

Tales to Talk About

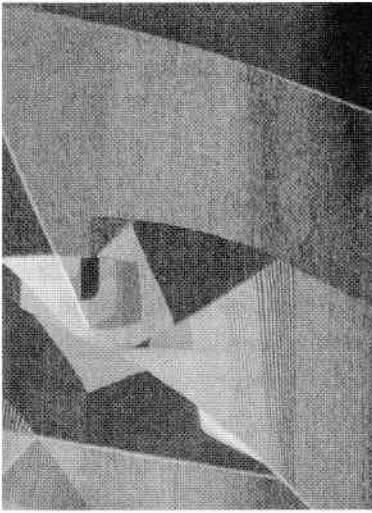
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A collection of topics to
analyse and discuss
by Antonella Mignani

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Life Seen by Children



■ Next Term, We'll Mash You

by Penelope Lively

■ A Small Story

by Maurice Duggan

Newspaper article:

from ***THE INDEPENDENT***

Penelope Lively

Penelope Greer was born in Cairo, Egypt, in 1933. She went to England at the age of 12 to attend school, and in 1956 she graduated with a degree in Modern History from St Anne's College, Oxford. The following year she married Jack Lively and eventually had two children.

She began writing prolifically in the 1970s, with a number of successful novels for children. In 1977 her first novel for adults, *The Road to Lichfield*, came out. It centres on the theme of death and loss, which was to become typical of her later production. *Moon Tiger* (1987), about an emotional love affair in wartime Egypt, won the Booker Prize and established her literary fame as one of the greatest contemporary British prose writers. Her collected short stories were published in 1986 as *Pack of Cards*.

Maurice Duggan

Maurice Duggan was born in Auckland, New Zealand, in 1922 into an Irish family. At sixteen he dropped out of school and started doing odd jobs around the country. In 1940 he had to have his left leg amputated, and the long period of immobility gave rise to a strong interest in literature and the desire to write.

In the early 1950s he moved to London, where he began writing short stories involving the Lenihans, an Irish immigrant family living in Auckland. Many of the events depicted reflect Duggan's early life. Most of the Lenihan stories were published in 1956 with the title *Immanuel's Land*.

In 1960 he published a novel entitled *The Wits of Willie Graves*, which marks the beginning of a more mature and less autobiographical type of fiction. He died in 1974 of cancer. His *Collected Stories* (1981) and *A Voice for the Minotaur*, *Collected Poems* (2002) were published posthumously.

Getting started: class discussion

Both the stories you are going to read in this section are about childhood.

- 1 Do you agree or disagree with the popular saying that 'childhood is the happiest time of one's life'? Give reasons for your answer.
- 2 Think about your own childhood. Apart from your parents, who has had the most influence on forming your character/personality?



Next Term, We'll Mash You

by Penelope Lively

Tune in: oral practice

- 1 a Try to remember your impressions on either your first day of school or the first day in the school you are attending now. How did you feel when you sat in your new class, saw your classmates and met your new teachers?
- b Which special event in your school life do you recall most vividly?

Approaching the text: reading

- 2 Quickly read through the text and say:
 - a where the three characters introduced at the beginning are going;
 - b why they are going there;
 - c who they meet there.

Inside the car it was quiet, the noise of the engine even and subdued,¹ the air just the right temperature, the windows tight-fitting.² The boy sat on the back seat, a box of chocolates, unopened, beside him, and a comic, folded. The trim³ Sussex⁴ landscape flowed past the windows: cows, white-fenced fields, highly-priced period houses.⁵ The sunlight was glassy,⁶ remote as a coloured photograph. The backs of the two heads in front of him swayed⁷ with the motion of the car.

His mother half-turned to speak to him. 'Nearly there now, darling.'

The father glanced downwards at his wife's wrist.⁸ 'Are we all right for time?'

1 **even and subdued** : quiet, not loud.

2 **tight-fitting** : (here) closed.

3 **trim** : (here) peaceful and pleasant.

4 **Sussex** : county in the south of England, famous for its beautiful countryside.

5 **highly ... houses** : very expensive, large, elegant country houses.

6 **glassy** : brilliant and clear.

7 **swayed** : moved slightly left and right.

8 **wrist** : part of the arm near the hand.

'Just right. Nearly twelve.'

'I could do with a drink. Hope they lay something on.'¹

'I'm sure they will. The Wilcoxes say they're awfully nice people. Not really the schoolmaster-type at all, Sally says.'

The man said, 'He's an Oxford chap.'²

'Is he? You didn't say.'

'Mmn.'

'Of course, the fees³ are that much higher than the Seaford place.'

'Fifty quid⁴ or so. We'll have to see.'

The car turned right, between white gates and high, dark, tight-clipped hedges.⁵ The whisper of the road under the tyres changed to the crunch of gravel.⁶ The child, staring sideways, read black lettering on a white board: 'St Edward's Preparatory School.⁷ Please Drive Slowly'. He shifted on the seat, and the leather sucked at the bare skin under his knees, stinging.⁸

The mother said, 'It's a lovely place. Those must be the playing-fields. Look, darling, there are some of the boys.' She clicked open her handbag, and the sun caught her mirror and flashed in the child's eyes; the comb went through her hair and he saw the grooves it left, neat as distant ploughing.⁹

'Come on, then, Charles, out you get.'

The building was red brick, early nineteenth century, spreading out long arms in which windows glittered blackly. Flowers, trapped in neat beds, were alternate red and white. They went up the steps, the man, the woman, and the child two paces¹⁰ behind.

The woman, the mother, smoothing down a skirt that would be ridged from sitting, thought: I like the way they've got the maid all done up properly.¹¹ The little white apron and all that. She's foreign, I suppose. Au pair.¹² Very nice. If

1 **lay something on** : (here) offer us something to drink.

2 **Oxford chap** : man who attended Oxford University.

3 **fees** : amount of money people pay to get a service.

4 **quid** : informal word for 'pound'.

5 **tight-clipped hedges** : well-kept small trees.

6 **gravel** : small stones.

7 **Preparatory School** : often prep school, very expensive, exclusive private school for children between 7 and 13.

8 **stinging** : (here) causing an unpleasant sensation.

9 **he saw ... ploughing** [plauɪŋ] : the signs the comb left in the woman's hair were like long cuts.

10 **paces** : steps.

11 **done up properly** : (here) dressed elegantly.

12 **au pair** [əʊpeɪ] : young person who lives and works in a foreign country to learn the language.

he comes here there'll be Speech Days¹ and that kind of thing. Sally Wilcox says it's quite dressy –² she got that cream linen coat for coming down here. You can see why it costs a bomb.³ Great big grounds and only an hour and a

40 half from London.

They went into a room looking out into a terrace. Beyond, dappled lawns,⁴ gently shifting trees, black and white cows grazing behind iron railings. Books, leather chairs, a table with magazines – *Country Life*, *The Field*, *The Economist*. 'Please, if you would wait here. The Headmaster won't

45 be long.'

Alone, they sat, inspected. 'I like the atmosphere, don't you, John?'

'Very pleasant, yes.' Four hundred a term, near enough. You can tell it's a cut above⁵ the Seaford place, though, or the one at St Albans. Bob Wilcox says quite a few City people⁶ send their boys here. One or two of the

50 merchant bankers, those kind of people. It's the sort of contact that would do no harm at all. You meet someone, get talking at a cricket match or what have you ... Not at all a bad thing.

'All right, Charles? You didn't get sick in the car, did you?'

The child had black hair, slicked down smooth to his head.⁷ His ears, too

55 large, jutted out,⁸ transparent in the light from the window, laced with tiny, delicate veins. His clothes had the shine and crease of newness. He looked at the books, the dark brown pictures, his parents, said nothing.

'Come here, let me tidy your hair.'

The door opened. The child hesitated, stood up, sat, then rose again with

60 his father.

'Mr and Mrs Manders? How very nice to meet you – I'm Margaret Spokes, and will you please forgive my husband who is tied up⁹ with some wretch¹⁰ who broke the cricket pavilion window and will be just a few more minutes. We try to be organised but a schoolmaster's day is always just that bit

65 unpredictable. Do please sit down and what will you have to revive you after

1 **Speech Days** : in British schools, an annual ceremony when the teachers make speeches and special prizes are given to children who have done well in their studies.

2 **dressy** : very elegant.

3 **a bomb** : (informal) a lot of money.

4 **dappled lawns** : large, well-kept areas of grass on which the sun is shining.

5 **a cut above** : (here) of a better quality than.

6 **City people** : people who work in the City of London, i.e. rich people with good jobs.

7 **slicked ... head** : his hair was flat and smooth.

8 **jutted out** : protruded.

9 **tied up** : busy

10 **wretch** [retʃ] : (here) badly-behaved boy.

that beastly drive? You live in Finchley, is that right?

'Hampstead, ¹ really,' said the mother. 'Sherry would be lovely.' She worked over ² the headmaster's wife from shoes to hairstyle, pricing and assessing. Shoes old but expensive – Russell and Bromley. Good skirt. Blouse could be Marks and Sparks – not sure. Real pearls. Super Victorian ring. 70 She's not gone to any particular trouble – that's just what she'd wear anyway. You can be confident, ³ with a voice like that, of course. Sally Wilcox says she knows all sorts of people.

The headmaster's wife said, 'I don't know how much you know about us. Prospectuses ⁴ don't tell you a thing, do they? We'll look round everything in a minute, when you've had a chat with my husband. I gather you're friends of the Wilcoxes, by the way. I'm awfully fond of Simon – he's down for Winchester, ⁵ of course, but I expect you know that!' 75

The mother smiled over her sherry. Oh, I know that all right. Sally Wilcox doesn't let you forget that. 80

'And this is Charles? My dear, we've been forgetting all about you! In a minute I'm going to borrow Charles and take him off to meet some of the boys because after all you're choosing a school for him, aren't you, and not for you, so he ought to know what he might be letting himself in for ⁶ and it shows we've got nothing to hide.' 85

The parents laughed. The father, sherry warming his guts, ⁷ thought that this was an amusing woman. Not attractive, of course, a bit homespun, ⁸ but impressive all the same. Partly the voice, of course; it takes a bloody expensive education to produce a voice like that. And other things, of course. Background ⁹ and all that stuff. 90

'I think I can hear the thud ¹⁰ of the Fourth Form coming in from games, which means my husband is on the way, and then I shall leave you with him while I take Charles off to the common-room.'

For a moment the three adults centred on the child, looking, judging. The

1 **Hampstead** : elegant suburb in north-west London where houses are very expensive.

2 **worked over** : (here) examined carefully.

3 **confident** : sure of oneself, self-possessed.

4 **prospectuses** : small brochures advertising the school and what it offers.

5 **Winchester** : city in the south of England, famous for its public school, an expensive institution for children aged 13 to 18.

6 **what he might ... for** : (here) what the school is like.

7 **guts** : (here) stomach.

8 **homespun** : simple and ordinary.

9 **background** : (here) good family and education.

10 **thud** : loud noise produced by the children's heavy steps.

95 mother said, 'He looks so hideously pale, compared to those boys we saw outside.'

'My dear, that's London, isn't it? You just have to get them out, to get some colour into them. Ah, here's James. James – Mr and Mrs Manders. You remember, Bob Wilcox was mentioning at Sports Day ...'

100 The headmaster reflected his wife's style, like paired cards in Happy Families. His clothes were mature rather than old, his skin well-scrubbed, his shoes clean, his geniality untainted by the least condescension.¹ He was genuinely sorry to have kept them waiting, but in this business one lurches² from one minor crisis to the next ... And this is Charles? Hello, there,
105 Charles. His large hand rested for a moment on the child's head, quite extinguishing the thin, dark hair. It was as though he had but to clench³ his fingers to crush the skull.⁴ But he took his hand away and moved the parents to the window, to observe the mutilated cricket pavilion, with indulgent laughter.

110 And the child is borne away by the headmaster's wife. She never touches him or tells him to come, but simply bears him away like some relentless tide, down corridors and through swinging glass doors, towing him like a frail craft,⁵ not bothering to look back to see if he is following, confident in the strength of magnetism, or obedience.

115 And delivers him to a room where boys are scattered among inky tables and rungless chairs and sprawled⁶ on a mangy⁷ carpet. There is a scampering,⁸ and a rising, and a silence falling, as she opens the door.

'Now this is the Lower Third, Charles, who you'd be with if you come to us in September. Boys, this is Charles Manders, and I want you to tell him all
120 about things and answer any questions he wants to ask. You can believe about half of what they say, Charles, and they will tell you the most fearful lies about the food, which is excellent.'

The boys laugh and groan; amiable, exaggerated groans. They must like the headmaster's wife: there is licensed repartee.⁹ They look at her with
125 bright eyes in open, eager faces. Someone leaps to hold the door for her, and close it behind her. She is gone.

1 his ... condescension : his manners were friendly and easy-going.

2 lurches : (here) faces and solves.

3 clench : press.

4 skull : bones in the head.

5 towing ... frail craft : pulling him along like a fragile object.

6 sprawled : lying in a relaxed way.

7 mangy : dirty and in bad condition.

8 scampering : quick movement.

9 repartee : clever, funny comments.

The child stands in the centre of the room, and it draws in around him.

The circle of children contracts, faces are only a yard or so from him; strange faces, looking, assessing.

Asking questions. They help themselves to his name, his age, his school. 130
 Over their heads he sees beyond the window an inaccessible ¹ world of shivering trees and high racing clouds and his voice which has floated like a feather in the dusty schoolroom air dies altogether and he becomes mute, and he stands in the middle of them with shoulders humped, ² staring down at feet: grubby plimsolls ³ and kicked brown sandals. There is a noise in his ears like rushing water, a torrential din ⁴ out of which voices boom, blotting each other out ⁵ so that he cannot always hear the words. Do you? they say, and Have you? and What's your? and the faces, if he looks up, swing into one another in kaleidoscopic patterns and the floor under his feet is unsteady, lifting and falling. 135 140

And out of the noises comes one voice that is complete, that he can hear. 'Next term, we'll mash ⁶ you,' it says. 'We always mash new boys.'

And a bell goes, somewhere beyond doors and down corridors, and suddenly the children are all gone, clattering away ⁷ and leaving him there with the heaving ⁸ floor and the walls that shift and swing, and the headmaster's wife comes back and tows him away, and he is with his parents again, and they are getting into the car, and the high hedges skim past the car windows once more, in the other direction, and the gravel under the tyres changes to black tarmac. ⁹ 145

'Well?' 150

'I liked it, didn't you?' The mother adjusted the car around her, closing windows, shrugging into her seat.

'Very pleasant, really. Nice chap.'

'I liked him. Not quite so sure about her.'

'It's pricey, ¹⁰ of course.'

'All the same ...' 155

1 **inaccessible** : too far away and impossible to reach.

2 **humped** : bent forward.

3 **grubby plimsolls** : dirty sports shoes.

4 **din** : loud, confused noise.

5 **blotting ... out** : covering completely.

6 **mash** : crush into a soft mass. Here it means to beat.

7 **clattering away** : making a loud noise as they leave.

8 **heaving** : moving up and down.

9 **tarmac** : black material used as a road surface.

10 **pricey** : (informal) expensive.