



City of the Mind

Penelope Lively

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Matthew Halland is an architect, intimately involved with the new face of the city, while haunted by earlier times of destruction and loss in its history. Although he is divorced and lonely, Matthew has a rich and moving relationship with his daughter Jane. She offers a fresh perspective on love, loss, and even the city of London.

Matthew becomes entangled with an array of fascinating characters, from Rutter, a corrupt real estate developer whose mafia-like ways disgust him, to Sarah Bridges, a romantic ray of hope who enters his life. Mathew's relationships with Jane, Sarah, and Rutter allow his mind to rove freely as the past, present, and future interweave and he strives to look ahead and forge new beginnings of his own..

In Lively's most ambitious novel, she has created a wonderfully rich and audacious confrontation with the mystery of London.

City of the Mind Details

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From Reader Review City of the Mind for online ebook

Jgknobler says

A divorced London architect is working on the renovation of an old industrial building. He meets a girl; has outings with his young daughter; is approached by an unsavory businessman who wants to collaborate on development (and throw out inconvenient tenants.) There are also confusing passages about an air raid warden during the blitz. While there are some lovely parts of this novel, and we definitely care about the protagonist, it is difficult to see what Lively is getting at--I suppose the past influencing the present, or the present built on the ruins of the past.

Karen says

This was a good read. The main character is a London architect, although London is painted as a character in itself. There is an emphasis on the idea that the city is in a state of flux, but that its history is never too far from the surface: that it is a sort of palimpsest – which I loved. Lively illustrates this with scenes from the Blitz intercut with the contemporary action. The two occasionally blur together. Her descriptive writing of London, and her vision of it as a many-layered city, is extremely perceptive and well-executed.

There were parts, however, that didn't work so well. A lot of the dialogue didn't ring true for me and I felt as if the story and characterisation weren't developed enough – perhaps because the descriptive writing was so good by contrast. Saying that, there was something about the book – a warm heart, perhaps, and a sort of intelligent optimism – that made me sure I will read another of her books.

Rebecca says

An exceptionally evocative contemporary and historic London tour. The plot in this novel seems to fade through the book and becomes an afterthought. Not recommended as fiction.

Judy says

Spiderweb was so enjoyable, that I expected to like this one. Hmm. To me, it was convoluted, and the characters were flat. I liked the idea of the story, but it just didn't catch me. I gave up after 32 pages (I usually give a book at least 50 pages), so I'm not going to rate it. Maybe if I'd read just a little further ...

Katrina says

I really like Lively's writing.

Michaela says

This book was just odd. The plot was too simple and too complicated at the same time. I think having multiple stories told is rather confusing and it did not add any value to the main story. The style of writing is also not something I would enjoy. I appreciate that the author tried to write some parts as if Matthew was thinking but being in someone else's brain is not easy for the readers. I was also missing depth, especially in the characters as we know so little about them. This was the first book I read from Penelope and I am afraid it was last as well.

Bruce says

Architect Matthew Hallard is distracted. He's engaged in a large building project, but as he gazes about the site he sees not only the London of his own time in 1990, but buildings that take him back to the 1820s or to the Renaissance. As his mind wanders from his present cares: the break-up of his marriage, his eight-year-old daughter Jane, encounters with an unscrupulous developer, and the good-looking young woman he chanced to encounter in a sandwich shop, his story is interleaved with the stories of other Londoners from other times: an air-raid warden during the blitz, a Victorian natural scientist, Elizabethan explorer Martin Frobisher, and several unnamed children from the past.

Lively ponders the fragile bonds of human affection, estrangement, loss, hope and industry as it swirls through the city and through time. Ultimately it's a reassuring meditation.

Realini says

City of the Mind by Penelope Lively, adapted for BBC Radio

Matthew Halland is the hero of this interesting, meditative, thought provoking narrative, dramatized for BBC Radio.

The first line announces the main theme – the dimensions of our existence: breadth, width, depth and...time. Jane is the daughter of the protagonist and she is the one who asks about time, first her mother, who is separated from her father, who says she does not know how to explain and then, when the hero hears that his ex-wife did not have an answer...he is sure to give one.

The stars are there and yet, they may be already gone, for it takes so many thousands of years for their light to reach us and, once it does, they may be already dead, vanished.

Jane has an accident and given that her father is not there – although he runs to the hospital as soon as he finds out – she is worried and concerned that he is not there...in general, inviting us to think.

A child can open up a discussion with deep impact, for she means that her father was not there when she

broke her wrist, but he may cease to exist altogether when she is with her mother and her new partner- of course, Jane does not use these words.

Matthew has a new partner, but while they have sex, he does not shout her name and provokes her to explain to him...

- Look, in the present there is me, Alice and for the past, there was Susan, the former Susan Halland

This woman is thirty-seven and given this delicate age, she is worried that she would not have the chance, the biology to have children for many years in the future and therefore she brings this up in a restaurant...

Look, at my age I have to consider a change

Yes, I thought we could not go on like this

I want you to give me a baby...

It was not in those words, but the hero was very surprised to hear the proposal and the insistence that if it is a question of money, they would have a contract and she says so loud that all the people inside could hear-

You mean you are infertile!?

While in a sandwich shop, a woman discovers she does not have her purse and Matthew offers to buy her the tuna sandwich she had wanted, which is only a little more than one pound.

The shop assistant is curious as to why he did not ask for the address, to get the money back supposedly and with hindsight, the hero leaves his card and says that if she should return, she could call him.

The architect meets a developer who has two mean dogs, a project for a new building that would interest the protagonist and a strange joke:

Shampoo?

I am sorry.

This is my little joke

Alas, the mirth is short lived – if there was any – and this vicious character has a murderous manner of convincing the tenants to evacuate premises for which he has other plans – reminding one of the superb French film The Beat That My Heart Skipped with the phenomenal Romain Duris, perhaps the best French star now.

One eight year old Bangladeshi girl is killed when thugs sent in by the mobster- property developer push a petrol bomb – most likely – in the premises and a fire is provoked that terrifies Matthew Halland when he learns about it.

He calls his supposed business partner and they have an argument, as expected, the hero is overwhelmed by the news that he had accepted to work for the plans for a building that has caused the death of a child.

Evidently, there was nothing he could have done about it.

In the meantime, the woman that had benefited from the gallantry, politeness of the protagonist has received his card, calls and says that she owes him lunch, where they agree from the very beginning.

She refers to this awkward way of meeting, but ads that the other methods of trying to find a partner as just as outré and Matthew agrees.

Whereas the first line mentions the four dimensions – length, breadth, depth and time- towards the end,

Matthew Halland concludes that there is another dimension to consider along with the aforementioned and that is...

Love!

Paul Secor says

A friend gave me a copy of City of the Mind some years ago. I'd never read any of Penelope Lively's books before, but after reading this one I was hooked. Since then, I've read nearly all of her books for adults. Probably time to give this one another read.

Susan says

I can't remember the last time I read something so beautifully written. The leading character is an architect and the city of London is jointly another leading character, too, and the strands of time are skillfully interwoven.

Peggy Aylsworth says

This is by one of my favorite British writers...I've read all her novels. This one is set in the city of London, which she creates almost as a character. The story deals with an London architect, divorced, with a young child, a little girl with whom he has a charming relationship. He wanders the city and brings the reader along with him. Lively's writing is so vivid and probing, in terms of her characters, I always feel I've actually met them...and know more about their interior life than if they were friends.

Jan says

Just started this and it's got to me straight away. Thought I had read all her books and might have read this before. Hope not.

Jane says

I love Penelope Lively, but the constant going backwards and forward in time in this book (presumably to give a sensation of the depth of human history in London) just didn't work for me - distracting rather than enhancing from the main story

Priscilla says

I liked it but it was a little too dreamy for my personal taste. It felt murky rather than poetic while I was reading it. Inevitable happy ending with the love interest disappointed me a bit. But a good read, nevertheless.

Sue says

A book a forgot I read almost moments after reading it. A bizarre plot line left undone. Style is fine, but plot was a mess.
