



Spiderweb

Penelope Lively

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At age sixty-five, retired anthropologist Stella Brentwood buys a cottage in Somerset, England, and slowly acquires neighbors, a dog, and a professional curiosity about the country village where she intends to settle and put down roots for the first time. She has spent her life studying communities of people--their families, social structures, how they welcome outsiders into their midst--remaining an observer, privileged to share in their intimate life but not obliged, and finally unwilling to tie herself closely to any lover, friend, or social group. In Somerset, Stella once again finds an opportunity to become part of the web of relationships that make for human society, as well as a chance at true friendship and love. How will independent-minded Stella, Lays reluctant to make an emotional commitment, respond? Written in exquisitely nuanced prose, *Spiderweb* is a captivating and deeply moving novel, a brilliant vision of our modern experience.

Spiderweb Details

Date : Published March 22nd 2000 by Harper Perennial (first published 1998)

ISBN : 9780060929725

Author : Penelope Lively

Format : Paperback 224 pages

Genre : Fiction, European Literature, British Literature, Novels, Literary Fiction

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From Reader Review Spiderweb for online ebook

Laurie says

Perfect novels, all of them. Just perfect. (This is one of my favorite book covers of all time.)

Flo says

Penelope Lively is one of the best writers I have ever read. Her writing is simply exquisite. Spiderweb tells the story of Stella, an anthropologist, who at 65 must retire and buys a cottage in a small village in England. She is single and childless and muses about her current staid and past fascinating life of fieldwork at exotic places around the world. Just to give you a taste of her writing, here is Stella driving home one evening.

"The night sky was clear in these parts, quite unlike the orange pall that hangs over cities. The weather was more vivid, you were more acutely aware of sun and rain, of the theatrical range of cloud effects, from incandescent back-lit masses to the delicate Wedgewood veil of summer cirrus. The car's headlights made a golden tunnel of the lanes down which she drove; when she came out into the open the hills were a long flank against the sparkling sky."

Stella's ironic "fieldwork" of her neighbors is understated yet comical. I subtracted a star due to Stella's lack of friends. Surely she had more than 1 good friend from her past aside from Judith and now deceased Nadine? I think Mrs Lively missed out here, but I love her writing.

Jana says

Another winner from Penelope Lively. Similar themes and features with other beloved novels from her: Shifting time, memories, ourselves in the current time passing by our remembered self from decades ago.

In one scene, two friends are recalling the same incident. "It is moth-eaten, this fabric of the past. But Stella's moth holes do not coincide with Judith's moth holes, it would seem. Of course not. Unreliable witnesses, all of us. We select the evidence, or something does."

Erika Schmid says

The insatiable need to flee, to not stay in any single place for very long, is not an uncommon theme to me as it has been my own life. Moving every five years and never growing too attached to people lest I leave, without a doubt the premise of this novel struck deep. However, the intrigue of this novel came when Stella, a retired anthropologist, settles in Somerset, England after years of moving around.

A quaint cottage in a small town; idea for some and yet a stretch for Stella as she leaves her nomadic life

behind. The core of this novel is the dynamics of a small village and the short look into the lives of a few people who interact with Stella. What I found the most interesting is that nothing was held back. The horrible neighbor was a horror without any apology. The unrequited love was not reciprocated. And the nature of people was honest through and through. Throughout is flashbacks to Stella's college days with her friend Nadine, who was on quite a different path as it was the 1950's and marriage was on the mind of many. All except Stella, of course, who remained unmarried and found herself drifting apart from Nadine who settled into home life early. It was fascinating to read the objective perspective of Stella as she observed her neighbors and reflected on her past with Nadine. She observed her life as she observed those she studied anthropologically, and rightfully so as that is simply the way her mind worked. Which is also why it was not surprising the way she acted the way she did. She bought a dog, since she observed that this was a common thing to do when settling into a cottage in Somerset. She attempted to follow the social norms of the society structure there and she couldn't. I commend her for sticking true to herself and not attempting to change for the sake of making others happy.

Stella was a hard character to relate to if one needs an emotional tether. And yet, in her lack of emotion, there was a great deal that came from her. In each instance where she had to leave, she showed a great deal of pain. And yet, knowing that if she stayed, there would have been an even greater pain. I commend Stella for remaining herself, even in a time in which she was told she should be another person.

Jeanne says

Well crafted, nuanced prose...found the storyline disappointing.

Pageturners book group selection.

Rebecca says

I need to read more of her work. I almost put the book aside after the first seventy pages. But, just in time, came shooting stars of thought-provoking commentary on relationships and singleness, on work and women and culture. There are riches of vocabulary and English village sociology. Plot, well, not so much.

Katrina says

I usually love Lively's books but this one was a slight disappointment.
<https://piningforthewest.co.uk/2018/0...>

Sue says

Retired anthropologist goes to live in the Quantock hills in West Somerset. An interesting study in part of village life but also of her past experiences in more exotic places. Her personal life and that of her best friend are also examined which are fascinating examples of the time. They seamlessly weave together.

Sandra says

Bought for me as consolation for missing a trip to a bookshop this turned out to contain a number of serendipitous references: first to Malta, where we were at the time, and also to Orkney and Watchet. But more than that, it was a satisfying journey around the life of a now 65 year-old and her attempts to settle to static domesticity for herself after a lifetime of travel and observing others. Greatly enjoyable.

Ed says

This is the third Penelope Lively book that I have read. The first that I read, *Moon Tiger*, won the Man Booker Prize in 1987. It is one of the best books I have read in the last decade. In my review of that book I wrote: "A dying woman expresses her desire to write a history of the world: a history that is kaleidoscopic rather than systematic, and that is communal AND personal. But more than that, this is a reflection on life and death and how a one exists after death as long as there are others to remember one. But this description is reductive and suggests none of the poetry and beauty of this book."

This book, *Spiderweb*, which deals with the retirement of a cultural anthropologist to a new, and for the first time, a permanent, home in the West Country (North Somerset), is more a reflection on time in the Einsteinian sense, as part of the fabric of Space-Time in which all four dimensions are interconnected.

"When Stella contemplated her own progress through time and space she saw lines – black lines that zig-zagged this way and that, netting the map of England, netting the globe, an arbitrary progress hither and thither. And sometimes these lines crossed one another. The intersections must surely be points of significance...But this progress of hers took place on two different planes. The web was not flat, but of three or indeed four dimensions. It had to incorporate both time and space in the way that only physicists can imagine. Stella thought of those spiderwebs that form an airy complex density of minutely connected strands. Her space-time progress was something like that, the whole thing shimmering with these portentous nodes at which the future lay hidden. You walk blindly past the self that is to come, and cannot see her."

This book was another reflective, perceptive work by the author, but I thought it was slightly marred by Lively's introduction of "Chekov's gun" early on. When until the very last pages of the narrative the device hadn't yet "gone off", the reader just waits for the inevitable punch instead of savoring the author's closing and summing up.

Still, this is a masterful book, and a moving one.

Philip says

Spiderweb by Penelope Lively is a superb novel. It features Stella Brentwood as a principal character. She has worked as an anthropologist in Greece, Malta, Egypt and a host of other locations, specialising in kinship relations. She has never married and has no children. At sixty-five retirement beckons and, on recommendation from an old acquaintance, she buys a cottage in Somerset, situated next door to a family of agricultural contractors. As a new life beckons, memories of the old resurface.

The agricultural family next door are called Hiscox. There's dad and mum and two teenage lads. As families go, they are somewhat dysfunctional, the boys causing particular problems since they are pretty much out of

control. They may prove to be difficult neighbours.

Though she has never before had a pet, Stella finds a small dog for companionship. She names it Bracken. The dog welcomes all comers, even the lads from next door, when they decide to call in. Links with the community begin to grow. Opportunities to participate in things local arise. She gives a talk about anthropology, challenging the rurally-based attendees to confront an ethnocentricity of which they are less than aware. It was an ambitious project and may have gone over some of the heads. A commission for a paper on the female anthropologist emerges and she goes to work.

Stella's contact in the area is Richard. He married Nadine, who was at Oxford with Stella. Nadine's goal in life was to marry and have children. She succeeded, but got a third class degree. Stella's first pointed towards career and independence, states that persist, along with the associated distance from personal relationships.

Recollections of college days and the pursuit of men alongside a task-orientated Nadine are interspersed with reminiscences on her field work and contemporary events. New relationships build and old ones already matured are experienced anew. Stella finds herself drawn into areas where she has previously decided not to tread. And then there are the neighbours, the Hiscox family with their two boys.

If Penelope Lively has a weakness, then it appears here. Like most other British novelists, she finds it hard to describe working class characters in anything other than caricature. The Hiscox family eventually play a pivotal role in Stella's developing relationship with the Somerset village and its inhabitants. But their identities never quite convince. In some ways, they appear conveniently, perhaps to indicate that this village is not completely composed of middle class retirees from professional occupations. As such, their role appears at times to be a convenience of plot, rather than a depiction of character.

At the end of the book, after finding new friends and rediscovering old ones alongside making a few enemies, Stella has a decision to make. Which way she decides to move is clearly going to be influenced by experience she has learned over the years. The reader is presented with her conundrum, but surely it has an answer. Spiderweb presents a thoroughly mature experience, where people grapple with the stuff of their thoroughly convincing lives.

John Newcomb says

Penelope Lively creates worlds and characters that draw the reader into the most intimate circumstances. The irony with this novel is that it is about community and belonging in a disjointed world but a world where the main protagonist, like the reader, is on the outside looking in. I wish I knew the real ending.

Cathy says

Sometimes I wonder why I read Penelope Lively. I enjoy her writing, but evil is always a presence. I'd rather not face evil in fiction--since there is plenty of evil to face in daily life!

Andrew Cox says

Excellent. I have read a few Penelope Lively books & although one was rather tame the others have not disappointed. This is an intriguing book dealing with the past & present life of an anthropologist. The book follows threads which are the spiderweb of the title. Moving from exotic locations to the gentle hills of Somerset the book is about identity & belonging or the difficulty of both. In many ways the present day and the dysfunctional family at the bottom of the lane prove to be more menacing than the field trips. The whole book has this wonderfully dark undertone best illustrated by the 2 brothers as they mooch about. This book is on many levels & is far more serious than it initially appears. Excellent.

Lynda says

A sixty five year old retired social anthropologist buys a cottage in the West Country where she begins to put down some roots for the first time in her peripatetic life. Ironically she singularly fails to read the runes and a horrifying act of cruelty arises. In this novel Lively once more contemplates the tricks that time plays on us all and wonders at how herself and her friend Nadine glad girls at Oxford became their older diminished selves. Lively I think deals very well with this material and it does not become sentimental in her exposition.
