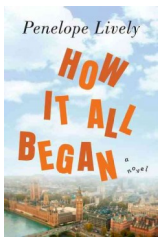


How It All Began



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I only brought one novel on my vacation to New Mexico, and *How It All Began* was the perfect one. Not that it's about New Mexico, no--it's almost wholly set in London with a few side trips to Cambridge and a "cathedral town."

The novel begins with an interesting premise, similar to the butterfly affect in New Zealand. What happens in the rest of the world when a butterfly starts a slight breeze wafting Down Under? In this case, it's nothing as natural or beautiful as a butterfly fluttering. Instead, an older retired teacher and passionate book person, Charlotte, has been mugged on a city street. This ignites a chain of events that alters many lives.

First, her daughter Rose must come to the hospital and care for her. This leaves Rose's grumpy, egotistical employer, Henry, a former professor of history, at a loss. Rose had promised to accompany him to Cambridge where he was presenting a lecture on his field, 18th century England.

Instead, his less-organized niece agrees to accompany him. Marion has her own interior design business, but she forgets to pack Henry's notes. (Of course, Henry can't be bothered with anything so mundane.) Henry makes an absolute fool of himself. Whereas in the old days, he could sail through "his" historical period with no notes, now the names of figures he's written about for decades have suddenly vanished.

But at least the speaking engagement isn't a total loss, Marion meets a rich client who needs many apartments decorated. On the way there, she cancels a date with her married lover, but alas, he's forgotten his phone in another jacket and his wife checks the text. They separate and soon divorce lawyers begin calling.

The novel really brings you inside all these characters' lives. Charlotte is forced to move in with Rose and her husband, Gerry. And suddenly, living close to them, she notices that her daughter does not have the deep connection that Charlotte herself had with her husband, now dead. Lively captures the fears and the losses of old age well. Charlotte desperately wants to be back on her own, but her broken hip makes her dependent on other people for the first time in her adult life. But at least she can continue with her literacy training. She can only work with one client now and she and the Literacy Center chose Anton, an educated Pole, who has been forced to work as a construction lackey until he can boost his English language skills.

This part of the book is lovely. Anton comes to Rose's house and he and Charlotte begin reading together classics of children's literature. Rose always joins them for tea at the end. She soon is on a mission to shop for the perfect gift for his mother. Of course, this leads to museum visits and walks in the park.

Lively seamlessly moves between varying narrative threads. It's a surprisingly optimistic exploration of dealing with life's hard knocks and doing so as part of a community of family and friends.

Another book of domestic fiction that you might also enjoy is Edna O'Brien's *The Light of Evening*.

Posted by Dory L. on June 12, 2012

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