



The House in Norham Gardens

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Editorial Choice:

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Media type:

Book

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Jane Nissen Books are quietly republishing a selection of classic titles from the 19th century onwards. Penelope Lively's **The House in Norham Gardens** is the first reprint of four projected Lively titles and was an extraordinarily absorbing, almost hypnotic read for this reviewer. First published in 1974, the story centres on 14-year-old orphan heroine Clare, living with two elderly aunts in a huge Gothic Victorian house in Oxford. They are surrounded by documents, portraits and objects which span more than a century of British and colonial history. In Clare's schoolgirl present, 'the Americans are revisiting the moon' and she is preoccupied with the ordinary dreams and frustrations of adolescence, but her, as yet, undetermined life is suspended in the dense texture of many previous lives in Norham Gardens. And it is informed by the experiences and personalities of her freethinking aunts, early socialists and feminists, who resisted marriage. When Clare stumbles across a tamburan (the ceremonial shield of a New Guinea Tribe) in the attic, the object exerts a strange fascination. She experiences visions of the tribe and a compelling sense that they are wordlessly calling on her to effect an unsepecified restitution. But just as Clare is inevitably growing forward into her own future, so the tribe's life and society is changing. Each chapter is prefaced by a brief dream-like section on the tribe, concluding with the 20th-century encroachments which bring both wealth and loss in their wake. An encounter with a young Ugandan research student, John Sempebwa, who becomes a lodger in the house, adds a further dimension, through which Lively explores cultural dislocations across time. **The House in Norham Gardens** is a prolonged meditation on identity, as it is shaped by society and history. Lively achieves the difficult task of making the reader pause within their own life and experience the many-layered nature of time through the dreams and consciousness of her highly sensitive heroine. This is a dense, hugely rewarding read for the literary teenager or, indeed adults and I am delighted that Jane Nissen have reprinted it.

Running Order:

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