

Blemished beings

Loose ends don't tie up the necklace of life. By Sue Gaisford

Towards the end of this collection of stories, a girl called Claudine is packing her suitcases. She is going to Poland with Leszek, her newly discovered father, to meet her dying grandmother. She wonders whether to take a vintage yellow dress with a daisy-patterned belt, bought on Ebay.

We already know about this dress, for we have encountered it in the very first story. It was Celia Idlewild's favourite and she wore it long ago when she first met her husband's parents, in comically



Perfect Lives
by Polly Samson

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embarrassing circumstances.

We also know Claudine, for her mother is Aurelia, a gifted pianist who was at college with Leszek. In fact, we also know another friend of theirs: Richard, who

didn't make it to the concert platform but who now tunes the Idlewilds' piano.

Round and round we go. It takes time to realise that each perfect little jewel of a story belongs on a necklace with all the others, that the reader knows things about these people that they scarcely, if at all, know about each other.

This is a masterly book, and it's impossible not to start all over again the minute you finish reading it. More than simply a series of exquisitely crafted miniatures,

it encompasses many of the larger delights of a full-length novel.

Polly Samson loves these people, describing them with incisive wit and generous compassion. She writes about little Ivan, convinced that his cuddly babysitter, Laura Idlewild, is really a circus trapeze artiste; about Tilda, transplanted from Hackney to a dismal farm dominated by her shotgun-toting mother-in-law, whose high colour is "undimmed by recent widowhood".

Miserably, Tilda longs for someone to remove her baby's batter-

ies, just for a day or two. But dramatic events change all that, mercifully for the better. So it is with magnificent Morganna, maddened by the rage of a woman scorned but ultimately, and splendidly, triumphant.

Not every end is neatly tied up: these lives are far from perfect. However, as Samson quotes, from Leonard Cohen: "That is no alibi for anything. On the contrary, you have to stand up and say Hallelujah." She might also have been thinking of EM Forster's dictum "Only connect".