I was born and grew up in Egypt, and I did not come to this country until I was twelve. I had visited it once in 1939, at the outbreak of war, when I was six, and then I spent the war years in Egypt. So I was the epitome of the expatriate child: I was reared knowing that I was English (and, interestingly, it was English then, rather than British). Nobody let you forget that but, frankly, if you did not know the place and only had a residual memory of a damp summer in the year the war was breaking out, this meant very little to you. I had an odd feeling of guilt about it, because so much was made of this, and I felt I had no claim to it; it was not a place that was anything to do with me. It had no resonances for me. Everyone else, the adults around me, got misty-eyed about it. But I had nothing about which to be misty-eyed. I could not see what the fuss was about. But when you are a child you tend to be docile and do what you are told. So clearly there was something going on here, but I did not feel it was a part of me and that I could claim ownership of it.

When I was twelve going on thirteen, just at the end of the war, I was brought to this country and it was a sharp, physical shock. I never knew a place could be so cold, or so green. The thing was bright green from end to end, and this was astonishing to a child who was used to deserts and my own homely humdrum life of palm trees and deserts and camels. It was exotic, extraordinary, and strange. Everybody spoke English, which was another bewildering thing. I was used to a world where everyone spoke with tongues. Cairo was a cosmopolitan city in which everyone was different, and I was used to this. Adolescences are usually fairly pliable, but I spent a fairly miserable, unhappy adolescence, as an outsider. I had great empathy with how the immigrant feels. Obviously mine was not the immigrant experience, but it had overtones of this.

To move quickly on to the writing situation. For years and years after I became a writer I could see no way of writing about this experience. I did not
know how to do it. I could not see how to do it. I did not want to write a piece of fiction that would be completely autobiographical. And so for years I did nothing. And then I went back to Egypt for the first time, in adult life, and saw a way into it, and so out of that I wrote Moon Tiger, which was in no sense autobiographical, but the central part, which features the Libyan campaign and Cairo during the war, was written from the point of view of a woman who had been a war correspondent in Egypt during the war, and I could not have written it without that childhood experience, which somehow infused the book. I could not have given it the balance and the background. So that was essential.

Some years after that, I decided that perhaps I would have a shot at a memoir of childhood, so I wrote Oleander Jacaranda. I tried not to write a straightforward memoir but a book which would also be a discussion of the nature of childhood perception. I wanted to take that handful of shards that you have in your own head, of childhood, and discuss them with the wisdom of adult hindsight. So it is both a book of childhood and about childhood and also about the Middle East during the war, as I lived through interesting times. That has been about the sum of it. I have another novel called Cleopatra’s Sister in which I invented a country that does not exist, as though you slipped another country in between Libya and Egypt. And I wrote a novel that features this country, but the other two books are the ones in which I tried to write out of this childhood experience.

What follows is a record of a conversation between the novelist Penelope Lively and the then Principal of Cumberland Lodge, Alastair Niven: the speaker is denoted by the initials ‘AN’ and ‘PL’ respectively.

AN: I am interested that you suggest, Penelope, that you could not have written your books if you had not grown up in Egypt.
PL: Yes, I realize now how fortunate I was, in a sense. I have tried to imagine the life I might have had, if history had gone differently. In 1942, when it looked like Rommel might indeed sweep through Egypt, British women and children left, and divided into two halves, and some went down to South Africa and many of them went to Palestine, as it then was. My mother and I were among the lot who went to Palestine. We spent the summer there and drifted back again when it became clear that Rommel was not going to sweep through Egypt. But many others went to South Africa. So I have been trying to write about ‘supposing we had’ gone to South Africa, rather than Palestine. The ships that went down from Suez to South Africa were at some risk in the Indian