The Road to Lichfield Short Guide

The Road to Lichfield by Penelope Lively

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Contents

Characters

Despite the strong, interesting themes, it is the characters that probably draw the majority of readers to Lively's novels. Her protagonists, as well as many of her secondary characters, are fully realized, sympathetic people who struggle with the same difficulties and delight in the same joys that readers do. They are also witty, highly intelligent, reflective individuals, and the pleasure of simply listening in on such characters' conversations and thought processes is reason enough to read a Lively novel.

Anne Linton is the prototype of most of Lively's later female protagonists: astute and intellectual, but also deeply maternal and more involved with family, household, and community than with career. Further, like most of Lively's protagonists, Anne shares the author's passion for history and her skepticism of those who distort it and turn it into entertainment. In fact, she is very much Lively's spokesperson, her comments being the main way the author's views about history come across.

As indicated in the section on social concerns, most of the secondary characters are realistically sketched individuals who help to express the novel's theme about the restrictions and compromises that come with life and with age. The portrait of old Mr. Stanway is particularly moving: Lively deftly conveys the frustration of realizing that one's body will no longer obey one's will and of being treated like a mental invalid just because one sometimes confuses the distant past with the present. Although some of the secondary characters verge on being stereotypes (for example, Graham as the fast-living but discontented bachelor and Don as the career-obsessed husband oblivious to his wife's needs), by exposing the reader to their inner thoughts and struggles, Lively shows them to be fully human. Tertiary characters, however, such as some of the members of the cottage preservation movement with which Anne is temporarily affiliated and the pretentious social-climbers at the cocktail parties she must endure for the sake of Don's career, are usually portrayed as two-dimensional and stereotypical, serving merely as vehicles for Lively's social satire.

Social Concerns

The Road to Lichfield, Lively's first novel for adults, is, in one respect, an exploration of the inevitable limitations and compromises of life, particularly those imposed by marriage and by aging. The protagonist is a fortyyear-old suburban housewife and parttime history teacher named Anne Linton who finds herself in a midlife crisis of sorts. At the novel's outset she has just received word that her widowed father, living several hours away in Lichfield, has entered a nursing home due to failing health. His condition necessitates Anne's making several trips to Lichfield over the course of the next few months, to visit with her father and to settle his affairs. In the course of these stays, a number of psychologically disorienting events occur that cause Anne to readjust her perceptions of her past and present life and of her marriage.

In sorting through her father's papers, Anne begins to suspect a disquieting truth, which is eventually confirmed by her brother, Graham: her father, whom she had always seen as a conventional family man, had for years carried on a passionate extramarital affair with a vibrant, intellectual woman more suited to his true nature than was his reserved wife. This information jolts Anne and radically alters her understanding of her father, of her parents' marriage, and of her entire childhood. But at the same time that she is making this discovery about her father, she is making a similar one about herself: In a pattern uncannily similar to her father's, she becomes involved in an intense extramarital affair that underscores the shortcomings of her marriage and her dissatisfaction with her husband, who is preoccupied with his legal career. On her weekend visits to Lichfield, she befriends a neighbor of her father's, a forty-two-year-old man named David Fielding who is himself in a disappointing marriage. The two discover that they have much in common — they are both teachers and they share a passion for history — and before long they succumb to their growing mutual attraction.

Caught in the same bind that her father once was, Anne develops a deeper understanding of him, for the first time seeing him as a human being rather than simply as a parent. She also comes to appreciate the decency and difficulty of the decision he apparently made not to leave his family for his lover. Anne eventually reaches the same decision herself. Although she and David are clearly better suited for one another than they are for their respective spouses, they ultimately recognize that their obligation to their families (David is devoted to his two teen-aged sons, as Anne is to her son and daughter) supersedes their own personal happiness.

The novel thus offers a realistic and sympathetic portrayal of the way people struggle with life's limitations. This theme is conveyed not only through the situations of Anne and David but also through those of secondary characters, such as James Stanway, Anne's father, who is astonished by the physical and mental decline of old age, and Anne's media mogul brother, who is experiencing the midlife realization that his choice of a fast-track lifestyle, so glamorous in his twenties, has left him a lonely bachelor. Even Anne's husband, Don, the only really unlikable character in the book, deserves our sympathy when, suddenly realizing he has fewer career years ahead of him than behind, he is filled with an uneasy awareness of the inexorable nature of time.

The novel also serves as a vehicle for the author's criticisms of the glitziness of the world of television and the superficiality of many in the suburban gentry class to which the Lintons, because of Don's career status, belong.

Lively exposes the way television emphasizes surface over substance, in particular the way it takes important topics like history, which Anne holds dear, and turns them into frothy entertainment. Anne's producer brother, with his slick approach to his work and his life, epitomizes all that is wrong with television. Further fodder for Lively's satire are the trendy uppermiddle-class types of people who embrace projects — charity work, historical preservation, and so on — simply because it is the fashionable thing to do. With characteristic wit, she skewers the stereotypical well-heeled, sociallyminded matron who seeks out causes "with the fervour of a medieval churchman in pursuit of a heresy," only to drop one cause and take up another when the winds of political correctness change.

Techniques

The Road to Lichfield, like most of Lively's novels, belongs to the general tradition of social realism. Lively narrates from a shifting third-person-limited point of view, rendering events mostly from Anne's perspective but also occasionally from the perspectives of Graham, Mr. Stanway, David, and Don. Although the characters sometimes lose themselves in memory and flashback, the dominant movement of the novel is chronological, following the unfolding of the well-shaped plot.

Lively also uses realism's traditional mixture of exterior and interior, that is, of dialogue and action, on the one hand, and of exposure to characters' thought processes, on the other. Although the novel is intricately crafted and patterned (there are parallels, for example, between various characters' lives, such as Anne's and her father's, as well as between the complexity of the historical past and that of Anne's personal past, and the journey to Lichfield is both a geographical and a psychological journey for Anne), its scaffolding never obtrudes into its "felt life" quality. What readers are most aware of when absorbed in The Road to Lichfield is the "rightness" of, the author's portrayal of the small, ordinary moments of existence: a mother's mixture of pity and irritation in trying to relate to her taciturn teen-aged daughter; the difficulty of making small talk at a social gathering when preoccupied with more important personal concerns; the painful awkwardness of carrying on a conversation with one's elderly, senile parent.

But despite its overall realism, The Road to Lichfield contains certain modernist traits, which will be more fully deployed in some of Lively's later, technically more radical novels. One of these is her Proustian treatment of psychological time. Lively's characters are subject to the kind of involuntary memories that Marcel experienced in Remembrance of Things Past (Marcel Proust, 1913-1927) when the taste of a madeleine dipped in lindenflower tea mentally transported him back to the childhood experience of partaking of this same repast with his aunt. Simi larly, in Lively's novels a sensory stimulus will sometimes plunge a character into a vivid mental reliving of an event that happened in his or her distant past. For example, driving through her undergraduate town of Oxford, Anne turns the corner onto the street where her then fiance Don lived and is suddenly flooded with the precise sensations she used to feel in this same spot twenty years earlier: the "sour brick and shabby privet hedges" are suffused with enchantment as she anticipates seeing "his duffle-coated figure coming towards her, wheeling a bicycle whose loose spoke clicked with each turn of the wheel, the background music of happiness."

Lively's handling of point of view also reveals the influence of modernism. Her careful honing of the details of a scene to fit the consciousness of the character from whose mental vantage point it is being rendered accords with the practice Henry James advocated in his discussions about theory and the modern novel. Furthermore, Lively uses a variation of the multiple-points-of-view approach employed by many modernists, most notably James Joyce and William Faulkner.

Describing her technique as "kaleidoscopic" and citing as her immediate inspiration the Japanese film Rashomon (directed by Akira Kurosawa, 1951), Lively repeats certain episodes two or three times, each time from a different participant's point of view. The effect is like that of shaking or rotating a kaleidoscope: Each version of the event, like each new kaleidoscope pattern, is different from but bears traces of the other versions. For example, a visit to Coventry cathedral by Anne, Graham, and their father in the early years of Anne's marriage is recalled separately by each of them, with their recollections overlapping in certain details but differing in their respective interpretations of each other's behavior. Whereas Anne attributed her father's argumentative mood that day to crankiness, he was actually trying to engage her in spirited debate to revive her old self, which he feared was being squelched by her dull husband. And whereas she assumed that Graham, newly launched in his glamorous television career, was cynically bored with the provincial outing, his aloofness was really caused by sentimental preoccupation with a love affair he was involved in. This narrative technique thus underscores the subjective nature of experience and reveals Lively's inheritance of the epistemological uncertainty that underlay modernist thought.

Themes

Although social concerns and social satire play a role in all of Lively's novels, her dominant theme is always the relationship between the past and the present. In The Road to Lichfield Lively first expresses the attitudes toward the historical past that will be found in all her subsequent novels. With her imagination steeped in history (her field of study at Oxford), she has a keen eye for the historical vestiges that linger in contemporary life: in the landscape, in architecture, in place names, in dialect.

Her protagonists generally share this sensibility. Thus, Anne, driving the road to Lichfield, gazes at the passing scenery and sees it as "a palimpsest, suggesting another time, another place.

Edgehill recalled the Civil War; Tamworth, lurking over to the right, had something Saxon about it, she seemed to remember."

Lively believes that it is important for people to know about history, but she also realizes how difficult it is to see the past clearly. She is alarmed by the contemporary tendency to distort and prettify earlier eras. It is this that television does, turning history into "[g]ood old bread-and-butter costume drama," as Anne's brother puts it. And it is this that the current mania for antiques and nostalgia does. Lively is very skeptical of those who, like many of Anne's acquaintances, affect an oldfashioned decor for their home, ornamenting it with historical artifacts and tools whose original function these people know or care little about.

Similarly, Lively criticizes those who distort the past by glorifying it, who believe that anything old is intrinsically better than anything new. She points out the misguided motives of a historical preservation group in Anne's suburban community who make a fuss about saving an ancient, dilapidated cottage that would really be better off demolished and replaced with low-cost housing for the needy. Although Anne is initially part of this group, she becomes increasingly skeptical of its tendency to "sanctify the past just for its own sake," and eventually quits, explaining, "It's just I feel worried about indiscriminate hanging onto the past — in the form of buildings, or — or anything else. Sometimes I think we're not too sure why we're doing it — and we may not even be clear what it is we're hanging onto. But at the same time I think it's very important to know about it — but to know properly, not just to have a vague idea or even to adapt it to suit your own purposes."

Not only the historical but also the personal past is of interest to Lively.

Believing that one's identity and consciousness are composed of the strata of one's past selves and past experiences, she frequently demonstrates the seamless way characters' mental processes move between memory and awareness of the present. For example, Anne, visiting with her elderly father, gazes at his decrepit body in the nursing home bed but simultaneously sees "that same body, upright in a pewter sea [on one of her childhood holidays], urging her towards it with outstretched hands."

Another characteristic theme that Lively introduces in this first novel is the subjective nature of human beings' perceptions and experiences. She shows that people inevitably view events in a limited, squinting way. Not only the plot — Anne's discovering that she must readjust her mental pictures of her childhood, her father, and her parents' marriage — but also Lively's narrative technique underscores the fact that an individual's perception of reality is always partial.

Key Questions

The Road to Lichfield is an excellent choice for book club discussions because it appeals to both middlebrow and highbrow readers, which is the kind of mix often found in such clubs.

It contains the usual elements of "a good read" — a suspenseful, intriguing plot; marriage, romance, and infidelity; well-rounded, believable characters; and social and psychological realism — as well as more sophisticated features, such as its Proustian treatment of psychological time, its Jamesian narrative technique for suggesting the subjective nature of experience, and its exploration of serious themes and social issues. Readers will enjoy discussing the relevant contemporary topics the book raises, including the conflict between historical preservation and community development and the role television plays in shaping our perception of reality. Furthermore, the book presents intricate thematic parallels (between Anne's experience and her father's; between the geographical and the psychological journeys Anne makes; between Anne's ideas about her own past and her ideas about the historical past) that invite analysis and dissection.

Finally, Anne's decisions first to have an affair and then to return to her marriage are sure to provoke controversial discussion among feminist readers.

1. What is the significance of the title? Does the "road to Lichfield" refer simply to the geographical journey Anne makes or to another kind of journey as well?

2. How do both the main plot (Anne's journeys to Lichfield and all that they entail) and the subplot (Anne's involvement with the Splatt's Cottage Preservation Committee) convey Lively's ideas about the difficulty of seeing the past clearly?

3. In both her fiction and her nonfiction Lively has frequently expressed her displeasure with the ways contemporary society turns the past into "entertainment." What are some of the ways we see this being done in The Road to Lichfield, and how is Lively's contempt for this phenomenon revealed?

4. The Road to Lichfield is a critically acclaimed novel (it was shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize) and yet it contains many of the ingredients of a romance novel. What are these ingredients? And what prevents this book, despite them, from being merely a romance novel?

5. One possible weakness of the novel is a lack of credibility regarding the marriage of Anne and Don. That is, it seems unlikely that a vital, earnest woman like Anne would marry a taciturn, passionless man like Don. Do you agree? Or do you think that this is a realistic portrait of a marriage?

6. Is the novel's ending satisfying or unsatisfying? Would the novel have been artistically or emotionally more satisfying and coherent if Anne had not returned to Don and her marriage?

7. How do you think feminist readers react to Anne and to the novel? Do they think Anne is wrong or right to fall into a romantic extramarital love affair? Wrong or right to return to Don?

8. Is David Fielding a realistic, fullydeveloped character or merely a plot device?

9. The novel raises a difficult moral and philosophical question: Should historical preservation take precedence over practical or financial needs? What does Lively's opinion seem to be? What is your own opinion on this issue?

10. When Splatt's Cottage is demolished, there are unearthed outside the kitchen door the skeletons of children who, autopsies reveal, died of starvation in the nineteenth century when the price of corn was so high that many people could not afford to feed their offspring. Why do you think Lively includes this detail? How does it fit into Anne's views about attitudes toward the past?

Literary Precedents

As the discussion of techniques indicates, The Road to Lichfield belongs generally to the mainstream tradition of realism in the British novel: It contains fully-developed characters, a wellcrafted plot, and realistic details; it also demonstrates the concern with society, manners, and morals that characterize the traditional novel. Indeed, many reviewers comment that Lively, with her wit, control, and deftness at portraying social scenes, writes in the comedy of manners tradition of Jane Austen. However, as her kaleidoscopic narrative technique and her Proustian treatment of personal time suggest, Lively is not unmindful of her more immediate forebears, the modernists.

Indeed, in some of her novels (although not so much in this, her first), those Proustian resurgences of the past resemble the quasi-mystical epiphanies of Virginia Woolf, with the character sensing him/herself to be temporarily suspended from ordinary time and ordinary reality.

Lively's novels thus partake of both traditions of the British novel, nineteenth-century realism and twentieth-century experimentalism, with some novels inclining more toward the former and some more toward the latter.

Related Titles

Lively's novels can be classified into two general categories: social realism (works in which the realist features are more dominant than the experimental) and modernist-influenced experimentalism (works in which the experimental features are more dominant than the realist). The Road to Lichfield is the prototype for the first category, which includes six other novels: Treasures of Time (1979); Judgment Day (1980); Next to Nature, Art (1982); Perfect Happiness (1983); According to Mark (1984); and Passing On (1989). All of these portray protagonists with professional interests in the past (for example, in history, archaeology, antiquarianism, biography) who become bemused with problematic questions about the ways the past — both public and personal — is to be regarded and understood. Most of these novels are set wholly or partly in provincial villages and explore social and ethical concerns important to such communities, such as local history, historical preservation, and environmentalism versus development.

Further, in all of them the exploration of serious themes and issues is interspersed with satiric, comedy of manners scenes. Perhaps the closest in kind to The Road to Lichfield is Judgment Day, which features a serious-minded female protagonist who, like Anne, becomes involved in a problematic community project concerned with historical preservation. Although an agnostic, Clare Paling joins a church fund-raising committee whose goal is to renovate the deteriorating eleventh-century village church, because she is interested in history and in ecclesiastical architecture. However, she takes issue with the committee's plan to stage a picturesque re-enactment of events from the church's past, arguing that such an approach distorts history.

Clare, then, very much resembles Anne and, like the latter, serves as a mouthpiece for Lively's ideas.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994