


According to Mark

Penelope Lively

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Mark Lamming is happily married--until he falls for the lovely daughter of his latest biography subject. Nothing can prepare him for the ensuing circumstances in this witty novel of memory and expectations.

According to Mark Details

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Author : Penelope Lively

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From Reader Review According to Mark for online ebook

Ruth Brumby says

A book about biography and truth. I was very gripped by the characters and fascinated by the paragraphs on writing. I'm not sure that the plot quite held together though. The discovery of a love affair of the subject of the biography, the affair of the biographer and the love of the subject of his affections for another did not quite integrate in a balanced way - although perhaps that was the point.

Val says

Mark is writing a biography of author, critic and essayist Gilbert Strong. Strong's now ageing acquaintances and former lovers have differing opinions of him and his own diaries seem to have been edited to give an incomplete account of his life. Mark is a painstaking and determined researcher, so he does eventually find out about hidden parts of Strong's life. He also questions his own life and how others see him, although I think that even after his soul-searching, his wife understands him better than he does himself. Alongside the literary sleuthing is a story of a romantic entanglement. Mark meets Strong's grand-daughter and is smitten. She is not interested in him, or in her grandfather, but she is also unusually obliging. This strand of the book is highly amusing and the author has managed to create a couple of female characters who just might act in this unusual way.

Gumble's Yard says

I read this book as part of the 2019 Mookse Madness Tournament.

This link contains a plot description – as well as one of the three central characters (who all appear as point of view characters, in some cases all three observing the same scene)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Accordi...](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/According...)

I could describe this novel two ways:

EITHER: A novel about a biographer writing a biography of a second, now deceased writer who wrote essays discussing the difference between novels and biography and who the biographer increasingly feels has ordered his affairs so as to frustrate a future biographer. The biographer also reflects on the tasks of the biographer – how it differs from that of a novelist, how it implies a level of omniscience but how it challenges the extent to which we can understand of the inner lives of those we are closest to, and they of ours. The novel has an omniscient narrator who has read the biographer's essay and at times discusses its advice and once even incorporates it to alter the way the novel is being told.

But a novel that is nevertheless much more light-hearted than that description might suggest.

OR: A mid-life crisis story about an educated middle aged married writer who, to his surprise and to the bemusement of his wife, is attracted to, and has an affair with, a young female garden centre manager, after realising her business partner is gay and not her lover. The affair, which the young girl participates in more out of a sense of obligation, helps her to break through her previous indifference towards love – caused by a

dysfunctional childhood - and begin a relationship of her own.

But a story which is much more serious than that description might suggest.

And both would be true – and the juxtaposition of the two makes this an enjoyable as well as thought provoking read.

S. says

I've read three Penelope Lively books in the last five months and this is my favorite. That's despite the fact that at page 140 or so I thought it had turned into a yawner, and I was having trouble buying the main character's attraction to a woman with whom he had nothing in common.

The plot centers on Mark Lamming, a biographer researching a book on the author Gilbert Strong. He's a contentedly married, childless man in his early forties. His ebullient, efficient wife Diana works in an art gallery. As to Strong, Mark finds his essays and criticism best, though Strong also wrote a couple novels and a play he would have preferred to forget. Mark believes he's got Strong pinned down when he goes off to do further research at Dean Close, Strong's former home, now maintained by a foundation and Strong's granddaughter Carrie, who runs a plant and nursery business on the premises with her gay partner Bill. Carrie is a kind of lost soul, diffident, detached, but attractive to Mark despite her having read only 4-5 books in her whole life.

There are three things Penelope Lively likes to explore: mother-daughter relationships, men as "other," and tourism. The last one seems odd, I know, but in "Heat Wave," which I read first, the odious son-in-law figure is writing about tourist traps. In "Moon Tiger," there is also an important scene in a recreated historical village. In *According to Mark*, writers' home are tourist spots - Thomas Hardy's and Gilbert Strong's - and there's likewise a trip to a historical fortress, and then on to France and the Louvre.

Every reader knows the enjoyment of book has to do with the state of mind s/he's in when s/he reads it. My satisfaction with *According to Mark* could have to do with having seen a movie a few days before with a sad ending that I had trouble accepting. Thus emotionally ripened, I said a glad grateful thank-you when Carrie finally threw off her passivity and found her way. And Mark's discovery of a fresh, worthwhile source of information on Strong was also satisfying, and helped him discover and understand more about his subject and himself. The book wasn't perfect - the character Diana especially didn't quite convince - but it was an intelligent story in a literary setting that unfolded nicely.

Sharen says

Penelope Lively is an author who faithfully draws us in. "According to Mark" is actually also "according to Carrie", "according to Diana" and even "according to Gilbert Strong". Lively's books, always rewarding to the reader and time well-spent, consistently remind us that each of us has our own point of view about the experiences that happen to us throughout our lives and that we each hang on to different fragments of memory about them. We sift, we select, we toss away...or we burnish them lovingly.

Here is a marvelous interview with Penelope Lively:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/...>

p.s. While she will always be a favourite 5* author, I did not like Mark who is so ego-driven - just as he was perhaps intended to be? However no doubt someone else would have a different pov?!!

Chiffchaff Birdy says

My first Penelope Lively read and arrived at due to a Goodreads recommendation following my Pym reading. This book did have similarities with Pym but that was more to do with the general tone and feeling of it.

Really enjoyed it and it was also witty in places. I liked Carrie's character a lot, Diana I hated, but I suspected that I was expected to dislike Diana as there seemed to be nothing of merit about her. She reminded me too much of a former colleague. The commentary about how powerless Mark felt in the face of a sudden infatuation with someone with whom he had nothing whatsoever in common was personally fascinating and revealing, and accurate I would say. How Diana reacted to the discovery of his infidelity was, however, quite unbelievable but this seemed to fit with the characterisation of Diana.

As others have said the novel does demonstrate the differences between people's recollections of the same event and how such recollections change radically over time.

Hugh says

This is a very interesting and thought-provoking novel. On one level it tells the story of a biographer's mid-life crisis, but it addresses deeper questions about the nature of experience, memory, truth and fiction, as the writer's experiences, thoughts and perceptions are contrasted with those of his subject, and he begins to question how his own life will be remembered. A rewarding book reminiscent of A.S. Byatt (I was reminded of elements of *Possession* and *The Biographer's Tale*, but this book preceded both of those).

Roberta says

Mark Lamming è un biografo, carriera che non gli garantisce la stabilità economica ma che soddisfa le sue ambizioni letterarie. Anche nella vita privata non può che ritenersi appagato: sposato con la bella e intelligente Diana, che lavora in una galleria d'arte e lo bilancia con il suo carattere pragmatico, ne è ancora innamorato e condivide con lei una gratificante intimità. Quando decide di scrivere la biografia del saggista Gilbert Strong (letterato inventato dall'autrice, non so se sulla base di uno scrittore reale) la fondazione Strong, che ne amministra le proprietà e i diritti, lo indirizza verso Carrie Summers, la nipote di Strong, che gestisce un vivaio nella tenuta del nonno e contemporaneamente si occupa della casa, mantenuta com'era all'epoca e aperta ai visitatori.

Quando Mark arriva a Dean Close, nel Dorset, scopre che esistono due bauli contenenti documenti personali di Strong: questo materiale lo costringe ovviamente ad ampliare il suo lavoro. Ma il vero motivo per cui si sente gravitare intorno alla casa è Carrie stessa: giovane, interessata solo alle piante, cerca di evitare quanto più possibile i rapporti sociali e non si preoccupa minimamente né del suo aspetto fisico né della cultura. Nonostante sia l'opposto dell'ideale femminile di Mark, egli si prende una sbandata con i fiocchi.

Ho trovato *Amori imprevisi* di un rispettabile biografo (traduzione un po' strampalata dell'originale *According to Mark*) diseguale: le riflessioni sulle biografie, sulla narrativa, e in generale su come si può

interpretare la vita di una persona (famosa o meno), sono molto interessanti, e lo diventano ancora di più quando Mark, sull'onda di una tenue intuizione, scopre delle lettere mai venute alla luce prima, che gettano una luce completamente nuova su Strong.

Per contro, ho trovato molto meno interessanti sia l'infatuazione per Carrie che i successivi sviluppi. Ho trovato il tono narrativo un po' superficiale (anche se potrebbe essere colpa della traduzione) e mi sarei aspettata un po' di luce in più sulla reazione di Diana, che per quanto sia di buon gusto, mi sembra riduttiva (sembra che stia affrontando la ristrutturazione del bagno). Nel complesso comunque molto interessante e anche piacevole, continuerò a leggere i romanzi della Lively.

[Di Penelope Lively ho già letto Tre vite e Family Album]

<http://robertabookshelf.blogspot.it/2...>

Lynda says

This was a re-read. It is a witty literary novel about an academic biographer in midlife who goes to research the life of a late 19th century biographer with a rather enigmatic and scandalous past. As with many of Lively's novels the themes include the shifting and distortion of memory, the unreliability of narrative and the possibility of transformative change. As Mark Lamming the modern day biographer examines the different layers of Gilbert Strong's life he finds his own life and values shifting and changing. This is a moving and thought provoking read. I plan to read more Lively in 2016.

Katheryn Thompson says

Mark, a respected literary biographer, is happily married, wholly satisfied by his career choice, despite the better-paid alternatives, and confident in his knowledge of Gilbert Strong, the subject of his next biography. But then he visits Dean Close, the old home of Strong, half preserved as a museum, and half taken over by Strong's granddaughter, Carrie, and her business partner, Bill, as their home and successfully-run garden centre. Here, much to his surprise, Mark finds a cache of letters and documents belonging to Strong, which he didn't know existed, and that he has fallen in love with Carrie, an unusual woman, almost childlike in her mannerisms, more interested in bedding plants than books or relationships, and certainly not Mark's type.

I loved the leisurely pace of this one, as Lively seems to drift between the minds of her characters, raising thought-provoking questions about love, literature, truth, and memory, and how well any of us really know each other, or even ourselves. Highly enjoyable.

Thomas says

A rather Pymian Lively.

Sara says

Mark è tenuto al guinzaglio dall'efficientissima moglie Diana, che lo accudisce, lo organizza, lo mantiene per permettergli di vivere tra le scartoffie polverose dei suoi soggetti da biografia e lo rimette sulla buona strada dopo la scappatella. Non si scompone mai e quando viene a sapere della botta di vita fuori programma sospira leggermente infastidita e prende mentalmente nota di fissare un appuntamento con l'analista. Per lui. Che donna. Pure elegante e di cultura.

Il protagonista comunque è Mark, non divaghiamo. Un po' lumacone, quando fa una corte più che fastidiosamente serrata a Carrie, completamente fuori dalla realtà e immersa nelle piante, e molto attaccato alla sua quotidianità, dominata in maniera indiscussa - di nuovo - da Superdiana.

La Lively è bravissima nel guidare il lettore nei grovigli della mente umana, in un misto di riflessioni, movimenti, episodi. Non rallenta mai la narrazione, mai un cedimento di noia. Carrie poi è raffigurata benissimo nella sua condiscendenza per non apparire maleducata - io mi ci sono persino immedesimata un poco.

Janet says

Mark Lamming is writing a biography of 1920s writer Gilbert Strong, and goes to meet Strong's granddaughter Carrie, who is his literary executor, lives in (a bit of) his house, runs a garden centre and hasn't read anything in years. During the course of his research, Mark, to his delight and dismay, becomes besotted with Carrie, but is she as keen? On their journey to France to visit Carrie's itinerant and self-absorbed mother, Mark and Carrie make some surprising discoveries about themselves and each other.

Mark also comes across various conflicting stories about Strong from some of his intimates, but who to believe? Until he is confronted with the Porlock letters...does he know the real Strong as well as he thinks?

One for fans of A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, methinks.

Mansi says

I picked this book up a couple of months ago from a British Library clearance sale. It promised to be a promising one right from the start. Till the end you really don't know what will really happen. Since I just got back from tripping over France it had a special connect.

The story is about a biographer Mark and his journey of gathering facts, lies and silences on his muse. Saying anything more would land up just ruining the book. It has twists and turns while being so straight forward. At the end you land up empathising, with both Mark and his muse. You understand their actions and why they did act in a certain way.

A good holiday read, *According to Mark*, can't be dismissed as frivolous, but a light read for sure.

Ruthiella says

I read this in anticipation of a future episode of the delightful podcast *Tea or Books*. I loved [Moon Tiger](#) and appreciate this kick in the pants to read more by Lively. The book is about a biographer, the titular Mark, and his experiences and dilemmas in researching the life of a fictional Edwardian era author named Gilbert Strong. I really disliked Mark but I do think the author intended this. The writing was impeccable and the

story wry, witty and often wise. It reminded me in tone and subject matter - both in that it is a bit of a literary mystery and a literary pastiche - of one of my favorite books, Possession by A.S. Byatt, yet it is only a quarter of the length. My only complaints are the ending was a bit abrupt and Mark's wife Diana a tad too understanding to be realistic.
