“Let me contemplate myself within my context”:

An Analysis of Penelope Lively’s Moon Tiger as a Work of Historical Fiction and a Commentary on History

B.A. Essay

Guðrún Valdimarsdóttir

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Guðrún Valdimarsdóttir
Kt.: 181285-2499

Supervisor: Ingibjörg Ágústdóttir
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Abstract

Penelope Lively’s 1987 novel *Moon Tiger* has long been left out of critical studies of the British historical novel, despite being an exceptionally fitting representative of the genre, as well as an apt pioneer of one of its subgenres. This essay endeavours to clarify its position within the extensive framework of historical fiction, while emphasizing the value and importance of such high-quality specimens of the genre. The protagonist and principal narrator of *Moon Tiger* is the historian Claudia Hampton, who is planning to write a history of the world with herself at its core. The novel’s positioning of Claudia as a central figure in the larger scheme of things is vital to my thesis, for it is my objective to demonstrate the interconnectedness of public and private narratives, and the manner in which Lively’s novel continually suggests their equivalent significance. For in a developing society the individual can not progress without recognizing his or her situation in history, whereas a historical account will never get close to being comprehensive without a proper consideration of subjective personal accounts along with names, dates and statistics. As Claudia executes her grand project, she wanders back in time, in a “kaleidoscopic” fashion, revisiting moments of her past and selected historical events, all the while allowing a few of her intimate contemporaries to shed an additional light on these past occurrences. Lively employs this fragmented narrative method as a means to strengthen many of her arguments which refute standard conceptions regarding historical objectivity and the accustomed hierarchy of historical evidence.
# Table of contents

Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 1  
I. Moon *Tiger* and Historical Fiction .................................................................................................. 2  
II. Relation of Incidents ......................................................................................................................... 7  
III. Origins and Evolution ....................................................................................................................... 10  
IV. Conquests, Rivals and Allies ............................................................................................................. 13  
V. The Core ............................................................................................................................................... 18  
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................... 22  
Works Cited ............................................................................................................................................... 24
Introduction

In his article “The Desires of History, Old and New”, Tony E. Jackson claims that “no one has contributed more to the contemporary novel of history than Penelope Lively” (173). However, despite such lofty praises neither Lively’s masterpiece, the Booker Prize winning novel Moon Tiger, nor the author herself are anywhere mentioned on chief historical fiction websites (e.g. www.historicalnovels.info and www.historical-fiction.com), or in major contemporary studies of the historical novel, such as Jerome de Groot’s The Historical Novel and even more astonishingly, Diana Wallace’s The Woman’s Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900 – 2000. It is not a straightforward task to identify the specific reasons for this omission, still it is worth mentioning that although Moon Tiger is in some measure, “a novel that has as its setting a period of history and that attempts to convey the spirit, manners, and social conditions of a past age with realistic detail and fidelity” (Encyclopædia Britannica), it also returns regularly to the hospital bed of its dying narrator, situated in the period of the novel’s publication. From this hospital bed the exquisite beauty Claudia Hampton, an intelligent and independent historian and journalist, plans to write a “history of the world as selected by Claudia: fact and fiction, myth and evidence, images and documents” (Moon Tiger 1).

This statement may appear “peremptory, stark, even ... arrogant” (Thwaite v) and thus distracts the reader from the fact that Claudia has “grown old with the century; there’s not much left of either of [them]” (66) and that this enables her to settle her own accounts along with those of her era. Furthermore, in order to “abide by the conventions of history” (6) a few selected individuals are allowed to shed some additional light on the moments selected by the narrator. This use of multiple perspectives, which even includes that of a “myriad Claudias” (2) and a wartime diary discovered decades after its creator’s demise, reveals that “[t]he voice of history ... is composite” (5) and thus evokes the subject of historiography. Therefore, it can be seen that Moon Tiger does not merely serve the function of a chronicle of the past century and certain earlier historical events, or of “The Life and Times of Claudia H.” (1), since the novel’s function is also that of a reflection on the nature of history and its relation to the present. For Claudia it is essential to appreciate your own position in the grand relation of incidents; moreover, as her lover Tom declares: “[i]t wonderfully concentrates the mind at times like these – all this contemplation of the past” (108). By knitting together the narrative threads of Claudia’s own experiences with
fragments of world history, Lively demonstrates through her narrator, that “what holds for
the individual holds as well on the level of cultural history” (Jackson 175). Accordingly,
although Lively made extensive use of historical evidence for the writing of her novel, she
also employed her own experiences and childhood memories as the inspiration and
background for certain parts of the narrative. The aim of this essay is firstly, to situate
Moon Tiger within the genre of historical fiction, while subsequently examining its
narrator’s view of history. It is then within this context, that events and individuals from
Claudia’s personal sphere will be juxtaposed with the historical events and circumstances
which she mentions in her narration, thus underlining the fact that “public and private time
are intertwined, neither separate nor unequal” (Burton 56), while illustrating the manner in
which Lively employs historical fictional as a means to dispute established conceptions
regarding history.

I. Moon Tiger and Historical Fiction

According to Georg Lukács, who has been called “the most influential and thoughtful
critic of the historical novel” (de Groot 24), the first work pertaining to the genre of
historical fiction is Sir Walter Scott’s Waverley, which was published in 1814. As Lukács
explains, there had previously existed novels which in theme resembled Scott’s novel and
whose subject matter was the past; however, the difference lay in the fact that the earlier
novels’ address of history was merely superficial, and as a result, “[n]ot only the
psychology of the characters, but the manners depicted are entirely of the writer’s own
day” (Lukács 19). There is nothing that mandates that such literary pieces hold less artistic
worth than those which demonstrate the “derivation of the individuality of characters from
the historical peculiarity of their age” (Lukács 19). Nevertheless, a lack of psychological
historicity deprives a novel of its importance as a means for individuals “to comprehend
their own existence as something historically conditioned, for them to see in history
something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them” (Lukács
24), and therefore such novels can not justly claim a place within the ranks of historical
fiction. Accordingly, despite the fact that the genre has expanded greatly, and that many of
the limitations previously imposed upon it have been outgrown since Lukács’ The
Historical Novel first came out in 1937, the above statement has not lost its value. We still
wish to read about the past in a manner which permits us to measure its effect upon our
own times, and more specifically, upon our own person, for as one of the characters in *Moon Tiger* points out, we are all a part of the “narrative” (184).

Although there have always existed various subgenres within the field of historical fiction, the latter part of the twentieth century has provided the genre with quite an extensive list of categories, and accordingly, as Sarah Johnson states in her *Historical Fiction: A Guide to the Genre*, the main problem with classifying historical fiction is that it is “too broad, and that it overlaps with other genres” (11). Thus, as a rather unconventional historical novel, *Moon Tiger* enters in the domain of several subgenres, the foremost being: postmodern historical fiction, historical novel of war and historical romance. Due to Lively’s exquisite sense of storytelling all three subgenres entwine marvellously, consequently endowing the novel with great depth and sensitivity. Moreover, despite its originality and multifaceted aspect the novel does not estrange the reader nor does it deviate from the core of historical fiction, “which demands an unusual response from its audience: an active response, at the least, and a sense of otherness and difference when reading” (de Groot 4). Still, in order to appreciate and understand each subgenre’s impact on the text it is imperative to revise them briefly, as well as highlight each of their principal characteristics which can be found in the novel.

Throughout *Moon Tiger*, Claudia engages with the idea of a compound perspective and the impossibility of really understanding and justly representing the mindset of individuals distant from us, whether that may be in time or in space. For she knows that just like everyone else, she “shall survive – appallingly misrepresented” (125) in the minds of those that have known her. Moreover, although Claudia usually boasts of a greater insight than the majority, at one point she does acknowledge her own complete ignorance, when she states: “I cannot shed my skin and put on yours, cannot strip my mind of its knowledge and its prejudices” (31). Nevertheless, this does not make her despair since it is merely the reality of the human situation and thus “can’t be helped” (31). As a result, Claudia’s invariable recognition of the instability of truth, facts and objectivity set the tone for the novel’s postmodern element since:

The techniques of postmodernism ... have become the techniques of the modern historical novel. Questioning the legitimacy of narrative and undermining authority are fundamental to the ways that contemporary novelists approach the past. Once again, this determinacy and dissident
complexity are fundamental to the historical novel as a phenomenon. (de Groot 108)

Yet *Moon Tiger* takes this dissident a step further than the bulk of historical fiction, due to its metafictional elements and proficient use of poioumenon, for Claudia never allow us to forget that she is “writing a history of the world” (1), and that we are reading the outcome. Moreover, she repeatedly considers the manner in which her account should be presented, and even speculates whether she should “write like the scribes of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, saying in the same breath that an archbishop passed away, a synod was held, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air” (8).

However, factual representation is far from being the only thing that Claudia does not take for granted; she also has little faith in the established measure of time. In the hospital where she is mostly alone with her memories Claudia loses track of time, while at other times she talks of “static months” (119) and “hours [which] are no longer linear but assorted like bright sweets in a jar” (108). Many places and situations evoke past events vividly in her head, like when she notes “that it was as though the Vikings were here again” (17) while visiting Lindisfarne at the beginning of World War II. Moreover, when she thinks of Egypt and in particular of Cairo, Claudia declares that “[t]here was no chronology to the place, and no logic” (89). Lively’s speculations regarding time have been noticed by several critics, one of whom being Tony E. Jackson, whose aforementioned article, “The Desires of History, Old and New”, mostly engages itself with Lively’s treatment of synchronic and diachronic time. There Jackson argues that *Moon Tiger* “enacts, so to speak, synchrony in the way it is written, and makes a point of including along the way the necessity of diachrony” (178). By this statement, he draws attention to the fact that regardless of the novel’s “kaleidoscopic” structure and its assertion that events and memories are not “sequential but a whirl of words and images” (14), it indeed insists upon the importance of not denying the past, and thus it does not, like Jasper, assume that “it has nothing to do with” (64) shaping the individual and the present moment. This argument is further supported by Mary Hurley Moran, who calls attention to the novel’s postmodern treatment of time by claiming that *Moon Tiger* is “a pastiche of jumbled time periods and conflicting and overlapping points of view”, which consequently maintains the “idea that human beings do not possess an absolute, transcendent identity but are instead an intersection of various versions of themselves” (“Experimental Impulse” 108).
In his short chapter on the historical novel of war, Jerome de Groot states that in 1993 Sebastian Faulk’s *Birdsong* “began a vogue for literary historical novelists about ... the two world wars” (102). This novel, which also travels between different periods of time and observes the war both as a current situation and as something of the past, came out six years after the publication of *Moon Tiger* and was, according to de Groot: “one of the first of these types of novels to really deal with ... the grimness and trauma which are now familiar tropes” (102). Although *Birdsong* certainly deserves its prominence within historical world war fiction, *Moon Tiger* can not be denied its place among the pioneers of the subgenre, since while it deals with a number of themes, the Second World War is an extremely prominent one; in effect, it constitutes the novel’s core. As a matter of fact, when Lively is invited to talk about her Booker Prize winning novel she often declares that she “had always wanted to write about Egypt during the second world war”, in order to take advantage of her own childhood experience (Lively “Writing *Moon Tiger*”). Moreover, while she does not approve of packing novels with research material, Lively nonetheless “spent hours in a projection room there [Imperial War Museum] watching mute, unedited film of the Libyan campaign ... This resource, along with the immense archive of still photographs, enabled ... [her] to see it as Tom saw it, and as ... Claudia, saw it on her own foray to the front as a war correspondent” (Lively “Writing *Moon Tiger*”). And although the visual material along with her own experience served as her major inspiration, Lively also scrutinized all the written material available: “war diaries, the accounts of war correspondents and the few novels that came out of that war” (Lively “Writing *Moon Tiger*”).

As can be seen by the above, *Moon Tiger* does not take itself lightly as a war novel; even though Lively does not adhere to direct quotes and statistics. Moreover, its unique position can be further demonstrated by referring again to de Groot, who ends his chapter on the war novel with a discussion on the subgenre’s most recent type of novel, which supposedly only emerged after the turn of the millennium. According to de Groot, this new kind of historical novel of war has introduced the elements of self-consciousness and authentic fallacy (108); i.e. it draws attention to the fictionalization of war writing and the impossibility of truly representing the experience of the common soldier on the battlefield. However, Lively in effect had already done this in 1987 by declaring that “[a]ll history, of course, is the history of wars” (66), and subsequently depriving the tank commander Tom Southern of an actual narrative voice by only representing him through
the eyes of his lover and a fragmented and chaotic journal. When Claudia has read Tom’s journal she compares it with her own narration and the general account of the events of the North African Campaign, and what she discovers is that Southern’s “experience – raw and untreated – does not seem to contribute to any of that. It is on a different plane ... it is all clearer to me than any chronicle of events but I cannot make sense of it, perhaps because there is none to be made” (207). In addition, throughout Moon Tiger Claudia often refers to the anonymous soldier while she criticises and draws attention to the “smokescreen of fantasy – that crazy language of generals and politicians ... [where] men did not die but bought it, were not shot but stopped one” (67).

The third subgenre which Moon Tiger belongs to is that of historical romance, a variety of fiction which according to de Groot, is mostly “written by women for a predominantly female audience ... [and] prioritises loving and sexual relationships” (52). Reviewing this statement it appears rather complicated to place Lively’s novel within the category; however, this has got more to do with the prescriptiveness of the definition than the subgenre itself. It is evident that de Groot’s study of the historical romance did not consider works like Moon Tiger, for despite several attempts at giving credit to the category he has next to nothing positive to say about historical romances. Yet, this comes as no great surprise given that he mostly limits his discussion to novels written before or around the middle of the twentieth century, which were limited to being either “ideologically conservative” (de Groot 54) or expressive “of the horrors of what women in particular went through” (de Groot 56).

However, in Diana Wallace’s study a more valid definition of historical romances is offered by underlining the importance of the fusion of distance with reality, while also stressing that within the subgenre there persists “the centralisation of women’s fears and desires ... [and] what we normally think of as history – the public and masculine ... is pushed into the background” (153-154). This can easily be applied to Moon Tiger, since although Claudia’s narration and work has got much to do with wars, conflict and general history, she manages to connect it all to her own personal sphere where she has “the last word. The historian’s privilege” (6). Still, “Miss Hampton has a way with her” (98) and she is no delicate heroine in need of rescue. Claudia employs her femininity and beauty as a weapon, which, often enough, places her ahead of the men she associates with. Moreover, critics have commented upon the absurdity of classifying Moon Tiger as a “housewives’ choice, [for] it proves only that housewives are made of stern stuff and
shouldn’t be underestimated” (Jordison, “Ludicrously patronised”). Namely, for even though the protagonist is female and the novel enters upon the themes of love and family, this does not suffice to categorize it as merely a novel for women, if such gendering is even possible. Nevertheless, *Moon Tiger* is certainly a historical romance since the relationships between Claudia and the men in her life, especially Tom, form the most significant parts of both its plot and structure. The historical events, such as those of the Second World War are certainly significant, yet as Moran points out:

What is more lasting for her than the public experience is the personal one it creates: an intensely passionate love affair with a young tank commander named Tom Southern. This love affair ... proves to be the central emotional and spiritual experience of Claudia’s life” (“Feminist History” 92).

II. Relation of Incidents

As has been demonstrated in the previous section, the relevance of *Moon Tiger* to the genre of historical fiction is multifaceted. However, despite the numerous arguments that can be presented on the subject, there is one element which bears greater significance than any other, and that is Claudia Hampton’s passion for history. Throughout the novel Lively’s narrator contemplates the nature of history, while introducing several concepts relating to historical ontology, although this is done in an unadorned manner which lacks magniloquence and abstractness. These considerations are presented in many ways; through dialogue, images, reminiscences and even the structure of the novel itself. The historian Michael Bentley describes Lively as suffering from an “obsession with transtemporal sensibility” (351) and charges her, somewhat unfairly, of participating in “evacuations of the past and annihilations of time-in-itself” (354). It is true that the protagonist of *Moon Tiger*, Claudia, declares her irritation with chronology (2), yet this does not deprive her wanderings in time of a plot and meaning. Lively merely demonstrates that a life does not have to resemble a *Bildungsroman* (i.e. a story of gradual formation and growth), but that it can also be centred on key events and coincidences whose significance never lessens. This is furthermore explained by Tony E. Jackson who states that:

In rejecting or suspending chronology, we at least provisionally reject the conventional idea of cause and effect. We can still have a kind of a
historiography. We can still say that things change, but we can no longer ascribe change to any sequential, additive development. (174)

Accordingly, as a professional historian Claudia has had to work with linear development in most of her works; however, in her ultimate grand history of herself and the world, Claudia has decided to follow her instincts and write in a kaleidoscopic manner, i.e. “shake the tube and see what comes out” (2). Because of the manner in which the text is structured, this description is exceptionally fitting, “for it suggests the circular, recursive movement and the overlapping quality of the presentations” (Moran, “Experimental Impulse” 103-104). Yet since Lively’s readers will be acquainted with most of the historical events mentioned in the novel, this technique should not result in any perplexity. Nevertheless, it will certainly intrigue the reader’s interest in Claudia Hampton herself, for we do not “know the story... [or] the general tendency” (2), and with her lifelong practice in journalism, Claudia knows exactly how to provide just enough information to pique the interest of her audience. Moreover, the indiscriminate invocation of pieces of history in Moon Tiger can even encourage investigation and further reading, since the reader who becomes fascinated by Claudia might desire to become better acquainted with the framework of her story.

The kaleidoscopic narrative technique of Moon Tiger furthermore serves as a commentary on the limitations of every written history, since it demonstrates Claudia’s ignorance of other parallel narratives, no matter how contiguous they appear in time, space and relevance. This entwining of perspectives is exceptionally successful due to the manner in which Lively “carefully hones the scene to fit the consciousness of that character, including only those details he or she registers and employing a style that simulates the character’s unique voice and thought processes” (Moran, “Experimental Impulse” 103). A prime example is the addition of the perspective of Lisa, Claudia’s daughter, for while in theory she should be one of the persons nearest to Claudia, there is perhaps no one she comprehends less, “[for] Claudia has never seen Lisa detached from Claudia” (60). It is made evident that the mother has no idea of her daughter’s inner or outer life, and the complete lack of mutual understanding is made all the more disheartening when an overdue apology from Claudia only causes Lisa more distress, for “now it will always be there, complicating things” (182). Moreover, the distant reflection of that other child which filled Claudia “with wonder and with awe” (130), but she was told to “forget all about” (132), bequeaths the reader with an understanding of Claudia
which Lisa will never reach. Still, we can not reach an ultimate truth regarding the legitimacy of their versions of the past; therefore, both of these women are judged in accordance with our subjective experience of their narrations and their subsequent juxtaposition. Accordingly, the same principle applies to all other historical events and circumstances, for as Keith Jenkins explains in his book Re-thinking History: “As the past has gone, no account can ever be checked against it but only against other accounts” (11).

By employing a narrator situated in the present it can be said that Lively is breaking away from a tradition in historical fiction which demands a certain distance between a story and its author/investigator persona. However, if her method is scrutinized further it becomes evident that the required detachment is still present, for although Claudia’s hospital bed is located in the late eighties she does not speculate on current affairs and, what is more, Claudia is not Lively’s surrogate. She might express some of her opinions, yet she possesses her own strong personality along with being born twenty-three years earlier and having led quite a dissimilar existence. Moreover, Lively is probably slightly more modest than “by far the best looking ... most resourceful, the most astute, the least deceivable” (91-92) female in her profession, as Claudia finds fit to describe herself.

Nevertheless, it is “Miss Hampton’s bold conceptual sweep” (1) and unwavering self-confidence which enables her to be the best possible narrator of a “history of the world ... [which is] in the process ... [her] own” (1). Through the sophisticated manner in which it is written, Moon Tiger “portrays historical events as elements in the mosaic of Claudia’s consciousness; these are interwoven in nonchronological, associative fashion with ... the reflections on her personal past” (Moran, “Experimental Impulse” 109). Right at the beginning of the novel she requests of her reader: “[l]et me contemplate myself within my context” (1), and this is exactly what she does, thus placing “importance and significance in places other than where males [or traditional scholars] would have them: in the personal feelings and reactions of the common people” (Moran, “Feminist History” 90). Consequently, Claudia elucidates her belief that history is not a dried up subject with no relevance to our daily life, while in addition confirming that “public and private time are intertwined, neither separate nor unequal” (Burton 56), as has been referred to above. In the following chapters the manner in which she relates to “[t]he whole triumphant murderous unstoppable chute” (1), which constitutes the history of mankind, will be depicted. This is an imperative matter, for as Claudia states: “it enlarges me, it frees me from the prison of my experience; it also resounds within that experience” (159).
III. Origins and Evolution

Although Claudia finds religion and faith quite fascinating, she does not “think there was such a person as God” (115), or at least her pragmatism does not allow her to waste prayers on an entity that appears unwilling to comply. Nevertheless, she has a deep-rooted need for placing herself within the bigger picture, or as she expresses it: “to slot myself into the historical process, hitch myself to its coat-tails, see where I come in” (29). Therefore, despite her disregard for chronology, Claudia is deeply interested in origins and her “beginnings; the universal beginning. From the mud to the stars” (3), and consequently many of the events she covers symbolize the commencement of a new era. In this context, Claudia repeatedly brings up the subject of rocks and palaeontology, yet her interest is not really triggered by the creation of the universe and its natural components. Conversely, as a true historian she is fascinated by human beings, their development, inventions and eccentricities. Accordingly, all paleontological references merely serve as an intelligent device for explaining or relating occurrences of both the “universal and particular, your story and mine” (1).

Then there also exist places and moments in time which are ancient, yet have the power to linger on forever, “conditioning the way we look at things” (80). For Claudia, Egypt is one of those places, where “past and present do not so much co-exist ... as cease to have any meaning” (80). Compared to all that has happened in the Egyptian desert sand, both the joys and sorrows of one woman seem but a small thing. The desert serves both as an almighty preserver, preventing a temple’s ruin for over 3000 years, and as an inexorable extinguisher of present events. Claudia remarks that after several days of bloody war in this wasteland, the area remains “untouched ... [while] the sand is starting to digest the broken vehicles, the petrol cans, the tangles of wire” (96). Yet, the effect of the “continuous phenomenon” (80) as Claudia calls Egypt, works similarly upon the mind, for when she returns there many years later, only to find the urban surroundings “unreachable” (113), she is still “confronted ... with the mirage – with the shining phantom of that other time” (88).

Nevertheless, not all territories possess the desert’s capacity to resist the influence of man, since one of the main abilities of the human race is “[t]ampering with the physical world” (13). For most settlers prefer dominating their environment to adapting to it, and consequently there can be “no nonsense about conserving it” (30). This topic of man’s dominion over territory and our long journey from a more primordial origin stays with
Claudia while she recollects a previous visit to the United States. During the trip and her remembrances of it, Claudia’s kaleidoscopic vision links the foundation of the first settlements in New England to the present day, while casually gliding over all that has happened in between: “slavery and secession, the Gold Rush, the Alamo, Transcendentalism, Hollywood, the Model T Ford, Sacco and Vanzetti, Joe McCarty ... Vietnam. Ronald Reagan, for heaven’s sake” (29). In her opinion the disembarkation of the Mayflower in Cape Cod in the year of 1620 is the “most interesting arrival of all” (29), for it marks the beginning of a society whose actions have been conditioning a great deal of the population of the rest of the world for almost four centuries. By taking a quick look at the listing above it can be observed how humanity has been bent and shaped by forces as divergent as culture, economy, transportation, militia, politics and the mastery of certain individuals over others, all deriving from a country which takes its name from two entire continents. Nevertheless, Claudia is not one to judge a fellow defender and she expresses her admiration for “the teeming continent America” (31), although she is most definitely only referring to the part known as the USA.

As a historian, Claudia feels that she is not restricted to conventional ideas of ancestry, for she imagines herself as the direct descendant, or rather as “the life hereafter... recording and assessing” (30) of the “unimaginative folk” (29) of the early settlements. Accordingly, the colonists’ inability to foresee the great aftermath of their legendary arrival is what most fascinates Claudia, and during her visit to a recreated Pilgrim Village she debates the idea of an alternative destiny with her brother Gordon. This brief mention of counterfactual history further broadens the perspective of Moon Tiger, since although Claudia knows that she can not alter the past there is always an underlying sense of what-ifs, especially in relation to the personal story in the foreground. In Robert Cowley’s introduction to the essay collection What If? he argues for the necessity of alternative histories by pointing out that:

History is properly the literature of what did happen; but that should not diminish the importance of the counterfactual. What-ifs can lead us to question long-held assumptions ... They can show that small accidents or split-second decisions are as likely to have major repercussions as large ones. (xi-i)

Accordingly, the circumstances through which the paths of Claudia and Tom Southern first converged were quite coincidental and during their conversations they bless
their luck, while declaring themselves “[h]ostages to fortune” (76). That two adults from a similar background would fall in love for the first time in the middle of the Egyptian desert during a time of war is remarkable, and it is impossible not to consider the many obstacles that could have prevented that meeting. Conversely, that a tank commander, like Tom, should be killed during the Second World War has its logic, although this does not make it any less tragic that “for Claudia the beginning is also the ending, and so the event of most value in her life flares up and vanishes in a brief flash of time” (Jackson 184). The great effect of her loss has occasioned animated debates amongst Lively’s readers, concerning an alternative outcome of events, and the more romantic ones would most likely want to conjure Tom back into the narrative. However, there are moments in their relationship which suggest the improbability of a felicitous outcome to that alternative ending. At one point Tom declares, rather condescendingly, that he will take care of Claudia while she “can write these history books” (121, emphasis added) and rear him a child. Somehow this does not seem a feasible ending for Claudia, although during those early moments of tenderness and infatuation she appears to go along with his plans for the future. Accordingly, even Lively agrees that a positive result of a further relationship between the lovers would be doubtful, for she does “not see Claudia as a farmer’s wife” (Lively, “Interview”).

Moreover, it would never be enough for Claudia to simply “contribute” (121), as Tom wants her to, since she neither views life nor history as a “dispassionate narration” (8); on the contrary, she forces history to penetrate all her existence and she declares her sincere intentions to “set out to shock” (3). However, there is hardly much remarkable to be found in her own origins, therefore she rather pictures herself as a descendant of history, “a Myth” (7), and even for a time she formed, along with her brother, an incestuous “aristocracy of two” (137). Accordingly, in order to “flesh it out; give it life and colour, add the screams and the rhetoric” (2), Claudia, instead of limiting herself to a description of her mother as a monotonous and frigid housewife, states that in order to avoid its heavy burden, her mother “retired from history” (6). Furthermore, Claudia’s father not only died on a stretcher during the Battle of the Somme, but got “picked off by history” (7). This passion for active involvement sheds a certain light on Claudia’s relationship with Jasper, the father of her only child and sole long-term partner. It is evident that she savours the idea of Jasper, who is “a fusion of Russian aristocracy and English gentry” and a man “who nicely manifested his ancestry” (9). She can envision all
of his progress in life and the nature of their relationship as a result of a cultural past; she even has “Tito to thank for” the fact that they ever met (9).

Consequently, when Claudia conceives a child by Jasper it is not difficult to imagine her high hopes and since individuals seldom rise to the level of other people’s elevated expectations, Lisa “was a disappointment” (51). Even so, Claudia believes that due to an aristocratic Russian grandfather:

Somewhere in Lisa’s soul... are whispers of St Petersbourg, of the Crimea, of Pushkin, of Turgenev, of million upon million enduring peasants, of relentless winters and parched summers, of the most glorious language even spoken, of samovars and droshkys and the sad sloe-eyed faces of a thousand icons... wolves howl across the steppe, the blood flows at Borodino, Irina sighs for Moscow. (61-62)

As can be seen, this is a dramatic and somewhat illusory list to live up to, especially since the grandfather was “a man of total moral fecklessness who never did a day’s work in his life” (6). When a historical load, such as the one listed above is placed upon the shoulders of a child, it is understandable that it should rather hide and creep away from its origins than embrace them with all its feeble might. Furthermore, in the case of Lisa the burden is twofold, since in addition to matching up to her father’s lofty background, the dazzling Claudia accepts nothing less of her than a miniature “alter ego” (51, emphasis in original).

A distancing from one’s own origins is, however, not equivalent to a withdrawal from history. On the contrary, it is sometimes necessary in order to instigate a fresh narration which can be somewhat free from the restraints of the past. Claudia did “not like being Mummy” (45) because her own mother was a passive Blackmore Vale institution, and probably due to this Lisa had a “red shrieking baby” at a very young age (61). One thing instigates another; Claudia “became a historian... because dissension was frowned upon when [she] was a child” (14) and Lisa does not communicate with Claudia because she does not simply converse with her, but “question[s] her, craftily, with adult sophistry, with the backing of Freud and Jung and centuries of perception and opinion” (43) until Claudia “snuffs Lisa out... [and] deprives her of speech” (60).

IV. Conquests, Rivals and Allies

The twentieth century experienced quite a deal of instability in political relationships, with allegiances being formed and broken at regular intervals while nations were built up or
torn apart at equal pace. These significant fluctuations and frictions of the so-called “century of war” (66) now form a part of the collective past of upcoming generations, although when *Moon Tiger* was published there still existed a part of the population which remembered the whole Sturm und Drang as a part of their existence. The novel’s protagonist certainly fits into this group, for “the core of Claudia’s life coincides with the violent, corpse-strewn core of the twentieth century” (Jackson 184). Due to this and other factors, such as her family, education and gender Claudia came to believe that “[a]rgument, of course, is the whole point of history” (14). Accordingly, it is made fairly obvious by several similar declarations, that Claudia does “enjoy a good dust up” (76). She has made a career out of writing provocative historical accounts and as indicated by herself, her books reflect the mindset of “a polemical opinionated independent Englishwoman” (154). Consequently, the driving forces of Claudia’s existence are conflict and dialogue and a large part of her professional life is spent “nit-picking” (1) through records of eminent male historical figures, while in her private moments she constantly partakes in verbal combat with the men around her.

During their childhood and adolescence, Claudia and her older brother Gordon developed an extremely intimate relationship, which for some time became that of lovers. Consequently, Gordon was Claudia’s first partner, sexually and otherwise; hence “the reader can easily see that the greater part of her identity and character stems from [their] relationship” (Moran, “Feminist History” 94). From the very beginning they are fierce rivals who relish their competitions without heeding the consequences; thus “[f]or the sake of beating Gordon to a choice-looking seam of Jurassic mud ... [Claudia] was prepared to bash a hundred and fifty million years to pieces” (3-4). Similarly, in the years of their adolescence, Claudia’s academic achievements were “powered by nascent sexuality and the need to do better than Gordon; [while] Gordon was powered by rivalry” with his sister (25). They have always got “an unresolved argument to be taken up” (140), yet due to their constant debates Gordon also acts as Claudia’s main motivator. Correspondingly, all great military and political leaders, especially in times of conflict, are equally motivated by the support and admiration of their followers, as by the idea of gaining respect and superiority over their principal antagonists. Furthermore, as Claudia states, “even in hatred we were united, exclusive, a community of two... he was my sense of identity, my mirror, my critic, judge and ally” (187). A prime example of the stimulus she derives from their competition is depicted when Claudia discusses how she got to be a journalist during
the North African Campaign: “Gordon had said I would never make it as a war correspondent. All the more reason, of course, why I had to” (70). Thus it can be seen, that the relationship between brother and sister is always passionate, as well as occasionally bordering on the fanatical, e.g. when at the age of nine Claudia “asked God to eliminate [her] brother” (16) and since “of course God did nothing of the kind... [she] became an agnostic” (16).

However, it is only due to her strong sense of independence that Claudia is able to derive strength from juxtaposing herself with a man like Gordon, seeing as for him “sharp clever women ... would never do as permanencies” (24). This is quite evident when he comes to see her in the hospital for it is solely because she does not look “like dauntless quarrelsome unquenchable Claudia” (164) that he is able to reach out to her. For a moment she is no longer an intimidating successful female and “when he sees that she is crying the old proximity is there, it is years ago again” (164). However, outside of that brief instant Claudia can not be the girl who danced with him for hours, since as a self-made woman she is “further from him than anyone else ... [although] he wishes it were otherwise” (165). In order to preserve her autonomy Claudia has had to refuse the values and traditional structures of the patriarchal society surrounding her, such as the institution of marriage, homemaking and general female self-sacrifice. Furthermore, she has been “an outspoken religious skeptic, displaying the same kind of irritation with the idea of ‘God the Father’ that she feels toward men who have gotten ahead in their professions simply because of their sex” (Moran, “Feminist History” 90).

There are certain similarities between Claudia’s relationship with Gordon and that which she holds with her intermittent lover Jasper. This is not surprising, given that both, although each in their different way, are Claudia’s only lasting male counterparts. Just as Gordon, Jasper’s “real taste is for compliance and subservience” (151) and it passes through Claudia’s mind that perhaps it would have been better for Jasper to “have had a Sylvia” (151). Consequently, Claudia, like others, questions the reasons behind her association with him. At one point, she claims that “amour-propre is more central than anxiety; never will Claudia allow Jasper to have her at a disadvantage” (65, emphasis in original). This gives us to understand that after her short but intense relationship with Tom Southern, Claudia really does not feel capable of surrendering herself in that way again. And as Jackson asserts in his article: “[t]he chronology of her life after Southern’s death can be told, but it will be a story purely of decline, with no gain to match the loss in the
beginning” (184). As a result, Claudia simply opts for the easiest way out, which means a liaison with someone who “was excellent to go to bed with, and entertaining out of it” (145), but who can just as easily “do without her” (170) when convenient.

Nevertheless, as Claudia is evidently aware of, she and Jasper “were linked for good. And for bad” (145). They are both excellent at taking advantage of any given situation and frequently use the other to further their own person. On the one hand, Claudia accuses Jasper of turning “history into entertainment” while making “money out of the sufferings of others”; on the other hand, he calls her an “[o]pinionated and dogmatic” writer of “overblown flashy stuff” (49). Hence, even though they are quite compatible and in a position where a friendly coalition would be the paramount alternative, they seem unable to put aside their antagonism. Accordingly, if personal relationships do indeed imitate those of larger entities, it could be said that in the context of international politics Claudia and Jasper represent:

Individual states [that] are imagined to act rationally in the service of coherent goals, to form mutually beneficial coalitions ... to seek understandings that are mutually satisfactory, and to use all available resources to maximize the attainment of separate national objectives. Such attainment [however] is limited primarily not by explicit rules ... but by the simultaneous competitive efforts ... to maximize their own objectives.

(March and Olsen 944)

An example of this is when Jasper takes Claudia along to an opportunity hunting at a post-war conference centre. He claims to have brought her along for their mutual enjoyment, when the real reason for the invitation has to do with her being “an asset ... People notice one’s association with Claudia” (147). However, instead of reaping the benefit of her company, Jasper was the one “who inadvertently supplied ... [Claudia] with a public pulpit, and was thus indirectly responsible for a great deal else” (151). This outcome of events resulted from his inability to select his allies and to assess his rivals. He erroneously supposes that all successful and influential men are of his “type”, and consequently Jasper dismisses the inconspicuous newspaper proprietor Hamilton, while also underestimating Claudia’s ability at self-promotion.

However, not only in her free time does Claudia enjoy engaging with men of power and confrontation, since a vast majority of her work as an historian also deals with “exploiters of historical circumstance... those fearless ruthless opportunists inserting
themselves into the cracks and crevices and channels created by politics and diplomacy” (144). This description could just as easily be applied to Gordon and Jasper, as to Tito and Napoleon, for they have all turned “war to [their] own advantage” (145), coming out of it with a gigantic reputation and resources to match. The reason for which she interacts with these men, both on a personal and professional level, rises from the fact that she feels a certain compatibility with them and what is more, she demonstrates in her own unique way how their lives are interconnected through the “disorder ... death and muddle and waste” (152), which according to Claudia is history in its totality. Moreover, just as men like Jasper and Gordon require women like Claudia in their lives to counterbalance them, the historiography of male leaders and autocrats necessitates her strong female voice, which does not follow the tendency of the “archetypical chronicler” (3). For Claudia goes against the:

assumption that underlies Western culture’s thinking: that only men can fully and accurately interpret reality. It is this belief in the correctness of their perceptions that causes male historians to assume they can write objectively about the past. Claudia, of course, is aware of the falseness of this assumption. (Moran, “Feminist History” 90)

The historical figure which can be said to have affected Claudia most aggressively is Hernando Cortez, whom she describes as “brave, charismatic, obstinate and apparently indestructible... greedy, fanatical, and unimaginative” (154). This is a man who documented his own history, stood up to his compatriots and superiors, used political tactics to adjoin an army of Mexicans to his own battalion against the Aztec emperor Montezuma, thus conquering a colossal amount of land and fortune for his sovereign. However, regardless of or perhaps due to his triumphs and general popularity, Cortez gained the animosity of the Spanish court and died a solitary death (Bandelier). In her history of the world, Claudia does not go into every detail of Cortez’s Mexican conquest; nevertheless, she presents her readers with cinematic descriptions of battle, a few interesting details and reflections (“It is interesting to note that the Aztecs...were deeply shocked by the Spanish custom of burning transgressors at the stake. Cruelty, evidently, lies in the eyes of the beholder” (155)), as well as a commentary on how history as “the tidying up of ... [past events] into books” (6) is really “a mirror of the mind” of the respective historian (154). Accordingly, this arises from her belief that “there is no such thing as scholarly objectivity because we are all tethered to a particular moment in history.
and we cannot escape being imbued with that epoch’s outlook” (Moran, “Feminist History” 90-91).

However, as mentioned above, Claudia “constantly draws parallels between her own development and human ... development” (Moran, “Feminist History” 91) and the principal reason for including Cortez in her history of the world soon becomes evident, for we realize that “[e]gocentric Claudia is once again subordinating history to her own puny existence” (29). She is offered the best salary of her life for doing exactly what she abhors in others: lending her name to endow credibility to a highly commercial and distorted filmic version of the conquest of the Aztec empire. Consequently, “amused but also a little queasy” Claudia (157) glides from dining with “Montezuma”, whose limited intellectual capacity makes her think of him “as an exquisite animal endowed with limited powers of speech and reason” (156), to lunching with “Cortez”, an Englishman whose “grasp of chronology is extremely weak... a historical innocent” (160). The contrast between the self-absorbed actors and the historical celebrities they represent is immense and serves to highlight the “stretching” of history (156) even further. Moreover, Lively’s description of the manner in which the encounter between the Aztecs and the Spaniards will be represented in contemporary cinema, is an insightful yet ironic commentary on the great extent to which historical representations can distort what is supposed to have actually happened. Nonetheless, Claudia’s participation in this project is fundamental to her own development, for it is on her way back from the lunch with “Cortez” that she has a near-death experience, which brings about a “mid-life rebirth” (172). The accident motivates her to return to contemporary issues and as a result, Claudia’s rather dubious role as “Historical Adviser” leads to her becoming once again actively involved in history.

V. The Core

Shortly before their traumatic accident, Claudia is explaining to the British actor that among the factors that influenced the selection of her current career as a historian was her journalistic experience from the Second World War, which had put her “off reporting on the present” (161). Nevertheless, she is not being completely honest, since what repelled her even more than the impossibility of translating her sentiments regarding the war into a logical discourse, was her own personal calamity. Hence, by not becoming engaged in current events on a daily basis, Claudia can find a refuge in a “synchronic perspective [that] can help save her because it dissolves the iron chain of loss that grounds her
particular chronology” (Jackson 184). For while she has faith in this synchrony, “everything can be retrieved ... [for then] a lifetime is not linear but instant” (68). During the war years Claudia was “richer, happier, more alive than ever before or ever since” (73); however, after a period of bliss she received a “war wound” (71) which in time did heal, although the scar never left her. Whilst relating one of Claudia’s dearest moments, Lively employs a beautiful metaphor, which encompasses brilliantly the fading of her happiness: “[t]he Moon Tiger is almost entirely burned away now; its green spiral is mirrored by a gray ash spiral in the saucer” (79). Before long Tom Southern is reported missing in action and later declared dead, thus Claudia’s whole world crumbles and she feels “[g]rief-stricken ... it is as though you have been felled. Knocked to the ground; pitched out of life and into something else” (129). Furthermore, her misery is made even more profound when she realizes that she bears Tom’s much desired child (122), only to miscarry shortly afterwards.

Tragic as they are, these events form the core of Claudia’s existence. As she affirms: “the past rests upon certain central and indisputable facts. So does life; it has its core, its centre” (70). The centrality of these years is demonstrated in several ways: firstly, it is, of course, the most influential era of her life and the title of the novel refers to the haunting memory of the incense filled Cairo nights; secondly, when Claudia arrives in Egypt she is a mature woman and not a young girl any more; and finally, when the structure of the novel is analysed it can be seen that although “Claudia Hampton’s range is ambitious” (1) and she covers many events from her own life and world history, “most of the plot takes place amidst the fighting in Egypt between 1940 and 1942” (Chisolm). Moreover, that Claudia’s hub coincides with the Second World War, which can be seen as the core of the twentieth century, is no coincidence since, as mentioned above, she is its product.

The several ways in which the Second World War constitutes the centre of the past century are evident. It is not only because of the years in which it took place, or due to the colossal amount of participants, affected parties and casualties, but furthermore does it arise from the fact that its inception reaches all the way back to the dawn of the century and the First World War. Moreover, and even more significantly, its aftermath continued far towards the century’s conclusion; actually, even further than the end of Moon Tiger and that of Claudia Hampton. For as she states: “the conventional aftermath [of war] is the struggle to set straight that which was awry ... and, at last, the writing of history. Once it is
all written down we know what really happened” (133). However, when *Moon Tiger* was published in 1987 the Berlin Wall was still standing, and therefore much unrest remained in the area and no proper conclusion was to be seen. Consequently, it can be argued that the repercussions of the Second World War stretched towards the year of 1990, when the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany was signed, and peace was officially guaranteed to the Allies (“Final Settlement”). One can imagine that Claudia would have liked to “know the outcome”; nevertheless, “being axed from the narrative” at some point (184), is altogether inevitable.

Alongside the more personal issues, Claudia ponders on the facts and fiction of the war. She resents the way in which Jasper, and his likes, create historical television programs, for in her opinion, “it diminished the past, turned history into entertainment” (49). However, Lively demonstrates that Claudia’s antipathy towards Jasper’s television program about the Second World War runs deeper than a mere dislike for “history as spectacle” (49), since it also arises from the feelings it generates in her:

The story that she is watching has, now, a third dimension, that is both more indistinct and yet clearer by far. This dimension has smell and feel and touch. It smells of Moon Tiger, kerosene, dung and dust. Its feelings are so sharp that Claudia gets up, slams the television into silence and sits staring at the blank pane of glass, where the story rolls on. (50)

For, as Claudia admits, even during the war the representation of the battlefield was neither raw nor accurate nor stripped of all glory. All terms and phrases relating to the combat zone are uttered in a “lunatic language that lays a smokescreen of fantasy” (67) and among the foreigners living in Cairo “[d]eath was unmentionable and kept at bay with code-words and the careless understated style of the playing fields” (90). This verbal distancing from the crudeness of reality helps people deal with great catastrophes, since according to Claudia the naming of an object brings it into existence. As a result, the role of language is “[p]reserving the ephemeral; giving form to dreams, permanence to sparks of sunlight” (9).

The story of Claudia “is tangled with the stories of others ... [and] their voices must be heard also” (5); however, there is “one above all” (28) who although not given a chance to comment on events in the same manner as the rest, contributes as a primary source, which even Claudia “cannot analyse and dissect” (207). Shortly after their initial meeting, Tom told Claudia about the purpose of his diary, which was “to remember what all this
was like” (93). It is quite impossible to say whether Tom would have thought that the
diary served its function if he had survived; however, its value for posterity, as well as that
of other similar documents, is immense, since it permits the public and scholars alike to
attach that “third dimension” to their findings and research, without having actually been
present at the historical event. Still, as Claudia often mentions in the text and Lively also
demonstrates through the narrative structure of *Moon Tiger*, the fact remains that
“[h]istory is a shifting, problematic discourse ... that is produced by a group of present-
minded workers ... and whose products, once in circulation, are subject to a series of uses
and abuses” (Jenkins 26). An untainted version of history is thus inaccessible, yet in order
to reach some kind of a satisfactory analysis of the past, the personal accounts of the likes
of Tom must be reviewed along with the figures and images that form the official records
of historical events, such as World War Two. For, while in the battlefield, the sequence of
events, or your place in the larger scheme of things, holds no relevance, neither to the
active participants nor to the dead and wounded.

During one of their long nights together, Tom claims to “owe Hitler for” Claudia
(76) and at first she does not approve of his words; however, it can be seen above that later
in her life when she meets Jasper, Claudia adopts this cynical phrasing. Because of her
involvement with Tom, Claudia’s perception of the war alters, and thus “[i]t is no longer
prowling on the perimeter ... It has come right up close and is howling at her bedroom
door” (117). Tom is an actual “statistic” (103) and consequently, his is the voice that
confers “that the past is true” (207). The words written in his diary strengthen the
arguments presented by Claudia when she talks of “history as illusion ... well-fed
complacent men and women designing the future and re-arranging the past ... [although in
fact] history is disorder” (152). For even as Tom is supposedly participating in a certain
strategic campaign designed by military commanders with every detail set in place, he can
not “say what came before what, where we were when, how this happened or that, in the
mind it’s not a sequence just a single event without beginning or end in any proper sense
simply a continuity spiked by moments of intensity” (196). Tom as a participant in the
great historical event has no clear sense of chronology and the order of his narration is a
“muddle”, yet it is so vivid that its reader can almost sense the “howling blackness full of
sound and smell ... interminable whistle and crackle of one’s headphones, fuel stink ... [the
soldiers’] fear of fear” (195). He is the representation of the fallen soldier whose private
life may not be of great importance for the machines of state and war, yet, as Penelope
Lively constantly reiterates, his is the important and uncensored voice of what actually happened, before hindsight and reason. Therefore, when Tom asserts that “[w]ars have little to do with justice. Or valour or sacrifice or the other things traditionally associated with them” (102), we stop and listen, for through his voice it can be seen “that the past is true, which both appals and uplifts” us (207).

Conclusion

When a critical study, or an anthology, is composed of a certain literary genre, it is impossible for the author/editor to be all-inclusive. However, when a brilliant award winning novel like Penelope Lively’s *Moon Tiger*, is excluded from the compilations and major studies of contemporary historical fiction, one can not help but wonder why. Discovering the specific reasons for this omission is beyond the scope of this thesis; however, after its analysis of *Moon Tiger*’s position within the genre of historical fiction, there should be no misgivings regarding the novel’s important place within this category. Each character’s psychology truly reflects his or her peculiarities along with the era at hand, while the hindsight which allows Claudia to squint “backwards: recording and assessing” (30), adds an additional dept to the storyline. Furthermore, besides being an informative, inspiring and engaging read which appeals to a variety of readers because of its relation to diverse subgenres, *Moon Tiger* also presents philosophical arguments for independent thinking, critical scepticism and reaching beyond accepted currents of thought and meaning. The novel’s plot is not an exceptionally straightforward one, for it is both a story of an individual’s life and an excerpt of the history of mankind. Moreover, since its protagonist is an immensely independent and innovative woman who actively resists female typecasting and acts as a pioneer in her academic field, there is never a monotonous moment in the entire narrative. Nevertheless, the principal effect and purpose of Lively’s novel is that of a lyrical speculation on subjects such as love, loss, time, memory and history, as well as our connection with and place within the so-called big picture. For as Claudia declares, regarding the value of past historical events to her own person: “it enlarges me, it frees me from the prison of my experience; it also resounds within that experience” (159).

Through an objective view of history and historiography in particular, one learns to appreciate the complexity and magnificence of current affairs in relation to both past and present. Furthermore, by recognizing the enormous effect a single human being, or the
slightest coincidence, can have on the overall relation of incidents, we are bound to consider our actions further, and endeavour, like Claudia, if not to be a “front-liner”, then at least to accept a certain responsibility and the necessity of critical thinking. Additionally, Lively both criticizes and explains the strategic employment of language as a medium for distorting cold facts, all the while accepting its occasional inevitability, for as Claudia says of her wartime journalistic work: “[w]ords were my business, but it wasn’t the moment for close analysis of their implications ... the words I dealt in – a language that seems fossilised now, superseded by new jargons, new camouflages” (68). Still, it is not until we start to think beyond numbers and dates that we can truly acknowledge the magnitude and significance of major historical events, such as the Second World War.

However, while it is unreasonable to assume that anyone can imagine the individual circumstances of millions of sufferers, the insertion of a handful of genuine personal experiences into history can produce a similar, yet subdued effect. Accordingly, in the words of the virtuoso of historical fiction, Leo Tolstoy:

[...] to study the laws of history we must completely change the subject of our observation, must leave aside kings, ministers, and generals, and study the common, infinitesimally small elements by which the masses are moved ... it is evident that only along that path does the possibility of discovering the laws of history lie” (653).

Moreover, since most of the general public is unable to both study extensive history books, as well as a number of primary sources relating to the events at hand, a historical novel which is equally well written and personal, as it is theoretical and informative, can be the ideal vehicle for individuals to engage with history. As a result, when Claudia “reviews her life as a paradigm of human history” (Thwaite v), whilst giving voice to other participants in the narrative, she demonstrates the significance of individual experience, as well as the interconnectedness of everything, since the “collective past ... is public property, but it is also deeply private. We all look differently at it” (2). In a forever shifting world, where everything and ideas in particular, should be recyclable, historical awareness is fundamental: “[b]ecause unless I am a part of everything I am nothing” (207).
Works Cited


