James Joyce, both of whom are decidedly more challenging. Lively makes clear through Claudia the theme of this chapter is the sexual tension between Claudia and Gordon. The story moves from an infantile scene of competition to a slightly more suggestive scene between the siblings immediately before World War II, and then to a scene combining this competitiveness and intimacy in a palpable sexual tension between the siblings even in the presence of their significant others at a bar in 1946. We are left to wonder whether it is truly Sylvia's perspective we are hearing when we enter her mind in 1946 or whether we are hearing Sylvia as filtered through Claudia, but the sentiment expressed is unmistakable; Sylvia is dull and unattractive to Gordon. She is the lazy complement to the worst side of his character and his vitality craves his sister, for whom he still is incited to jealousy. The increasingly obvious suggestion of sexual energy between the two is confirmed finally and concretely in another adolescent memory in which Gordon's inappropriate touch gives Claudia a sexual thrill that she does not understand at the time for what it is.

The question of whether we are entering alternative perspectives or whether we are trapped in Claudia's consciousness even when we are led to believe we are seeing events from the vantage point of other characters is an important question, and is among the questions the book raises implicitly rather than explicitly. Because Claudia reflects at length on the nature of memory and historical knowledge, the reader is presented explicitly with a range of questions: Is there simply one version of history, or are there many? What is the relationship between history and biography? Why are certain trivialities memorialized while other significant events or persons go unmentioned in the historical record? Why is it important to study history? In addition to these questions, there is a set of more subtle questions that emerge in reflecting on the structure and conceit of the novel: Is Claudia able to get past her own perspective and see global and personal history from different points-of-view? Who is the real narrator of the book, Claudia or Penelope Lively? That is to say, do we hear Claudia's version of the people in her life, or do we simply hear them as they really are because their omniscient creator, Lively, is presenting them to us? This second chapter, even more clearly than the first, raises these more subtle questions.

## Vocabulary

propitiate, caricature, profundity, gingerly, intermittently, classicist, emergent, subjunctive, conventional, lolling, complacent, baffling



## Chapter 3

### Summary

The third chapter opens again with Claudia's free associations on historical consciousness. She wonders about the sense history-makers have of their own significance and is fascinated by imagining great historical figures' preoccupations with the mundane details of their monumental actions; Vasco da Gama or Marco Polo are envisioned in their dull examination of compasses, Caesar is imagined in his contemplation of the Sussex coast, the quaint figures on the Bayeux tapestry are pictured in their decidedly non-quaint labors during the Norman invasion. Claudia's associations focus in on the English settlers of America, and she declares the pilgrims are to have considerable space in her history of the world. She is thrilled, particularly, by the thought that these people, so small in their own struggle against the elements, spawned something so powerful.

After Claudia's reflections comes the story of a trip she took with Gordon and Sylvia to a village of historical re-enactors set in the time of the Pilgrims. The car trip itself receives considerable attention, again highlighting Sylvia's dullness and Claudia's contrasting vivaciousness. Sylvia, hot and plump, sits in the back seat and occasionally complains about the open windows. Claudia, thin and interesting even as she ages, sits in the front and argues with her brother about Malawi politics. Claudia's memories reflect her view that Sylvia is simply a pest or a sort of child to be dealt with quickly and silenced in the interest of more enlightening conversation. Sylvia's perspective, on the other hand, reflects her superficiality. Physical facts preoccupy her: the style of Claudia's hair, her own outfit as compared with Claudia's, her own hunger and the tuna salad she will have for lunch. On the whole, Claudia is shown to be a much more intellectual and energetic person than Sylvia, who is supposed by Claudia, and shown by her own thoughts (if, in fact, they are her own thoughts) to be a bovine bore.

Once the three arrive at the historical village, Gordon and Claudia wander about asking penetrating questions of the actors, who stay in character even when displaying mild irritation and the philosophizing that is in contrast with the straightforward questions of other visitors. Sylvia becomes flustered and embarrassed by Gordon's and Claudia's eccentricity and she stomps off to eat lunch. Gordon knows he ought to follow her but convinces himself she will regain her composure best on her own.

On their own, Claudia and Gordon discuss the value of counterfactual history. Imagining historical alternatives and writing historical fantasy is something that intrigues Claudia, who is capable of imagining things having been otherwise. Gordon, on the other hand, sees this enterprise as useless, implying he subscribes to a kind of historical determinism, or is at least too lazy to be interested in imagining the alternative dynamics of large-scale events. When it comes to personal histories, however, Gordon is just as interested as Claudia in imagining changed circumstances. He imagines Sylvia having



married Adlai Stevenson rather than joining up with Jasper, and he imagines himself as a professional cricket player.

## Analysis

This chapter is a more detailed depiction of the dynamics between Sylvia, Gordon and Claudia. Again, Sylvia is shown to lack imagination and to pale in comparison with the vibrant Claudia. Whether this contrast is real or is simply imagined by the self-aggrandizing Claudia remains unclear. The lazy quality Claudia identifies in Gordon is further depicted in this chapter. When Sylvia is upset by his behavior, he lacks the energy to deal with the situation and instead leaves her to deal with the problem in her own way. The reader learned already Sylvia maintained the status quo with her husband by remaining unperturbed by marital infidelity and it becomes even clearer in this chapter the marriage between the two is a union of the worst in two people and they function as a couple only because they are both too lazy to address their problems.

Gordon's character flaws are not the only ones further clarified by this chapter; Claudia's judgmental personality and her propensity for self-adulation is on display here. She not only is quick to dismiss Sylvia in her thoughts, but also has no qualms about belittling her and offending her at every turn. Claudia, though she is the narrator and central character of this story, tells two stories: the one she wants to tell, and the one she inadvertently reveals about her own personality. They are, at times, at odds. The story she tells of herself is of a confident and bold woman, while the story she inadvertently reveals is one of a deeply flawed woman who is either blind or indifferent to her shortcomings of interpersonal decency.

## Vocabulary

egocentric, inhabitants, querulous, wavering, wampum, imprisoned, blasphemy, stockade, manifest destiny, torpid, lavatory, dignity



# Chapter 4

## Summary

This chapter focuses on the relationship between Claudia and her daughter Lisa. Lisa has already been described as homely and entirely unlike either of her parents in temperament or intelligence. In this chapter the reader gets Claudia's perspective followed by Lisa's perspective on the nature of their failed relationship.

The chapter opens with Claudia in the nursing home, struggling to remember the word for curtain. After being reminded of the word by a nurse, Claudia ponders the historical nature of language. Our words, she says, preserve centuries of linguistic history. English, for example, contains within it traces of Latin, Anglo-Saxon and Norse. These traces emerge in the speech of ordinary people in ordinary places; they are heard on the bus, on the radio, in the supermarket. Claudia marvels at the complexity of language. Her awe gives her a capacity to appreciate Lisa as a developing child even in the absence of a strong maternal bond. Claudia recalls her fascination with Lisa's developing sense of the verbal as a young child and this launches Claudia and the reader into a memory of a wilderness walk Claudia and the child Lisa took many years earlier.

Claudia's version shows Lisa as a quiet, odd, and interesting child. Lisa's actions are obscure to Claudia, and she does not ask Lisa to explain herself. Claudia's questions are aimed primarily at understanding Lisa's mental development. Lisa's version of the memory demonstrates even at this early stage she was emotionally complex in a way to which Claudia was oblivious. Lisa's memory is of a mother who is barely present and always threatening to vanish altogether.

Returning to Claudia's perspective, the reader is introduced indirectly to Lisa's husband Harry. Harry, Claudia says is an example of British degeneracy; a man with conventional, second-hand opinions concerned primarily with mimicking a kind of outdated British opulence that is culturally irrelevant and personally unattainable. Claudia remembers Lisa's wedding to Harry and her memory is followed by the same memory from Jasper's perspective. Claudia and Jasper, estranged by this point, nonetheless have a rendezvous in a hotel after their daughter's wedding. In the morning, they argue about the intellectual integrity of a historical television series Jasper produced and Claudia defends her own sensationalist and popularizing historiography. We are catapulted momentarily to a memory of Claudia watching Jasper's television series. Its treatment of World War II sends her into emotional turbulence and she suggests, yet again, her central story of her life taking place during World War II remains to be told.

Lisa's memory of her own wedding shows her to be simultaneously embarrassed and awed by her parents, who defy all social convention in their behavior and bearing.



The chapter ends with Claudia remembering Lisa's dissolution from an interesting child to a dull woman. Though Claudia could not offer her daughter maternal love because she was simply too cold and unfeeling a woman to do so, she could offer her training in intellectual matters. Lisa, however, did not take to this training and she quickly became an irritant to Claudia. When we shift to Lisa's perspective, we see the void created by Claudia's coldness kept Lisa from taking hold of what Claudia did have to offer. Lisa sought nothing more than acceptance, love, and the sort of autonomy she saw her own mother exercising but could not exercise herself.

## Analysis

This chapter, like the preceding chapters, is structured by a relationship and by a historical consideration. This chapter deals with the relationship between Claudia and Lisa and deals with questions of language and history. In struggling to remember the word for curtain, Claudia feels abandoned by language. To be abandoned by language is to lose more than the power to communicate; it is also to lose one's history, because language is a kind of archaeological record insofar as it retains the traces of its own evolution. Here Claudia's archaeological sensibility takes on a new dimension; we have already been encouraged by her narration to see history and ourselves as layered archaeological sites; in this chapter, Claudia leads us to see even the words with which we analyze history as themselves a manifestation of history. Lively, through Claudia, is showing the reader how history is inescapable; there is nothing that is not historical. Global history, personal history, and linguistic history all set the very conditions of possibility for our thoughts, our fantasies, and our choices.

Reading beyond and between Claudia's own historiography, it becomes clear her version of events is as flawed as her own character. She dismisses Lisa as a bore just as she dismissed Sylvia, but Lisa's perspective shows us she perhaps remained as complex as she ever was in childhood but this complexity came to be shrouded from a mother who was emotionally unavailable.

## Vocabulary

commonplace, commemorate, idle, repellent, impenetrable, evasion, camouflage, undergrowth, benign, fettered, prominent, adequate, overblown, flowery, genetically, intrusive

# Chapter 5

## Summary

At the beginning of this chapter we are back in the nursing home; Claudia asks the nurses if they agree God is an unprincipled bastard, to which they reply with their usual bewilderment. Claudia turns to her own thoughts and says she would never have agreed to have Lisa christened but her two grandmothers together conspired and had the ritual performed without telling her. This angered Claudia, who saw the event simply as an opportunity for her grandmothers to maintain a superficial sense of propriety and to have a tea party.

Returning to the nursing home, Claudia asks Lisa, who is visiting her, whether she has resigned from the Church of England. Lisa replies she goes to church only for special occasions and, when pressed, says she is not sure she believes in God. Claudia replies she does, because nobody else could have made such a mess of things.

Claudia asks Lisa to tell her what she has been doing and Lisa gives a rather dull and brief narrative of her family activities. She conceals from Claudia the fact she has seen her lover of four years. Entering Lisa's thoughts, we discover Lisa resents Claudia's facile assumptions about her own character; Claudia has assumed her daughter is an uncomplicated and boring person, and therefore this is the person Lisa shows her.

We return to Claudia's thoughts on God and history. God, she says, will have a starring role in her history of the world because he has been the cause and inspiration for innumerable great events, good and bad. The construction of Chartres Cathedral, composition of Saint Matthews Passion, and the works of Michelangelo can all be attributed in one way or another to the idea of God. The crusades, the invention of innumerable instruments of torture, the pogroms, and the Inquisition are all similarly attributable to God. Claudia struggles with how she would explain the odd fact that much of human history has been dictated by the belief in an indefinable and unassuageable Power to an alien. She decides the only fitting demonstration of God's power in human affairs is the ubiquity of churches, buildings outfitted neither for habitation nor defense existing everywhere despite their total lack of utility.

Claudia turns from her thoughts on religion in the abstract to her own experience with prayer. During her time in Cairo in World War II, Claudia went to Saint George's Pro-Cathedral and set aside all her intellectual objections to the existence of God simply to beg a putative God for help and support. Torn asunder by events she leaves unnamed, Claudia was driven to a moment of religiosity.

The narrative returns to Lisa's nursing home visit. Lisa's thoughts reveal she has read all of Claudia's books, though Claudia does not know and would never guess this is the case. Lisa finds Claudia's books readable and interesting, but she is prepared to believe the critics who say Claudia is not a rigorous historian. She is prepared to believe this



because she has first-hand experience of Claudia's propensity to being blind and wrongheaded. Claudia has never been able to view Lisa objectively and to understand her as an individual; she has only seen Lisa as an extension of herself and thus has measured her qualities only as they compared to her own. The Lisa who is unknown to Claudia, Lisa reflects, is prettier, sharper, and more competent than the Lisa of Claudia's perception. In the nursing home, Claudia interrupts Lisa's internal musings on love and perception to tell her that her preoccupation with God is entirely abstract. For the first time, Lisa is filled with pity for her aging mother as she leaves.

Claudia is left to reflect on her daughter's aging and the fact that, somewhere within this dull English woman who is her daughter are the traces of her Russian heritage. The placid Lisa must have in her somewhere a glimmer of the turbulence of the Russian people, however subterranean that turbulence is in Lisa. Claudia moves on to a memory of Jasper's Russian father, whom she found to be a creep. Her memory of her interaction with Jasper after their meeting with his father ended intimates again there is a traumatic story waiting to be told. Claudia tells Jasper he cannot escape his Russian heritage and Jasper responds he can and there is nothing in her of the torpid Dorset farmers making up her family tree. Claudia responds she probably inherited their endurance. Jasper sardonically questions whether or not Claudia has ever endured anything truly difficult; to which she responds she has endured more than he will ever know.

## Analysis

The exploration of Lisa's relationship with Claudia continues in this chapter as Claudia's historical reflections focus on the role of religion in human affairs. We see in this chapter yet more clearly that Lisa is obscure to her mother and, while she proves in a sense her mother's thesis that one's genetic history cannot be escaped, her mother is unable to recognize this in Lisa. For Claudia, Lisa is simply a boring middle-aged woman, and her self-absorption prevents her from developing the kind of intimacy required for Lisa ever to reveal herself to Claudia.

In this chapter we get closer to Claudia and as she warms up to the reader, so to speak, she begins to reveal her own story to us. The trauma occurring during World War II is spoken about more explicitly than ever before. Claudia enters a cathedral and begs for an unidentified man to be spared a cruel death on a battlefield. This man, the reader is left to assume, is someone very close to her, perhaps a lover.

We see in this chapter that Claudia, despite her egotism and apparent coldness, has an acute sensitivity to the reality of suffering, her own and that of people en masse. She speaks of the sufferings occasioned by religion with a subtle but unmistakable pathos, and when she reflects on Lisa's Russian heritage she refers to the Russians as the most tormented people in the history of the world. The existential and historical pain depicted by Russian artists like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky is something that evidently resonates with Claudia, and the reader begins to suspect perhaps her inability to love her daughter emerges not from an absence but an abundance of suffering.



Claudia is, at first blush, a profoundly unlikable character. She is cold and unfeeling. She dismisses others arrogantly and speaks haughtily of her own accomplishments. She does not pause her breathlessly self-aggrandizing recollections for even a moment to consider the feelings and thoughts of those she sees as historical non-entities. Claudia nonetheless ingratiates herself slowly and steadily with the reader. There is something in her reflections and in her acknowledgment that there are other perspectives, even if she is not prepared really to take them seriously, leading the reader to grant her absolution for her selfishness.

## Vocabulary

unassuageable, marvelous, appalling, putative, sufficient, genteel, relentless, flattering, incapacity, warily, unruffled, quintessentially





# Chapter 6

## Summary

This chapter combines reflections on historical contingency with the first glimpse into the core story of Claudia's life. The chapter opens with Claudia's musings on historical accident; for Claudia, Jasper's father Sasha is a prime example of life as a historical aberration. Sasha should have died in Russia during the First World War rather than surviving into his ungraceful old age, but he survived, and his survival—aberrational though it was—shaped Claudia's life. Claudia couples her reflections on historical contingency to her thoughts on the ephemeral and the preserving power of language. What remains of the past are words and images, even for those who witnessed the past themselves. Claudia, a war correspondent in Cairo during World War II, finds the most lasting sense of the war she has come not from her personal experience but from the second-hand, big-picture information she has about the war. Her reality at the time was formed less by the war itself and more by the ambience of her daily life in Cairo and the central relationship she formed during her time as a war correspondent. In this chapter, we are first introduced to Tom, a British officer with whom Claudia falls madly and quickly in love. The latter half of this chapter recounts a weekend trip to Luxor the two took during a brief break in Tom's service. The title is here first explained; a moon tiger is a coil slowly burned at night as a mosquito repellent. It smolders and, slowly, lengths of grey ash drop from it. The chapter ends with a late-night conversation between Tom and Claudia in which he sums up his life story and the two proclaim their love for each other. Claudia wishes the story they are creating together could have a happy ending.

## Analysis

This chapter marks a shift in the book, from what Claudia calls the strata of her history to the core story of *Moon Tiger*. The reader will note, first and foremost, that unlike all the preceding chapters, this chapter does not shift perspectives. The entire chapter is in Claudia's voice, and this difference is significant; it demonstrates a kind of intimacy and narrative commitment not present in the previous chapters. One gets the sense Claudia's time in Cairo, and specifically her relationship with Tom, is far too central to her self-understanding to be held at arm's length, or considered from various perspectives. Further, Claudia says explicitly only she and Tom know what happened in Cairo. Her experience there, though it is her core story, is an experience she is unable to share with anyone else in her life. Though we do not yet know how her story with Tom ends, it is revealing we hear only her version of a narrative binding her to Tom. Here the absence of something is just as important as the presence of something. By omitting Tom's voice, Lively has created a void that makes Claudia's narrative both lonely and moribund.

Claudia remarks in her musings on history and her time in Cairo that what remains, in the end, are emotions and places, and history is not linear but simultaneous. Everything



happens in an instant, she says. At first this may seem an odd statement for a historian to make, but Claudia's sense of history as ever-present goes a long way toward explaining her penchant for dramatized popular histories. Also, because Claudia is a historian for whom history is very much alive, she has an acute ability to recognize parallels. We see an example of this when Claudia enters a restaurant in 1940s Cairo and likens the identifying uniforms of all the people there to the telling costumes of medieval guild-members. The past is not dead for Claudia, and though that makes her a vivid historian, it also vivifies her pain.

## Vocabulary

amiable, euphemism, eccentricity, hindsight, teeming, deafening, insignia, supplanted, stringer, trundling, felucca, sloe, impervious, textural, immensity, fate, indignation



# Chapter 7

## Summary

Chapter 7 opens with Claudia's description of Cairo as a place where the terms "past" and "present" have no meaning. Cairo is a place, she says, where the archaeology and the architecture blend seamlessly and where the landscape is decidedly cyclical, rather than linear, in its rhythms. After these reflections, the chapter turns to Claudia's second trip to Cairo, in her old age. Claudia tells of meeting an American tourist who mistakes her for the same and takes up her company for a trip down the Nile. The two form an incongruous pair but keep easy company. In the process of describing their trip through the desert, Claudia transitions to her memories of a different trip through the desert: the trip in which she met Tom.

Claudia first encounters Tom during a trip through the desert with a small group of press correspondents. After the vehicle they are traveling in breaks down, they are picked up by two officers, one of whom is Tom. They camp in the desert that night, and Tom and Claudia share some brief but meaningful conversation in which both reminisce about childhood. Tom gives Claudia a fossil after she mentions hunting for fossils at Charmouth as a girl.

On their second day of travel, Claudia gets out of the car to urinate and spots a wounded man in the valley below. She recklessly goes down to investigate and discovers the man is dead but there is a second man who is badly wounded but still alive. She returns to the vehicle and tells the others, who then call for an ambulance. Tom tells Claudia the two men were wounded by a mine, and Claudia could have stepped on a mine herself. He calls her a bloody fool and she says she is sorry for having been so foolish.

## Analysis

This chapter, like the previous chapter, does not shift from various personal perspectives but, unlike the previous chapter, much of it is in the third person. This lends it a journalistic or documentary quality befitting its purpose in the novel: to set up the story of Tom and Claudia. The narrative, by this point in the novel, has become much more focused. Though Claudia still flits from moment to moment in her narrative and still freely associates, mentioning Gordon or her fellow tourist, for example, the chapter is more tightly written than the preceding chapters. Here we see style following content. Claudia has described her experience with Tom as her "core" story and there is density to her telling of that core story absent in her more associate and quirky descriptions of the experiences making up the strata of her life. Nonetheless, Claudia retains her unusual sense of time. The chapter is focused and made dense not by chronology but by place and emotion: the very things Claudia said endure in history. Cairo structures this chapter and this chapter mimics, in its own way, that timeless city.



Just as the past and present merge in the streets, people, and culture of Cairo, the past and present merge in the core story of Claudia's life. The spatialization of time in this chapter is a striking technique for transferring Claudia's ideas into her mode of description.

## Vocabulary

incurious, descendants, architecture, regeneration, decapitated, contemptuous, familiarity, grueling, debris, turrets, lurid, expediency, posterity, mirage, chronology, retrenchment



# Chapter 8

## Summary

In this chapter, we see more of Tom and Claudia's burgeoning relationship. We see the end of their encounter in the desert, and their awkward expression of interest as they part. Their first date, a trip to the zoo, is described, as well as their first night together. Claudia's face is filled with fear as they have sex, and Tom asks her if it is her first time. It is not, and Claudia's face is filled not with fear of the sexual act, but with fear of the love that is taking her over for the first time. In this chapter, we also hear some of Tom's historical reflections. Tom says he prefers the fantasy that one is immune to history to the harsh reality of participating in history. This sentiment appears at odds with Claudia's own lust for historical experience and valorization of historical participants over the unengaged like her sister-in-law Sylvia, but Claudia nonetheless is left speechless by Tom's musings. For the first time, she is incapable of a facile response because, for the first time, she is concerned with ingratiating herself. After their first night together, Tom and Claudia spend a day exploring Cairo. Tom buys a ring for Claudia and expresses his wish that she think of him in his absence. As they walk by the Nile that evening, they talk about what they will do after the war. Claudia says she will not write a book about her time in Cairo, but may return to a book on Benjamin Disraeli she was planning. Tom is more vague with his post-war plans. He says what he does after the war will depend on various things, but that he would prefer not to talk about them at the moment.

## Analysis

The cold, emotionally unavailable and harsh Claudia of the novel's beginning has, by this chapter, given way entirely to a vulnerable and bewildered Claudia: a young woman who is in love for the first time and who is humbled by her desire to be loved in return. Tom, clearly enchanted with Claudia, is a humane figure, and there is in him nothing of the dry cynicism we see in the older Claudia. Like chapters 6 and 7, this chapter continues with the core story of Claudia's history and is accordingly focused. Though there are shifts, the narrative is basically confined to a few days in the desert and in Cairo. One of Tom's historical reflections aptly describes the pacing of this chapter. He says being in the desert does odd things with time; it can make an hour feel like a day and a day feel like an hour. In this chapter, as indeed with the previous two, a few days expand to the significance of a lifetime, only it is not the desert working this magic, but the experience of love. There is, however, a lurking sense of fate waiting in the wings. Tom is not forthcoming with his post-war plans, perhaps because he realizes surviving the war is not a given. Because Claudia has already given us a sense that her time in Cairo is not only the core story, but the core trauma, of her life, we are already anticipating an unhappy ending to Tom and Claudia's love story. It is in this chapter we get the first concrete intimations of unhappiness in the description of Tom and Claudia's love.

## Vocabulary

squadron, botany, pretentious, technicolor, diplomat, casuarinas, derangement, gazelle, refracted, artificial, parody, acclimatized



# Chapter 9

## Summary

Chapter 9 continues the pattern set-up in the previous chapters, with parallel accounts of Claudia's two trips to Cairo, the first as a young war correspondent and the second as an elderly tourist. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to the former. Claudia is racked with fear and anticipation in Tom's absence. She longs to experience what he is experiencing and so she attempts to get back to the desert, but she is not granted permission by the British military and she must remain in urban areas. She goes to Jerusalem hoping to interview Charles de Gaulle, but does not encounter him there. When Claudia and Tom reunite, Claudia asks Tom once again what he plans to do after the war. He tells her previously, he intended to return to England and run for Parliament as an act of sheer social idealism. Now, however, his desires are different. He wants to marry, to live in a place where the ground is fertile and lush, and to have a child. He tells Claudia it is she he wishes to marry and it is clear this is her desire too. They talk briefly about the sort of life they will have together, and the chapter ends with Tom expressing his wish for a child.

## Analysis

Like the rest of the novel's chapters, this chapter combines Claudia's broad reflections with a story. Exploring the link between the two is telling. Here, Claudia talks about mortality. The Egyptians, she says, ingeniously surrounded themselves with the moribund as a way of staving off death itself. By building pyramids and outfitting them with all the trappings of a normal life, they invested the realm of death with life, as it were. In a sense then, they were a culture obsessed not with death but with life. As we see Claudia worry for Tom, we see the universality of the dilemma of death. The Egyptians come to terms with death through a culture, which reclaims the dead in the fantasy of the afterlife. Tom and Claudia, because neither is religious, do not have recourse to such a fantasy, and they cling instead to the hope of a better life after the war, with full knowledge that such a life may be cut short at any moment. One wonders, however, if Lively intends Tom's wish for a child as his own solution to the problem of death. The duality between the barren desert and the fertile land of Tom's desires further reinforces the tension between life and death that is the key to this chapter.

## Vocabulary

unreachable, salutary, fragility, disservice, sustenance, annihilation, nourishment, majestic, depot, perimeter, cosmic, indistinct, harangue, inconsequential



# Chapter 10

## Summary

In this chapter Claudia learns Tom has been killed and she is pregnant with his child. The chapter opens with Lisa visiting the elderly Claudia at a nursing home. The nurse there tells Lisa her mother had a fit in which she returned to the moment of childbirth and kept demanding to know the gender of her baby. Lisa sits with her mother, who is asleep and removed, for fifteen minutes, and is filled with disgust and pity for her. She thinks to herself her mother has never truly been in love. When the narrative shifts back to wartime Cairo, we learn with Claudia Tom was classified first as missing and then as killed. Claudia is tortured by thoughts of his death and wonders whether it was slow or instantaneous. Her unfeeling flatmate Camilla does not know about Tom and is flippantly dismissive of Claudia's obvious illness. Eventually, Claudia learns she is pregnant with Tom's child and goes to a convent hospital to be taken care of when she has stomach pains. There she has a miscarriage. A nurse at the convent tells her it is for the best and that nature has a way of taking its course in such cases, implying Claudia must be relieved to lose the child since she is unmarried. Claudia yells at the nurse, demanding she save her child, but Claudia has a miscarriage and the chapter ends with a nurse saying the child was neither a boy nor a girl and it is all over.

## Analysis

This chapter is minimalist in its description of Claudia's feelings about the central trauma of her life as it happens. The emotional impact of the chapter comes from the power of the events as well as from its choppy, almost violent, style. The narrative is clear, but the way the story lurches from moment to moment in broken paragraphs conveys something of the gut-wrenching events' impact on Claudia. Her own psyche, one senses, is ripped apart by the loss of lover and their child and the reader begins to understand how it is the kind-hearted and earnest Claudia that contrasted so strikingly with the superficial Camilla came to be the cynical and sardonic Claudia of the book's opening.

## Vocabulary

regiment, hastily, proletariat, misrepresentation, unconfirmed, unscathed, nausea, manifestation, assuage, malice, apprehension, discomposure, confidentiality





# Chapter 11

## Summary

Chapter 11 opens with Claudia's memory of her time on the German-Polish border in 1945. In this disputed territory, fought over since time immemorial, she meets a mélange of people whose nationalities and languages are so hybrid Claudia is prompted to reflect on the nature of political borders. A nation with clear borders, and in particular an island nation, avoids the disorder wreaked by territorial disputes. From here the chapter moves on to Claudia and Gordon's first post-war encounter and then back to their relationship in late adolescence. Though the two reveal little and conceal much in their first meeting after the war, it does not take long for their old competitiveness and jealousy to reestablish itself. The unusual intimacy that exists between Claudia and Gordon here and in previous chapters is fleshed out for the first time in the account that follows of Claudia and Gordon's history of incest. We see Claudia and Gordon in a studio practicing a slow foxtrot. From Claudia's perspective, we learn she is aroused by his manliness and their practice ends with a passionate kiss. It is made clear the two had a fully sexual incestuous relationship for two years, starting when Claudia was 19. The chapter ends with a dinner hosted by Claudia's mother at which Claudia, Gordon and Sylvia are present. This happens well after the termination of Claudia and Gordon's sexual relationship, but because their history remains ingrained in their very way of being, Sylvia picks up on an intimacy she calls odd. In the first version of the dinner, Sylvia is portrayed as a totally silly and ignorant woman who does not have any idea what it is she is picking up on. The second account of the dinner, however, is told from Sylvia's perspective. It becomes clear she has understood much more than she is given credit for and she sees past Gordon and Claudia's casual joking about incest to the reality of something incestuous in the relationship between her husband and his sister. She is pregnant and uses this as a reason to excuse herself when she is nauseated by her realization.

## Analysis

In this chapter as in the preceding chapters, there is a connection to be made between Claudia's abstract thoughts and the story she is telling. A nation with clear borders, she tells us, is a nation that does not have to deal with the complexities of blurred identities and transgressed boundaries. This observation is pertinent, in a metaphorical sense, to the relationship between Claudia and Gordon. The boundary between brother and sister is blurred between them and they transgress the norm that prohibits sexual relations between siblings. Claudia explains their sexual attraction for each other emerges from their narcissism. Each sees in the other a reflection of himself, and, for that reason, the incestuous relationship is essentially a relationship of self-love. The infinite regress of Claudia's relationship with Gordon contrasts sharply with the relationship she is to have later with Tom. In Tom's presence, she is humbled and often at a loss for words. Tom is, for Claudia, a radically other person. He is not a reflection of her, but an encounter, and



for this reason what she shared with Tom affects her and remains with her in a way her experience with Gordon, however significant, does not.

## **Vocabulary**

aftermath, wasteland, disconsolately, overlaid, grumbling, dense, frisson, anonymous



# Chapter 12

## Summary

This chapter recounts a trip Claudia took with Jasper just after the war to a chateau in France that served as a conference center for NATO officials. Jasper is attending the conference in hopes of ingratiating himself with the right people to land a job at NATO and leave his job at the Foreign Office. From his perspective, the conference center is a charming and well-appointed chateau that charms Claudia and serves as a comfortable backdrop for discussing important political matters. From Claudia's perspective, however, the chateau is a de-historicized place rendered tacky by Disney-esque touches in its décor. Moreover, Claudia thinks the meeting itself is a joke. The NATO officials gathered there do not understand that history is complex and muddled and traumatic. They sit in leisure and luxury, analyzing imagined patterns in a reality they have failed to really engage.

## Analysis

We have already learned in previous chapters Claudia is an unconventional historian. Her histories are for a popular audience and her prose is too vivid for the sober academic historians who call her work sensationalist. In this chapter, we get a clearer sense of Claudia's maverick disregard for the niceties of status and we see this disregard is at least partially responsible for her success as a writer and provocateur. When Claudia goes to the first social event of the weekend—an evening cocktail party of NATO officials, journalists and secretaries—she avoids Jasper and people of note altogether. She instead singles out a rather ordinary-looking and apparently uninteresting man who turns out to be a very important publisher. He has read her book on Tito and some of her war dispatches and expresses disappointment when Claudia says she has no intention of becoming a journalist. He nonetheless offers her work, telling her to write articles for his newspaper as she feels inclined. When Jasper sees Claudia has been published and she owes this to the conversation she struck up with a man whom everyone was ignoring in favor of more interesting or apparently well-connected figures, he is jealous. But Claudia's focus is not on her good luck but on the disgust she feels with this group of self-appointed experts on history and current events who fail to understand the disorder, muddle, and waste of history. Claudia's youthful integrity is communicated in this chapter. She is not concerned with fame or status or even academic respectability. She is concerned with faithfully representing what she sees as the chaos of human experience. Herein lies a clue to the cynicism of the elderly Claudia. Not only has the trauma of losing Tom soured her, but also the less-evident and slower trauma of having her idealism subverted by experiences like the one recounted in this chapter. Claudia discovers that the world of political actors is filled not with intelligent and perceptive people with good intentions, but with people who are merely looking to cash in on the disorder of history by claiming to see patterns that are



actually fictitious and by proposing action that is misguided for being based on these fictitious patterns.

## Vocabulary

dismissal, censorious, opportunists, ruthless, avarice, possession, lust, sermonizing, laborious, progression, apparatus, lavishly, bidet, diplomatic, unswerving, chateau, statistics



# Chapter 13

## Summary

In this chapter, we learn of Claudia's experience as a historical adviser for a film about Herman Cortez's conquest of Mexico. Claudia, who has written a book about Cortez, is asked to be an adviser for a film that turns out to be rather inaccurate despite her advice to the contrary. Jasper later chastises her for the poor historiography of the film and in this chapter Claudia admits to herself she has profited financially from a painful story told inaccurately. Nonetheless, she believes she is connected to the events in Mexico in the time of Cortez. Though a history of the world seems far removed from the details of Claudia's life, this moment in history about which Claudia wrote a book is a moment that enlarges her and frees her from the prison of her own experience. The latter half of the chapter tells of a car accident Claudia is in along with the actor who play Cortez in the film. The chauffeur who was driving the car dies and the actor sustains a skull fracture. Claudia has a concussion and breaks two ribs. The chapter ends with Gordon visiting Claudia in the hospital after the car accident. She begins to cry when she sees him and this moves him to hold her hand and look at her with a gaze they have not exchanged since their intimate incestuous days. Claudia and Gordon hold each other's eyes until neither can stand it. When we see the same moment from both Claudia's and Gordon's perspectives, we learn both feel the same way about the other: that the other is simultaneously extremely close and extremely far. Though they know each other better than any two people and share an intimate past, there is an insurmountable barrier between the two siblings.

## Analysis

When Claudia is asked what it is that motivates her to do what she does, she often gives an arrogant reply. When Tom asked her she says natural talent has landed her in the Egyptian desert. When the actor in the film about Cortez asks her, she speaks of arrogance and hubris. Claudia's self-awareness is clear enough, but it seems her flippant confession of pride is further evidence of her pride. The tension between Claudia's pride and her sense of historical accident is thrown into relief in this chapter. It is evident Claudia thinks herself great on some level. At the same time, she recognizes her fate is dictated by forces beyond her control—many of them rather uninteresting forces. Though she escapes only slightly wounded from the accident that seriously wounded the other two passengers, the car accident is a sort of brush with death for Claudia and it comes, interestingly enough, after a stilted conversation with the actor in which she reminds him of the Greek fates. These women plan all sorts of arbitrary ends for humans. One's fate has little rhyme or reason, no matter how strong one's desires and one's will. This reality humbles Claudia in this chapter, and makes her long for intimacy. The intimacy she once shared with Gordon is called to mind instantly with his gaze, but despite the accessibility of these feelings, they are really very far away, and there is a kind of hermetic seal between Claudia and Gordon. The reader comes to



understand Claudia's tears for Gordon are really tears for Tom, who was the real object of her love and intimacy.

## Vocabulary

murmurs, barges, swarming, fanatical, appeasement, minion, dubiously, confrontation, authenticity, spectator, probable, chauffeur, monumentally, disassociated



# Chapter 14

## Summary

Claudia speaks of her body as a record of time. The birth of her child, the car accident she was in, and the loss of her appendix all would be revealed by an autopsy, she says. In addition to her own personal history, her body records a story on a different time scale; in the structure of her body lies also the story of human evolution and the relationship of human beings to every other creature. Claudia continues her reflections on the bodily, saying the fact that she is an attractive woman has conditioned her life in particular ways. From here, the narrative moves to the London Zoo for Lisa's eighth birthday.

Claudia and Jasper take Lisa to the zoo for her birthday and there, Lisa asks what is happening between two monkeys copulating. Jasper tries to avoid the question, but Claudia explains quite clearly and explicitly how sex works, adding human beings copulate in the exact same way. This revelation jars Claudia and, though she looks upon the monkeys with a certain amount of sympathy, she has no such sympathy when she looks at her own parents, who must have copulated in this way. We then return to the present day, and to the nursing home. Claudia says whenever Lisa visits, she speaks only dispassionately of mundane things. Claudia loves Lisa and respects her right to be closed-off with her, but she does not understand how it is Lisa acquired a taste for silence and decency over the unconventional honesty of her parents. Claudia says during Lisa's last visit, Lisa read her snippets from the newspaper, but she overlooked the best item, a remark by Miss World of 1985 that "destiny is what you make of it." This historical banality launches Claudia into a memory of 1956—the year she met a young Hungarian man who was to become like a son to her.

In 1956, Claudia becomes absorbed with the Hungarian revolution against the Politburo, the soviet leadership of Hungary. The violence and strife in Hungary affects her own life when she receives a phone call from a Hungarian man who has obtained her phone number through the newspaper she writes for. The man tells her that his son Laszlo is in London studying and he wishes Claudia to tell him he ought not return to Hungary. Claudia brings Laszlo to her flat and tells him to relax and consider his decision carefully. If he decides to stay in London, he is to stay with her, she tells him. After much agonizing, Laszlo decides not to return to Hungary and he moves in with Claudia, who helps him gain admission to an art school as well as to get a grant from an organization patronizing Hungarian refugees. Though Laszlo gets drunk and is sick in Claudia's apartment more than once, she never wavers in her commitment to helping him. He soon moves to another flat with artist friends, but often returns to Claudia when they are evicted for not paying rent or when he quarrels with his friends. Eventually, Laszlo tells Claudia he is gay and Claudia responds casually and acceptingly. Though Lisa never accepted Laszlo as an intimate family member, she regards him in her adulthood like a distant second cousin who has fallen on hard times and may at any moment ask for a loan. Laszlo lives with his older boyfriend who supports him; he cannot make a living



from his art because his paintings are too dark and jarring, filled with surreal landscapes, anguished people, nightmare creatures and broken cities. Claudia, however, hangs these dark paintings on her own walls, and says she must honor them because there is nobody else to do so.

## Analysis

The dichotomy between Claudia's relationship with her own daughter and her relationship with Laszlo is striking. Though Lisa is her biological daughter, she is unable to connect deeply with her, and only reaches out to her when she is struck with a bout of guilt for her lack of maternal care. Lisa is effectively raised by her two grandmothers, and the conventional decency and insipid opinions of these women has turned Lisa, Claudia seems to imply, into a boring and uninspired person. Laszlo, on the other hand, is a young man marked by suffering and his encounter with Claudia is completely devoid of niceties; from the beginning of their acquaintance Laszlo and Claudia must confront a harsh reality together and, perhaps for this reason, their intimacy is immediately greater than that between Claudia and Lisa. Claudia's accounts of these relationships, however, can both be seen as meditations on the comment about destiny by Miss World she reads in the newspaper. Lisa's life and Laszlo's life, as indeed every person's life, is shaped by what seem to be arbitrary factors, though it is impossible to say whether things would have turned out identically even if circumstances had been otherwise. Lisa is conflict-averse and inauthentic, at least in Claudia's eyes, because two such women instead of have raised her by her spitfire mother. Laszlo is a volatile and turbulent artist because he has been shaped by volatile and turbulent times in his own country, torn violently and without warning from home and family as a young adult. But Claudia asks herself whether he would have been a turbulent man regardless of circumstance. Perhaps this is just Laszlo's personality. The same question could be asked about Lisa.

This chapter also makes clear Claudia's sympathies are elicited more by shared suffering than by biological ties. Though her body is an inescapable history, her own emotions are unrestrained by physicality; it is not her biological daughter who has come closest to her heart, but a Hungarian man who has known great suffering. Claudia is a deeply compassionate person, but she lacks the patience to understand and come to know her own daughter.

## Vocabulary

autopsy, pathologist, intensity, enclosures, determinedly, destiny, rhetoric, kit-bag, enabled, glowering





# Chapter 15

## Summary

In this chapter, the elderly Claudia begins to lose her hold on the passage of time. Laszlo, Lisa and Sylvia visit her over the course of three days and Claudia combines them all into one day. Claudia meditates on the fact all people are hinges linking other people, sometimes incongruously. She reflects also on the modern day's waning sense of the apocalyptic. She remembers the fear of nuclear war that plagued her throughout the Cold War. Claudia remarks her fear was made more potent by being a mother; though she lacked conventional maternal instincts, she was filled with worry and anxiety about the world for the sake of her daughter like any mother. The narrative transitions to a memory of being in a taxi with Gordon and Sylvia two days before Gordon's death. Gordon, whose death is imminent, is given leave by his doctors to give evidence before a Royal Commission of Broadcasting. On the way to the appointment, Sylvia and Gordon have an argument, but the argument is only a pretext for a much subtler and more profound communication between the two. Claudia has always been Gordon's alter ego, as Gordon has been Claudia's, and in the knowledge of their impending and permanent separation, the siblings assert their love for each other by acting contentiously as they always have. From Sylvia's perspective, Claudia's behavior is appalling and cruel. She does not understand how it is Claudia can interrupt and shout at Gordon when she knows his death is only days away. The chapter ends with a memory of Claudia's 70th birthday, which she celebrated with Laszlo and Lisa. The two have always had a forced and difficult relationship because Lisa has always refused to accept Laszlo, despite his desire to love and be loved by Lisa. At a restaurant, Lisa and Laszlo ask Claudia questions about an article she has written reminiscing about her time in Cairo. Claudia remains tight-lipped about this period. We enter Laszlo's thoughts, where we learn he has always been infatuated with the brilliant Claudia and she has poor taste in men.

## Analysis

The memories in this chapter are united by the issue of histrionics and containment. Sylvia is taken aback by Claudia's tactlessness in the face of Gordon's imminent death even as she is distracted from the moment by thoughts of her soon to be improved life without Gordon. Gordon finds Laszlo's histrionics in poor taste. While he does not object to the reality and potency of matters of the soul, he finds the blatant and explicit contention with these matters tasteless. He has affection for Laszlo and leaves him an inheritance after his death, but he takes issue with the way Laszlo wears his heart on his sleeve. There is a similar tension between Laszlo and Lisa, who is also a reserved and tactful person. Lively has created in this chapter a spectrum of exteriority and interiority. We see where one exists on this spectrum, and whether one is reserved or not, is not an indicator of profundity. Sylvia is reserved but beneath the surface are not the riches of interiority but merely a self-involved vacuity. Lisa is reserved but her tact



and silence do not mask superficiality akin to Sylvia's. She is genuinely intrigued and bewildered by her world, even if she keeps these sentiments largely to herself. And Laszlo, who is seen by so many people as an intolerably odd figure in part because of the exteriority of his pain, is for Claudia a breath of fresh air. There is very little processing of any feeling by Laszlo before he communicates it, and the intensity and innocence of these feelings are admirable in Claudia's eyes. Claudia's own mix of interiority and exteriority goes unaddressed in this chapter but the reader cannot help but observe Claudia's effusive character belies a deep sense of the personal in her; she has never, after all, shared the core experience of her life with anyone, not even Gordon who is her own alter ego.

## Vocabulary

fortuitous, tidily, desperately, imitate, frenetic, legacy, concentrated, disarmament, evidently, exclusive, kaleidoscopic



# Chapter 16

## Summary

In this chapter, Laszlo brings Claudia a package of papers she requests, which turns out to be Tom's war diary. Claudia has read it once before, on her 70th birthday, and now she reads it again on her deathbed. We read it along with her. Tom's diary is both a blow-by-blow account of his war experience and a document of his self-examination during that experience. Tom says the worst part of combat is not the fear one experiences during an operation but the fear of fear that precedes this. He speaks repeatedly of Claudia, to whom he refers simply as "C," and he expresses his hope that someday they will look at this diary together. Obviously, they never do, and the diary ends with a line written by his sister saying Tom died in an air attack while trying to repair an oil leak in his tank. Tom's sister deduced Claudia was the "C." of Tom's diary after reading the editorial piece she wrote at age 70 on her time in Egypt.

## Analysis

What is most striking about this chapter is that for the first time we hear Tom's story in Tom's voice. Because Claudia's memories of Tom do not allow him to speak from the grave, it takes a real historical document—Tom's diary—to elicit his voice in this narrative. We learn from Tom's diary his love for Claudia deeply affected him and Claudia had quickly become the focus of all his hopes. We also learn Tom is self-reflective. He recognizes in his own fantasies for a blissful post-war life the simplifications of desperation. He knows his yearning for a beautiful life after the war is a yearning that obliterates the complications of ordinary life; he imagines life out of the desert as a sort of nirvana. Still, even as Tom excuses his war-induced naiveté, he clings to these hopes.

## Vocabulary

infantryman, armored, illuminated, cliché, paralyzing, obscurity, unmitigated



# Chapter 17

## Summary

The final chapter of Lively's novel puts us back in Claudia's room at the nursing home. Having just read Tom's diary, she recognizes the person she has become would perhaps revolt Tom. Tom's death and the passage of time have made these lovers as different as they could be. Tom remains young forever as Claudia ages. In death he is ignorant of history's march, and the events that have shaped Claudia since the war will forever be unknown to him. Nonetheless, Claudia reflects, she and Tom are inextricably bound. Because Tom so insinuated himself into her being, both in life and in death, he lives on in Claudia and she speaks to him as if she is speaking to herself. Claudia says the events in Tom's diary are clearer to her than a chronicle but that, even so, she cannot make sense of these events. The diary demonstrates to Claudia the reality of history and she recognizes just as Tom is part of her, so are Gordon, Jasper, Lisa, and countless others. Claudia says without these people, she is nothing and that for this reason, she can only tell her story by telling the world's story. Biography and history are one because one's personal existence is meaningless without collective existence. The novel ends with a description of the light in Claudia's room. The darkness clears and sunlight filters into the room before disappearing just as abruptly as it came. Claudia's death is described by describing a shift in the room itself; the room goes from being a room with life in it to being a room in which there is only inorganic matter.

## Analysis

The final chapter, though brief, is really the first time we come face to face with the elderly Claudia. We have come to know her through her memories but in this chapter her present and her past meet. The core experience of her life—meeting, falling in love with, and losing Tom—is finally confronted directly and Claudia reveals to us how her dependence on Tom and on everyone she has known and loved binds her personal history to the history of the world. But what Claudia admits in this poignant chapter is this history is so real and so intertwined with the fabric of her being she can never have the critical distance to make sense of it. Tom's diary as a historical document eludes her. It is impenetrable to analysis and cannot be summed up as historical trajectory or spectacle. This surrender to the incoherence but undeniable reality of the past gives way to a description of Claudia's death that reflects the same theme. The room and the world it represents move on without Claudia.

## Vocabulary

recoil, wonder, irregular, tracery, inanimate



# Characters

## Claudia

Claudia is the main character of the novel. When the novel opens, she is an elderly woman dying in a nursing home and aspiring to write a history of the world intertwined with a history of her own life. That work is *Moon Tiger* itself. The novel is composed of her own memories as well as the same events recounted from the perspectives of other participants. Her history is not told chronologically, but instead jumps around in a pattern dictated by Claudia's free associations. We learn Claudia was a war correspondent in Egypt during World War II, where she met a military officer named Tom with whom she fell in love. The central trauma of Claudia's life is she lost Tom as a war casualty and soon after miscarried their child. Despite having a core story, Claudia says repeatedly there is not a single Claudia but rather many versions of herself. In spite of this multiplicity, certain constants emerge: her undying love for Tom, her complex and argumentative mind, her narcissistic and incestuous but profound relationship with her brother Gordon. Further, a particular trajectory emerges as well: that of Claudia as a woman embittered by experience but too intelligent to overlook her dependence even on those she dismisses.

## Tom

Tom is the army officer with whom Claudia falls in love in Egypt. He is introspective, intelligent, and good-hearted. He is the first person Claudia feels humbled by, and she seeks his good opinion from the moment they meet. He and Claudia meet when a group Claudia is traveling with is stranded in the desert and rescued by Tom and another officer. They quickly grow intimate and confess their love for each other. Tom is killed in an air strike in the desert and Claudia miscarries their child. Claudia never speaks of this to anyone, and it is only at the end of the novel we see these events from Tom's perspective as we read with Claudia a diary he wrote during his final days.

## Gordon

Gordon is Claudia's brother: a dashing and intelligent economist who is Claudia's alter ego and rival. Gordon and Claudia have an incestuous relationship in late adolescence that is spurred as much by their genuine interest in each other as by their narcissism. Each sees in the other a reflection of themselves. Gordon is married to Sylvia, a rather ordinary and superficial woman. Claudia observes Gordon, though full of intellectual energy, is emotionally lazy and Sylvia is a manifestation of this laziness. Gordon and Sylvia's relationship is portrayed as vacuous and insipid.



## Jasper

Jasper is a half-British, half-Russian man with whom Claudia carries on a love affair for ten years. Jasper is the father of Claudia's daughter Lisa. He is portrayed as an attractive playboy whose engagement with those around him is sophisticated but superficial; he wishes to see more of his daughter in her youth because she is "amusing," rather than because he cares for her. He shrugs off love affairs with other women as insignificant when courting Claudia's company. When the narrative shifts to Jasper's perspective, we see that his concerns are trivial. He sees Claudia as a woman one is proud to be seen with, and he attends conferences on political matters that are really just extravagant social engagements.

## Lisa

Lisa is Claudia's and Jasper's daughter. She is described as pale and boring—a shadow of her more vibrant mother. The reader comes to realize, however, this depiction is attributable more to Lisa's interiority than to a lack of intensity and curiosity in Lisa. She has read all of her mother's books and found them compelling, if wanting in accuracy. She has a lover with whom she is madly in love, and a family to whom she is firmly committed. She is described as conflict-averse and uninteresting, but her inner thoughts reveal her to be rather reflective. She has failed, however, ever to become intimate with Laszlo, the Hungarian artist her mother has effectively adopted.

## Laszlo

Laszlo is a Hungarian artist Claudia meets when he is about 20. Laszlo's father contacts Claudia after getting her phone number from the newspaper for which she writes articles about the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. Laszlo's father asks Claudia to help Laszlo and to tell him never to return to Hungary, which is in shambles after the revolution. Laszlo lives with Claudia for a time and remains her intimate friend throughout her life. He is homosexual and a tortured artist for whom the refugee experience is translated into monstrous images. Despite his histrionic tendencies, Claudia admires and respects him.

## Sylvia

Sylvia is Gordon's wife. Claudia dismisses her as uninteresting and what we hear of Sylvia's perspective basically confirms Claudia's dismissal. Sylvia is concerned with appearances and with politeness. She does not understand the relationship between Claudia and her husband, but she does sense that there is something unusually intimate between them. She feels continually excluded by their relationship and her agitation at this exclusion is only superficially placated by Gordon, who cannot muster much of a reaction to Sylvia's outbursts.

## Nurses

The nurses at the nursing home remain anonymous and are incidental to the story, but are an important device in the novel. Their patronizing treatment of Claudia reveals a certain blasé lack of concern for her past, and, indeed, for the past in general. They often mediate the story's progress, letting in visitors and making deliveries to Claudia.



# Objects/Places

## Egypt

The story of Claudia and Tom, which Claudia describes as her “core story,” takes place in Egypt during World War II. Claudia has come to Egypt as a war correspondent, and Tom is a British military officer. The desert and Cairo are both described at length in the novel and function almost as characters. Soon after meeting in the desert, Claudia asks Tom to describe his time there. We do not his full account of the desert until the penultimate chapter, when we read the diary in which he attempted to answer Claudia’s question. Soon after meeting, Tom and Claudia walk around Cairo. We also see Cairo in Claudia’s memory of going to pray for Tom after learning he has been listed as missing. Claudia leaves the cathedral and walks along the Nile, feeling the life and vibrancy of the city is an affront to her pain. Claudia returns to Egypt as a tourist in her old age and finds it very much changed. Its modernization, however, does not erase for Claudia the poignancy of her memories there.

## Nursing Home

Though we never receive any kind of description of Claudia’s nursing home, this space dominates the narrative in a subtle way because the book itself is written there. Every other place in this novel is at a remove because it is only envisioned in the memory. The nursing home is where the Claudia who writes the novel actually lives and, at the end of the novel, dies.

## Charmouth Beach

The first memory described in the novel is of Charmouth Beach, where Gordon and Claudia would go on summer trips to look for fossils among the cliffs. Claudia falls from a Cliff after she and Gordon argue over territory on the cliffs.

## Historical Reenactment Village

Claudia, Gordon, and Sylvia go to a village with actors trained to behave as if it is 1627 in America. Claudia and Gordon are fascinated with the questions of counterfactual history the village raises, but Sylvia is not amused by the intensity of their questions to the actors and she goes to the dining room in a huff.





# Themes

## Historical Contingency

Claudia's world is a godless world and for that reason, it is a place of chance rather than destiny. Claudia is deeply affected by the utter arbitrariness of historical fact. In one striking example of this, she describes how the price of fur in England dictates the value of wampum in America. The role of chance in history is something Claudia acknowledges and celebrates while also militating against it. The trauma of losing Tom is senseless because arbitrary, but at the same time her ever having met Tom at all is also a historical accident, so in the end, it becomes impossible to say whether the terms 'contingency' and 'necessity' mean anything to a complex historical mind. Claudia cannot make sense of the events in Tom's diary even though these events are so real they are almost palpable to her. There seems to be at one and the same time a radical senselessness to history and a potent drama. The story of Tom and Claudia may not make any sense historically. That is to say, it may not resolve itself into a trajectory that fits nicely with the story of the war as a whole, or the story of Claudia's life as a whole. Nonetheless, it is a story of great drama. We learn in this novel what is senseless from a simplifying historical perspective may be deeply meaningful at the level of meaning enacted in a human life.

## Interiority and Exteriority

In Chapter 15, the novel deals clearly with the tension between being reserved and being open. Laszlo is effusive and dramatic, while Lisa keeps more within than she exposes without. Claudia herself is very open in her history, but one gets the sense this is a singular act for her; she has spent her life hiding her central story from those around her. Beyond the explicit treatment of this theme in Chapter 15, the entire novel is structured in a way that highlights the split between inside and outside. The very idea of perspective depends on an idea of personhood distinguishing between inner thoughts and outer words and behavior. The 'many Claudias' that Claudia mentions are not just the many Claudias of her own history, but also the many Claudia's of others' perceptions.

## Historical Connectedness

One of the most-repeated thematic elements of the novel is the idea that one is bound to all others in such a way individual history and collective history cannot be told independently. This is, in fact, the central conceit of the novel. The book opens with Claudia's reflections on the seemingly egotistical of combining biography with world history and ends with her assimilation into collective history through death.

## Perceptual Relativism

Moon Tiger is the refraction of an individual memory into several voices. It is a story based on the disjunction between event and narrative and is therefore a kind of reflection on perceptual relativism, or the idea that there are many legitimate narratives about a single event. Claudia does not deny the reality of the past. She does not claim there is no fact of the matter about what happened in such-and-such a place on such-and-such a day. What she denies is the idea one version of history can tell the whole story. It is only by looking at the many conflicting versions of a moment in history we can begin to understand that moment profoundly. Thus, it is only by seeing Claudia from the perspective of her superficial lover, her deceased love, her distant daughter and her admiring adoptive son that we can begin to understand Claudia as she really is, rather than as she sees herself. The same can be said of a war, or an epoch.



# Style

## Point of View

Moon Tiger is told from many points of view, though the reader is left to wonder whether the points of view of characters other than Claudia are omnisciently provided or whether they have been filtered through Claudia's reconstruction of them. As explained in the description of perceptual relativism as a theme of the novel, the stylistic technique of shifting perspectives is central to the novel's power. Lively has demonstrated in structure what she has said in content. Claudia's reflections on history are very clearly manifested in the novel's stylistic devices.

## Setting

The novel shifts from place to place on one level—the level of memory—while remaining anchored to one place: Claudia's nursing home. This roving quality in a static frame gives the novel the restlessness of movement while also creating the sense of something coming towards the immobile reader. That something is Claudia's death, with which the novel ends.

## Language and Meaning

Lively is clearly a writer who is interested in language on many levels. Through Claudia, she reflects on language as itself a historical document as well as on the ways in which we use language to shield ourselves from reality. The jargon of World War II combatants makes the grave realities of injury and death more manageable by euphemizing them. The language of the novel itself, while well-crafted, is less instrumental to establishing the perspectives of its characters than is the simple shift of point-of-view.

## Structure

The novel is divided into 17 chapters, almost all of which shift perspectives from character to character. Each chapter integrates Claudia's broad historical theorizing with particular memories. The two kinds of narrative are typically linked thematically.



## Quotes

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.

History is of course crammed with people like Mother, who are just sitting it out. It is the front-liners who are the exception—those who find themselves thus placed whether they like it or not and those who seek involvement. Gordon and I were front-liners, in our different ways.

The price of beaver on the London market determined the value of wampum; an agreeably bizarre economic circumstance—that a hat worn under a rainy Middlesex sky should be a matter of life and death for sea-shells creeping in the shallows of Cape Cod.

We open our mouths and out flow words whose ancestries we do not even know. We are walking lexicons. In a single sentence of idle chatter we preserve Latin, Anglo-Saxon, Norse; we carry a museum inside our heads, each day we commemorate peoples of whom we have never heard.

Find something to do,' says Claudia. I can't, shouts Lisa, I can't I can't I can't I don't know where to find it I don't know where to look I want pink fingernails like yours I want to be you not me I want to make you look at me I want you to say Lisa how pretty you are.

God shall have a starring role in my history of the world. How could it be otherwise? If He exists, then He is responsible for the whole marvelous appalling narrative. If He does not, then the very proposition that He might has killed more people and exercised more minds than anything else.

Gordon had said I would never make it as a war correspondent. All the more reason, of course, why I had to.

Past and present do not so much co-exist in the Nile valley as cease to have any meaning.

You lived from day to day. That of course is a banality but it had a prosaic truth to it then. Death was unmentionable and kept at bay with code-words and the careless understated style of the playing fields.

Wars are fought by children. Conceived by their mad demonic elders and fought by boys.

I want to get married. I want to marry you, in case I'm not making myself absolutely plain,



And hours later, when they are doing things with bowls of water and pails and sheets she is aware of shouting again, shouting at them, swearing at them. 'Twas neither a girl nor a boy,' says the Irish sister. 'Over and done with now, it is. The best thing you can do is forget all about it.

Gordon smells now of man. In her nostrils, as she presses up against him, breasts to his shirt-front, hair brushing his cheek, is a full-blown male scent, almost anonymous, no longer Gordon but something else. It is delicious, and there flows through Claudia the most strange and interesting feeling.

History is disorder, I wanted to scream at them—death and muddle and waste. And here you sit cashing in on it and making patterns in the sand.

It occurs to him that Claudia is both closer to and further from him than anyone else, and that he wishes it were otherwise.

Lisa remembers what Claudia said just now, about people. She turns round and looks at them, at Claudia and Jasper. There they are, just as they have always been Claudia and Jasper whom she does not call Mummy and Daddy because Claudia thinks those are silly names.

In the beginning there was myself; my own body set the frontiers, physical and emotional, there was simply me and not-me; the egotism of infancy has grandeur.

And within the room a change has taken place. It is empty. Void. It has the stillness of a place in which there are only inanimate objects; metal, wood, glass, plastic. No life.



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

How do the shifts in perspective relate to Claudia's views about history?

## Topic 2

What is Claudia's attitude toward God and religion?

## Topic 3

Claudia sometimes describes her life archaeologically. Discuss her model of life having strata and a core.

## Topic 4

Do you think that Claudia was a bad mother? Why or why not?

## Topic 5

Claudia and her brother Gordon carry on an incestuous relationship in late adolescence. Claudia later describes this as a manifestation of their narcissism. Do you think Lively succeeds in making the reader consider the complexities of incest rather than simply recoiling at this taboo?

## Topic 6

Claudia says that wars are devised by elders and fought by children. Do you agree with this?

## Topic 7

Claudia becomes disgusted with the group of strategists she meets at the Chateau with Jasper because she feels they do not understand the disorder and chaos of history. Have you ever encountered a group of people whose purported aim is to good even while all they do is socialize or grasp at power?



## Topic 8

Discuss Claudia's views on language as a historical artifact. How have you seen language evolve in your lifetime?

## Topic 9

Claudia's death can be said to be described from the perspective of the room. Discuss this understated description of her death. Why do you think Lively ended Moon Tiger this way?