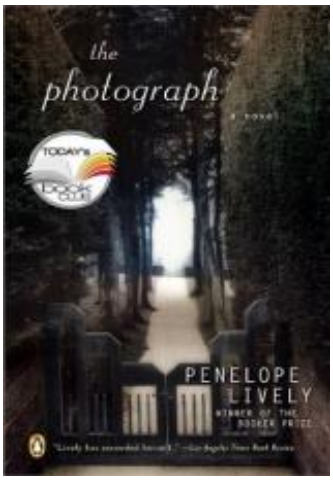
The Photograph

by Penelope Lively



About the Book

Booker prize-winning novelist Penelope Lively has been praised for creating characters whom readers are reluctant to part with and for a Jamesian complexity that is at once intellectually compelling and emotionally riveting. In **The Photograph**, her thirteenth work of fiction, she takes her narrative mastery and psychological insight to new, and seldom achieved, heights.

The Photograph is an unflinching and unforgettable story of the many ways the past intrudes upon the present and the present alters the past. When Glyn, a landscape historian, stumbles upon a photograph of his deceased wife, Kath, holding hands with another man, his understanding of the past is "savagely undermined." Reading the past, uncovering and deciphering its strata, is his stock in trade, but now it is his own personal landscape, and the history of his marriage, that he must reinterpret. He veers from emotional vertigo to an obsessive need to know what kind of woman his wife really was. Why did she have an affair? Did she have other lovers? Was their whole life together a lie? His search takes him back into his life with Kath, and her absence becomes the most powerful presence in his life, rising up before him, speaking to him, leading him to discoveries that reveal much more?and much more disturbing truths?about himself than about his wife. Though dead, she is the novel's most eloquent character, the still center around which the lives of all the other characters begin to swirl. Who was she, this beautiful woman who seemed to draw and hold the gaze of everyone who saw her, who seemed carefree and clearly happy, a burst of color and uncontainable energy?

And why did she have to die so young?

A taut and suspenseful psychological narrative, written with Lively's unmistakable nuance and insight, **The Photograph** is above all a profoundly moving meditation on the mysteries of time, memory, and the instability of the past.

Discussion Guide

1. When Glyn stumbles upon the photograph of Kath holding hands with Nick, he feels "driven to extract from this vital piece of evidence all that it can tell about how things were back then, since it appears that they were not as they seemed to be at the time, nor as I have believed them to have been ever since" (p. 15). He expects to find further infidelities, but what harsher truths, about himself as well as Kath, does he uncover? In what ways does he need to learn these things? In what ways does his professional life suit him to his search?

2. Why does Lively tell the story from different points of view? In what ways are multiple perspectives appropriate to the nature of the story?

3. Oliver thinks that Kath "has become like some mythical figure, trawled up at will to fit other people's narratives. Everyone has their way with her, everyone decides what she was, how things were. It seems to him unjust that in the midst of this to-do she is denied a voice" (p. 168). In what ways do the other characters in the novel use and distort the reality of who Kath was to "fit" their narratives? Does the narrative of the novel itself give Kath her own "voice"?

4. After Elaine's conversation with Mary Packard, when she learns that Kath had two devastating miscarriages, she thinks: "The nonbabies are now loud and clear, who did not exist a couple of hours ago. Kath's nonchildren. Because of them?because of these beings who never were?there is a new flavor to much that was said, much that was done. When Kath speaks now, Elaine hears a new note in her voice. Kath says the same things, but she says them in a new way" (p. 221). In what ways is the novel as a whole about not only how the past changes the present but how the present changes the past?

5. Kath is forever intruding into people's thoughts, rising up before them unbidden. Why does her absent presence have such power for the characters who survived her? In what ways did the absent presences of her own unborn children affect the course and outcome of her life?

6. In trying to reconstruct his life with Kath, Glyn recalls Kath's telling him something. "You're not listening, are you?" she asks. Glyn thinks, "Not listening, no. But now he is listening. He is listening hard" (p. 122). To what extent is Glyn, in his inability to listen and to know Kath, responsible for her death? What crucial things about Kath does he fail to understand? Why was he unable to listen fully to her when she was alive? Did he really love her?

7. Kath appears to others as a kind of embodiment of pure being, a beautiful, self-assured woman spontaneously following her whims wherever they might lead. Why do the other characters fail to see the deep insecurities that plague her? What is the "dark malaise" behind and beyond her looks? In what sense is her beauty both a privilege and a curse?

8. Why does Lively describe in such detail what Glyn, Elaine, Nick, and Polly were doing the day Kath took her life? What is the significance of Kath's unreturned phone calls to Glyn and Elaine? Would the outcome have been different had those calls been answered?

9. When Oliver visits Mark Packard, he has "an eerie feeling that this woman might know everything anyway, by some osmotic process, like the wise woman of folktales" (p. 223). Is this merely a fanciful projection on Oliver's part, or does Mary seem to have access to a kind of "knowing" the other characters can't attain? Or is it simply that she listened to

Kath more fully, and with less self-interest, than they did?

10. How surprising is it to learn the reasons for Kath's suicide? Do these reasons seem in keeping with her character? Why were none of the people who knew her best able to see that she was in danger?

11. In its dramatization of the relationships between Glyn and Kath, Nick and Elaine, and Nick and Kath, and to a lesser extent between Oliver and Sandra, Glyn and Myra, and Polly and her boyfriends, what does the novel suggest about our ability to know each other? What does it suggest about the role listening plays in such relationships?

12. At the end of the novel, Glyn relives the moment of finding Kath after she has committed suicide. "He moves through the day again and again, and at the end he sees what he saw then. The sight is the same as ever it was, except that it is informed by new wisdoms, and he looks differently" (p. 231). What are those "new wisdoms"? How is Glyn's perception?of himself and of Kath?different now from what it was then?

Author Bio

Penelope Lively is the author of many prize-winning novels and short story collections for both adults and children. She has twice been shortlisted for the Booker Prize: once in 1977 for her first novel, THE ROAD TO LICHFIELD, and again in 1984 for ACCORDING TO MARK. She later won the 1987 Booker Prize for her highly acclaimed novel MOON TIGER.

Her other books include GOING BACK; JUDGEMENT DAY; NEXT TO NATURE, ART; PERFECT HAPPINESS; PASSING ON; CITY OF THE MIND; CLEOPATRA'S SISTER; HEAT WAVE; BEYOND THE BLUE MOUNTAINS, a collection of short stories; OLEANDER, JACARANDA, a memoir of her childhood days in Egypt; SPIDERWEB; her autobiographical work, A HOUSE UNLOCKED; THE PHOTOGRAPH; MAKING IT UP; CONSEQUENCES; FAMILY ALBUM, which was shortlisted for the 2009 Costa Novel Award, and HOW IT ALL BEGAN.

She is a popular writer for children and has won both the Carnegie Medal and the Whitbread Award. She was appointed CBE in the 2001 New Year?s Honours List, and DBE in 2012.

Penelope Lively lives in London. She was married to Jack Lively, who died in 1998.

Critical Praise

"**The Photograph** is Penelope Lively's 14th novel, but she shows no sign of running out of inventiveness or of failing to write books that are hugely pleasurable to read. This one is deftly edged with humour."

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