

## Into the Realm of *What If*

By Peter Wolfe

Book Review:

*Making It Up*, by Penelope Lively. Viking, 2005.

Penelope Lively's tactic of presenting fictional versions of herself at different times in her life puts *Making It Up* in the tradition, associated with Flaubert and Henry James, of the artistically self-conscious novel; *Making It Up* ponders the limits and renewals of fictional art as it moves forward—and sometimes backward.

Addressing these limits straightaway, it accuses fiction of dishonesty. Lively calls her new book an “anti-memoir” because, like other stories, it imposes order and pattern upon chaos. This is where the gears screech. Though helpful to clarity and flow, the control exerted by storytellers falsifies reality, which is messy and erratic.

Her concept of character tempers her implication in the hoax. The self in Lively is provisional and tricky, a brew of attitudes and assumptions often concocted by chance. Rarely do we control what happens to us. History, for instance, grabs people “by the scruff of the neck and puts them where they do not want to be.” Though star performers in our own lives, we play bit parts in the life-dramas scripted by others.

These others can be powerful. Lively's time-settings—the Korean War, the Suez Crisis, and the Falklands invasion—help make insecurity and danger the norms of the 20th century. “Some form of capricious choice” on the parts of our national leaders can pluck us from our cozy routines and send us into war. Or away from it; the threat of a German invasion of Lively's native Egypt c. 1942 sends an English family from Cairo in “The Mozambique Channel.”

Our vulnerability to chance and the unknown calls into question the continuity of self. Not only can strangers derail our

lives; an English-born Californian in "Transatlantic" finds her native land more alien than familiar. A woman in "Comet" calls the image in an early snapshot of her "not so much an alter ego as another person," one, moreover, sure to disapprove of the matronly self she would later become. The drama of self-fragmentation is even global, the "mass migrations" of the last century having given millions of people identities sharply different from those they were born into.

But the drama has another side to it. "Comet" takes its drive from a long-dead, long-forgotten character called, advisedly, Penelope. The vital new bonds created by the locket Penelope was wearing when she died 50 years earlier denies death itself a free-standing final reality. It's important that the locket was found by accident. Lively's view of life as a network of chance lacking terminal values takes her, as it did Robert Frost, to the realm of what if, or what might have happened (in fact, she quotes Frost's poetic meditation on the subject, "The Road Not Taken"). Though a-historical, some events, or non-events in "Comet" came so close to happening that they deserve to be rescued from oblivion.

Lively also shows them nourishing her art. And what a splendid art that is. She sets mood quickly, whether she's writing about the raucous street life of hot, dusty Cairo or cold, damp England during the wartime ordeals of food rationing, power shortages, and the Blitz. Her preference for live action over summary serves her well throughout. For instance, rather than saying that a ship has been torpedoed, she describes the roaring, heaving effects of a torpedo blast upon the ship's passengers.

But these stunned passengers aren't merely victims of the indifference of time and military policy. A "mysterious innate steering system" we all possess makes them—and us—special. And this specialness infers a vital mysterious world that underlies the one we inhabit and share. There's nothing reductive here. Besides illuminating the creative process, *Making It Up* also lends shape and voice to those enigmas that have always focused the human drama.