

London Life Books

PERFECT LIVES

by Polly Samson
(Virago, £15.99)

LIZ HOGGARD

I WAS like a woman demented reading Samson's new collection of short stories. Every few pages you leaf back thinking: "Damn, haven't I met that character before? Surely that's the husband who was unfaithful in an earlier story?"

Private Lives is a jigsaw of interconnected lives. Inherently filmic, it reminds you of Robert Altman's *Short Cuts*. Set in an English seaside town, it mines the dreams – and fears – that run through the heart of all families.

The collection starts with a gem, *The Egg*: the perfect life of a suburban mother, as she prepares breakfast for Father's Day. Samson lingers on the details: the Japanese dressing gown, the tray of coffee and ginger thins, the sleeping husband – until things turn sinister when an egg is pushed through the letter box, hinting at a dark secret.

Samson can be magnificently tender, caustic and thrillingly filthy all on the same page. The story of a middle-aged wife stalking her husband and his new lover (tiptoeing through the "perfumed gardens" of their Facebook sites) is both hilarious and terrifying. Her gaze is also panoramic. The collection features a picture restorer who can't love her baby; a lovelorn piano tuner and a daughter who loathes her mother's Greenham Common set. Just occasionally the destination is less interesting than the writing but Samson is never boring.

Half-English (her Jewish father was diplomatic correspondent for the *Daily Worker*), half-Chinese, she worked in publishing, becoming publicity director of Jonathan Cape at the age of 24. Then, when her relationship with the poet Heathcote Williams, the father of her son Sam, collapsed, she began writing and shot to fame in 1999 with her first short story collection, *Lying in Bed*. She is now married to Pink Floyd guitarist David Gilmour and has featured on a list of Britain's 50 most beautiful women. She and Gilmour have had three more children together but



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RICHARD KENDAL/RETNA PICTURES

A RICHER CANVAS FOR THE SHORTER STORY

she knows the undercurrents swirling beneath the perfect life.

She followed up *Lying in Bed* with a novel in 2000. Then all went quiet – but now, after 10 years, we have *Perfect Lives*, the title inspired by a Leonard Cohen lyric. Every page is studded with dazzling metaphors: "Behind the wheel he was cramped like something about to hatch."

"Not for the first time she wished that she could take the baby's batteries out."

Samson is particularly good on children – she wrote her novel, *Out of the Picture*, to explore what it was like for Sam to grow up without his biological father but her forte is thwarted, dissatisfied women. "Oh God, don't tell them

we think that!" you want to exclaim.

Samson also skewers selfishness. But no character is ever less than three-dimensional. A mother bitches unforgivably about her daughter's appearance and only later do we realise the deadly gift of DNA blooming at the heart of the family.

If you find the short story genre unsatisfying – why invest in characters who disappear? – *Private Lives* offers a richer canvas. Samson may return to *The Egg* for a novel. This is a collection of delicious fondants laced with strong liquor. You can rifle through the layers, greedily consuming another story before breakfast. But the after-kick lingers for days.