

**O. A. Sudlenkova**

*Minsk, Belarus*

ALTERNATIVE VERSIONS OF A HUMAN DESTINY  
IN PENELOPE LIVELY'S NOVEL *MAKING IT UP*

Uchronia, allohistory, alternative history, “what if...” literature – these are various names for the genre of fiction the essence of which is to imagine what might have happened if at some point events took a turn different from the real one. This sort of fiction has become fairly popular with writers lately and though it is not taken seriously by all scholars who often relegate it to science or even pulp fiction it has its rules and terminology. One of the indispensable elements of alternative history is the presence of the point of divergence, or POD for short, that is the actual moment in history when the narrative begins to diverge from the true course of events and takes a fictional one. The POD may be present in the text or may be merely implied if the writer relies on the reader's awareness of the actual developments.

Most alternative histories deal with events of world significance like wars, revolutions or geographical discoveries. It is considered that there are more than 50 works of various genres, most of them fiction, describing an outcome of the Civil War in the USA different from the real one. Harry Turtledove, a famous American writer, alone has produced eleven novels on the theme “What if the South Had Won the Civil War”. About one hundred and fifty works give alternative versions of WW II. One of the best known of them is the novel “Fatherland” by Robert Harris drawing a picture of Europe in the 1960s ruled by Germany with Hitler still at its head. The philosophical questions this and other books of the kind pose are as follows: the role of a personality in history and the influence of a chance, or accident, on world and personal life. As Robert Cowley writes in the preface to the book “More What If”, certain moments in history are predetermined by the decisions of one person, but “history too may well depend on a single accident – which has the power to abrogate all those ... individual decisions” [1, p. xvii].

Yet there are also books presenting alternative versions of individual lives. Thus Peter Ackroyd has a novel called *Milton in America* (1996) where he imagines what course John Milton's life and the New World's history might have taken if the poet with his charisma and authority among the puritans had fled to America after the Restoration of the monarchy in England. The novel develops into an alternative history of the New World where Milton's fanaticism and charisma turns America into a strictly theocratic society.

The book *Making It Up* (2005) by the English writer Penelope Lively (b. 1933) is another specimen of alternative history. It consists of eight separate stories which differ by their chronotope – the scene is laid in different places (Egypt, the Mozambique Channel, Korea, London, English provincial towns and villages) and the time span covers the period from WWII to our days. For that

reason the stories seem disunited at first sight yet they are connected by the biography of the writer herself who figures in the stories either as a principal or a secondary character. However, the book is not a traditional autobiography based on reminiscences – Lively herself defines it as an anti-memoir. She also calls it a form of confabulation and explains what she means by it: “That word has a precise meaning in psychiatric terminology, it refers to the creation of imaginary remembered experiences which replace the gaps left by disorders of the memory” [2, p. 2] and adds that since her memory is not disordered, her confabulation is merely a piece of fictional license. Thus the book presents eight miniature alternative histories which offer imaginary versions of different periods of the writer’s own life – her childhood, youth and mature years. The PODs, which Lively calls “forking paths”, lie outside the described episodes and, since the stories deal with an individual life, the author has to present them either in their prologues or in the epilogues to each of the stories where she treats of how matters stood with her in reality in the given period of time.

As we come to know from those extra-plot elements, the writer’s real life went fairly smoothly and peacefully but for the dramatic episode in her childhood when her mother and she, like many other English people, had to flee for life from Egypt that was occupied by Germany. She graduated from Oxford University, was happily married and had children, meanwhile writing stories and novels. “Story-telling is an ingrained habit; I wouldn’t know what else to do” [2; p. 1] she says half in joke. In *Making It Up*, however, she treats of dramatic, at times tragic episodes that happen to her heroine as the author imagines what might have happened if at a certain moment events had taken a different course.

What if in 1941 they fled from Egypt to South Africa as some English families did? In reality her mother chose to go to Palestine which saved their lives as about twenty British ships bound for South Africa with civilians and military people on board were destroyed by Japanese submarines. This possible outcome makes up the plot of the first story called *Mozambique Channel*. In the centre of the story, however, is not the little girl but her nanny and her love affair which had a romantic beginning and a tragic end on board the ship. The seven-year Penelope, or rather her alternative alter ego, and her mother are on the periphery of the narration, they are seen through the nanny’s eyes. The account of the sinking of the ship in the story is no less colourful and tragic though, naturally, shorter, than the famous heart-rending scene from the film *The Titanic*.

As can be seen from the story, the writer’s fictional alternative ego is not the focal figure. Neither is it in several other ones. Lively proceeds from the following idea: each of us is the central figure only to himself or herself while to others we are on the periphery of their attention. “So in the interests of truth and reality most of these alternative lives of mine abandon the solipsistic vision” [2, p. 74], she says, that is why the point of view paradigm of the stories is varied.

In one of the prologues Penelope Lively explains her motives for creating alternative versions of her biography: “When a writer contemplates her own life, there is an irresistible compulsion to tinker with it, to try out a crucial adjustment

here or there. What follows is one such tinkering. The protagonist is not myself, her own experience and her associates are invented, but she is perhaps a suggestion of another outcome” [2, p. 136].

Judging by the stories Lively had various motives for alternative versions of her destiny – it could be someone’s or her own choice (as in *Mozambique Channel*, or *Transatlantic*, *The Temple of Mithras*.), chance (in *Imjin River* or *Albert Hall*) or some feature of her character or unfulfilled desire which under certain circumstances might have led to the situations described (*Comet*, *Penelope*). Thus, the last story of the book called *Penelope* is, according to Lively herself, appeared due to her childish desire to rewrite Homer’s *Odyssey* which once produced a great impression on her. All the personages of the story – the heroine herself, her husband Orson, her son Toby born out of wedlock and having some foot problem, Orson’s illegitimate son Tam – go back to Homer’s poem. The analogy of situations and interrelations, closeness or absolute identity of names in Homer’s poem and Lively’s story stress the repetitiveness, or archetypality of events.

In the very first story (*Mozambique Channel*) as well as in some other ones Lively illustrates the idea that history is embodied in individual lives, that every human destiny is closely linked with historical processes. “Personal life is set against the background noise of public events” [2, p. 112], says Lively in the preface to the story *Imjin River*, which treats of the death of a young English soldier during the Korean war of the 1950s. The young man was the writer’s future husband. In real life he had luckily avoided mobilization. If he had not, Lively’s own life would have been different, because, as she asserts, people influence one another, which means that with another man she herself would have been different.

How different from the real one her youth might have been is evident in the story *Albert Hall* dating back to the 1960s. The ideas of permissiveness and sexual revolution current in that decade are embodied in the character of Miranda, an alternative image of Lively herself. Miranda is a single mother, who because of her hippy wanderings and changeable love affairs neglects her daughter, Chloe by name. Chloe, however, grows into the opposite of her mother – she is well-organized, even pedantic, sure of her ability to run her own and her children’s lives. A professional pedagogue, she is confident that she knows her children inside out as she is able to take into account the role of both heredity and upbringing. Her self-confidence, however, is shattered by the unexpected news of her teenage daughter’s pregnancy, which makes Chloe, like the writer herself, come to the conclusion that a human life depends on an incidental combination of various factors. “Nature and nurture are not in apposition but have made some kind of provocative deal” [2, p. 70].

Among the factors that might affect human character and destiny, according to Lively, are books. This theme permeates the story *Number Twelve Sheep Street* where the writer resorts to a trick – she divides her personality into two characters – the first one, the main character, is Hester Lampson, an elderly owner of a large house and a rich library who has no idea of either the cultural or material value of the books once lovingly collected by her father. The other one, a secondary

personage, is a customer at a second-hand bookshop where she drops in because she is working on a book about her native town as Lively herself once did. Hester Lampson is the writer's alternative self – this is what she might have become if all the treasures of literature had passed her by because as she says «writing is an extension of reading» and «Books beget books». Yet Lively does not dare to assert a direct interdependence between one's reading background and one's writing skills as a human life is unpredictable and depends on too many factors. «Would I have become a writer if I had been denied books? ... Unanswerable questions, but they prompt speculation. ... the endeavour seems precarious indeed» [2;206].

The story *Transatlantic* is an illustration of the concept of the Other Self. From the prologue to the story we learn that in her youth she rejected a marriage proposal from an American University professor. In the story her heroine does marry an American, and after living in the States for a few years, comes back to England to visit her aunt. She sees England both from inside and outside and very sharply realizes the difference not only between English and American mentalities but also between her old English and new American identities. Thus, in *Transatlantic* she explores the influence of the environment on a human character by presenting “an alternative destiny, an alternative persona responding to the requirements of another environment” [2, p. 135].

The variety of themes raised in the stories with their prologues and epilogues turns the eight miniature alternative histories into philosophical and psychological essays on the problem of factors determining human character and destiny. As the author put it: «Somehow, choice and contingency have landed you where you are, as the person that you are, and the whole process seems so precarious that you look back at those climactic moments when things might have gone differently, when life might have spun off in some other direction, and wonder at this apparently arbitrary outcome” [2, p. 1].

As has been said above, Lively calls her book a piece of fictional license. With regard to her own life it is definitely so, but in a more general sense the incidents described in the stories are quite probable. Lots of children perished with ships bombed by enemy vehicles during WW II like little Penelope did in the story *Mozambique Channel*, hundreds of British women lost their beloveds because of the Korean warfare described in the story *Imjin River*, “mass migration, the time when millions slipped from one culture into another” [2, p. 162] might have produced a state of mind similar to that of Clara from the story *Transatlantic*, etc. In other words Lively's *Making It Up* presents alternative versions of the writer's own destiny but, with respect to humanity in general, she describes fairly life-like situations brought about by the events and atmosphere of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## LITERATURE

1. More What If? Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been / ed. R. Cowley. – London : Pan Macmillan, 2003. – 400 p.
2. Lively, Penelope. Making it Up / P. Lively. – London : Penguin Books, 2006. – 256 p.