

## Life in the Garden

*Penelope Lively*

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**Life in the Garden** Penelope Lively

**From the Booker Prize winner and national bestselling author, reflections on gardening, art, literature, and life**

Penelope Lively takes up her key themes of time and memory, and her lifelong passions for art, literature, and gardening in this philosophical and poetic memoir. From the courtyards of her childhood home in Cairo to a family cottage in Somerset, to her own gardens in Oxford and London, Lively conducts an expert tour, taking us from Eden to Sissinghurst and into her own backyard, traversing the lives of writers like Virginia Woolf and Philip Larkin while imparting her own sly and spare wisdom. "Her body of work proves that certain themes never go out of fashion," writes the *New York Times Book Review*, as true of this beautiful volume as of the rest of the Lively canon.

Now in her eighty-fourth year, Lively muses, "To garden is to elide past, present, and future; it is a defiance of time."

## Life in the Garden Details


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## From Reader Review *Life in the Garden* for online ebook

### **Peter says**

A rich, detailed, and thoughtful look at gardening, especially English gardening, and all the ways a garden enriches a person's life. A person cannot come to love plants and gardens without becoming a different person, and Lively navigates this transformation with nuanced historical commentary and excellent writing. Highly recommend to anyone who takes pleasure in the existence and craft of gardening, whether it is a flower box or a ten-acre masterpiece.

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### **Hannah says**

I started reading this book while staying with my aunt who has a spectacular, well established garden of large proportions. I finished it at home, where pots 3 or 4 deep line all sides of my courtyard. And while these gardens are opposites in many ways, at their core is a love for growing and creating. A wonderful example of the great variety that exists in gardens. No two are the same, but a love for the act of gardening itself (and not just the pretty garden that results) is what binds gardeners together.

Penelope Lively writes about gardens the way Nigella Lawson writes about food - without pretension and with true delight. This makes it a joy to read as you will find plenty of commonality with Lively and learn many a new thing. From growing up in Egypt to her small London garden by way of large estates, country gardens, vegetable plots and everything in between. If Lively hasn't lived it, she's certainly wondered about it and wants us too wonder too. A gardeners' mind is enquiring and inquisitive, and it shows well in this book.

A wonderful read for any gardener, large or small.

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### **Melora says**

Oh dear. Penelope Lively has got me wanting to grow roses again. Well, and also plant mixed borders, fill containers with mounds and cascades of flowers, and arrange some sort of a "water feature."

I enjoyed this tremendously! In her wide ranging little book Lively looks at gardens in literature, painting, and real life, considering the ways they are used to communicate ideas, convey character, and suggest social position, and also how they may simply give hints about the inclinations of their creators. She talks about gardeners, from the famous and wealthy, with grand estates and staff to do the digging, to the more modestly situated, with patio or allotment gardens. Memories of her own gardening experiences and those of family and friends are interspersed with reflections on literary gardens, public gardens, garden writers, garden designers, etc. From the philosophically abstract to the grubbily mundane, she explores gardens across time and countries, *forcing* me to add quite a few new books to my already too-lengthy tbr lists! Absolutely delightful.

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## **Beth Bonini says**

"We garden for tomorrow, and thereafter. We garden in expectation, and that is why it is so invigorating. Gardening you are no long stuck in the here and now; you think backwards, and forwards, you think of how this or that performed last year, you works out your hopes and plans for the next. And, for me, there is this abiding astonishment at the fury for growth, at the tenacity of plant life, at the unstoppable dictation of the seasons."

Penelope Lively is interested in time; it's a theme in all of her books, and also thoroughly explored in this piece of biographical writing about her life as a gardener. She also touches on literary gardens, artists' gardens, gardens as metaphors, and gardens as cultural phenomenon. I wouldn't recommend it for anyone who doesn't have much interest in gardens or gardening, but if you are interesting in books and gardens you are bound to enjoy it.

It's also an ideal gift: and indeed, I received it from a friend. Fig Tree (an imprint of Penguin) did a beautiful job: the cover and endpapers are gorgeous.

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## **Suzy says**

### **5 stars for the heartfelt and well-researched subject matter**

Penelope Lively has inherited her love of gardening down through her family's generations, as well as a wealth of knowledge and mad skills. She shares her unique perspective and first-hand experience of gardens and gardening throughout history in six chapters.

- *Reality and Metaphor*
- *The Written Garden*
- *The Fashionable Garden*
- *Time, Order and the Garden*
- *Style and the Garden*
- *Town and Country*

I loved what she had to say and learned a lot about gardens real, gardens imagined, plants and flowers of England, how garden design has changed throughout the centuries, fiction and non-fiction writing featuring gardens, how types of gardens reflect class and society in England and the wonderful, seemingly egalitarian system of "allotments" throughout the country. (The only reason I had a picture of these was from seeing the wonderful movie *Another Year*, a lovely Mike Leigh ensemble film that starts with the planting of the main couple's garden in their allotment and follows them through the four seasons.

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1431181/>)

### **5 stars for the beautiful book design**

This is a gorgeous physical book! I read the one with the cream background on the cover, and I see there's one with a black background that looks equally beautiful. At the turn of each section, there is a lovely

black/white illustration of various plants.

## **2 stars for the clunky writing**

I have recently enjoyed Lively's latest collection of short stories, *The Purple Swamp Hen and Other Stories*. Delightful! So, I was really surprised at how clunkily written this was. It felt like business writing, the old "tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them and then tell them what you told them". In this book of essays, this structure became, unfortunately, predictable. And throughout the book, she said frequently "more about that later". I wondered if she felt she was whetting our appetite, but for me this was annoying with a capital A! I never knew if she actually said more about "that" later. My last gripe is that she went off on tangents in every section and then made a little remark about why she went off on that tangent. Where was her editor! I wondered if she was rushing this to press, wanting to make sure these heartfelt essays were published.

Nonetheless, I'm glad I read *Life in the Garden* and would recommend it.

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## **Jaymi says**

How did I not know who Penelope Lively was before now? Man-booker prize winner for *Moon Tiger* and one of the most insightful voices on memory and time? Yet again, I have been hit for six by my own ignorance (however charming and Emma Woodhousian it may be).

'*Life in the Garden*' is Penelope Lively's newest book and garden memoir. This sterling woman is in her 80s and is one of the most insightful, supremely intelligent and straight forward examiners of everything from archaeology to literature to gardens, horticulture and beyond! Her writing is wise, intelligent and just enough learned that my mother would describe her as 'not overly enjoyable' (which suits my tastes just fine). *Life in the Garden* is an examination of gardens—their history, what they mean to us, how they are presented in literature (*Paradise Lost*, Jane Austen, George Eliot and Beatrix Potter) and how the garden has been shaped by catalogues, garden centres (we call them nurseries here) and notable horticulturalists and landscapers—the likes of which include Gertrude Jekyll, Elizabeth von Arnim and Capability Brown. She talks about her own gardens too—a childhood in Egypt and her marital gardening ventures with Jack in Oxfordshire and then in London.

Perhaps the most crucial take away for me, as someone who wants to explore gardens in writing, is their relationship to artists and the way in which our gardens become contrived and landscaped into serving a purpose. Penelope Lively discusses this point at length in relation to Claude Monet and his garden in Giverny which served as his grand experiment for colour, producing the very famous series of *Water Lilies*. She also touches on novelists in relation to their own gardens—Virginia Woolf and the wonderful Vita Sackville-West, the latter purposely chose the lesser of the garish flowers for Sissinghurst.

Penelope Lively leaves the impression that gardeners turn into writers, or writers turn into gardeners, and both might be contrived from the other. She talks about gardens and plants and flowers in collaboration with life, which makes this book essential reading for anyone—not just gardeners, readers and artists, and I will be happy to hand it over to my mother for Christmas (which was its original purpose, 'accidentally' swayed from). It has made me unspeakably happy to have read it and I think my mother will be grateful for a very thorough daughter indeed!

### **Sharon Huether says**

Penelope Lively now lives in London, England. When she was growing up in Cairo Egypt. She made comparisons in gardening, which is *Night and Day*. The Cairo garden needed water, water and more water; where as in London the climate is much cooler and the gardening there is quite easy. She compares the flowers in artists painting to different gardens with the same flowers. In this book Penelope muses about the past, present and future with humor. I won this Free book through Goodreads First-Reads.

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### **Rebecca Foster says**

**(2.5)** I read the first 79 of 187 pages. This is a gorgeous physical book, literally one of the loveliest I've come across in years, what with its embossed matte cover with full-color flowers against a black background and the black-and-white botanical illustrations on the endpapers and opposite the start of each chapter. But this is writing by numbers: It feels so stiff you can see just how Lively filled in her original outline. One chapter even ends with "This has been a discussion of the written garden". Early chapters are on the history of gardens, gardens as metaphors, and gardens in literature (Vita Sackville-West, Elizabeth von Arnim, the Sitwells, et al.). I think you'd have to be much more of a gardening enthusiast than I am – I'm a lazy, frustrated amateur at best – to get a lot out of this. I've been underwhelmed by the three fairly recent Lively books I've read; I have a feeling I need to go back to her most celebrated works, like *Moon Tiger*, to see what all the fuss is about. I'd also like to read her memoir of childhood.

#### **Favorite lines:**

"We garden for tomorrow, and thereafter. We garden in expectation, and that is why it is so invigorating."

"the concept of the garden carries overtones of paradisiacal potential. We may not feel that in our own, on a wet day with the weeds rampant, and the slugs and the snails and everything that creepeth upon the earth"

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### **Catullus2 says**

A bit rambling, but in a good way.

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### **Lisa says**

My mother was not a great reader, but she was a keen gardener across three continents and *Life in the Garden* would have been the perfect birthday gift for her. Penelope Lively is a great raconteur and this memoir of her own life in gardens is nostalgia reading for any of us with memories of English gardens and of creating our own gardens, wherever they happened to be.

Lively thinks that there is a genetic element to being a gardener, and that it passes through the female line.

She tells us about her grandmother's garden in Somerset, her mother's garden in Cairo where she spent her childhood, and then about her own two gardens in Oxfordshire and her current small urban garden in London. There are hints, here and there, that although her mind is as sharp as ever, Lively is getting on a bit, something I'd rather not think about because she has been part of my reading life ever since I discovered *Moon Tiger*, which won the Booker in 1987. My mother was lucky to spend her last years with the garden she had created on the Gold Coast; I don't think she would have thrived if, like Lively, she'd had to downsize to a small courtyard garden.

Like my mother – who loved it when I came up during term holidays and took her for short expeditions to the nearest Bunnings Garden Centre – Lively can't help but be captivated by the marketing of new plants. In the chapter 'the Fashionable Garden', she traces the history of garden fashion, noting that

These days, garden fashion is dictated by television gardening programmes, by garden journalism, by what is available and conspicuous in garden centres. Both television and garden centres are relatively recent dictators – neither was around when I first took an interest in gardening in the 1960s. But we have always gardened according to the written word, and some very persuasively written words at that. In the early part of the twentieth century, and back in the nineteenth, writers were the garden gurus of the day. Not usually fiction writers, but devoted gardeners – maniacal gardeners indeed – who turned themselves into writers in order to spread the message. (p.81)

To read the rest of my review please visit <https://anzlitlovers.com/2018/02/07/1...>

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### **Kappy says**

3.5. A gentle book, reflections on personal gardens in history, in literature, for food, for flowers, for personal well being and more. Penelope Lively is a favorite author, and although there were many parts of the book I liked, it did not move me to rate it higher. However, in the chaotic world I find myself in, gentleness and consideration of growing things are welcome subjects.

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### **Alena says**

Despite the 40 years and ocean that separate us, whenever I read Penelope Lively's non-fiction, I'm convinced that we would be "bosom friends." I was reluctant to read this one though because I am no gardener. Other than planting a couple pots a year and harvesting the vegetables my husband sows, flowers, lawns, gardens hold little interest for me.

Or so I thought. In Lively's hands, gardens were lovely metaphors, beacons of hope, treasured observations and memory makers. Her ruminations on gardens in art and literature, in history and in culture are wise and wonderful.

She remains a pleasure to read.

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## **Julia Nock says**

Lively writes a sort of gardening memoir, from memories of childhood gardens in Cairo and the English countryside, through the limited patch of garden in old age. At the same time, she considers the meaning of gardens through history, literature, art, and present day culture. While sometimes the book has the feel of someone assigned a school theme, it is full of gems of acute perception and insight. Lively is a companion that I want to keep with me.

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## **Sem says**

I'd have enjoyed this more had it just been about gardening (though I deplore her taste for white flowers) but as so much of it was about writers and gardens and I don't care for most of the writers she references it was a bit of an up and down affair. I'd thought that the garden parts would carry me through but I became irretrievably bored somewhere around Nancy Mitford and Edith Wharton. I can imagine that many readers would love this book and, certainly, I like the *sort* of book it is, but in the end three stars seemed a bit of a stretch.

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## **Michael Tweed says**

If you love gardening and also love quality literature this book by one Britain's most esteemed author's will give you great pleasure.

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