

Dems were subjected to a traditional pincer attack from the other two parties in the last days of the contest, each of them claiming that a vote for Clegg would let either Brown or Cameron in. (The fact that both couldn't be right didn't matter.)

As to whom Clegg did let in, David Laws, the Lib Dem MP for Yeovil, provides a compelling case that the only practical possibility was the Tories. Laws is a funny chap, and **22 Days in May** is the first political testimony with quite so many references to the "rather dull sandwiches" provided by the civil service in the multi-party talks. What was evidently even less palatable to Laws was the Labour party's attitude to his party, which was about as patronising as everyone else in the media used to be towards Sky News. If, like me, you were half hoping for a "progressive coalition" of the Lib Dems and Labour, then you need to know who killed this dream: Ed "Tribal" Balls, who effectively sabotaged the talks. But in doing so, he saved the Lib Dems from having to choose between viable offers from both parties, which really would have split them down the middle.

Yet that leaves another mystery: an entirely fictional offer from Labour of electoral reform without having to bother with a referendum. This mysterious non-offer is denied by all concerned, and is absent from the Laws account, but somehow it so embedded itself in Cameron's mind that he used it to bounce his MPs into agreeing his deal with the Lib Dems for fear of a Lib-Lab pact. Clegg afterwards claimed that "it might have been an offer that might have been made and that might have been considered". Could our historic coalition be founded on a muddle? Might have been.



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### Short stories

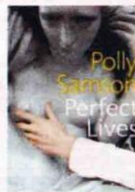
## Perfection: it's best avoided

*All is not as it seems in  
this dazzling collection*

### Perfect Lives

By Polly Samson  
Virago £15.99

REVIEWED BY  
KATY GUEST



It is conceivable that the theme of Polly Samson's brilliant latest collection was dreamt up only to leaven readers' jealousy on seeing her adoring acknowledgement to her rock legend husband David Gilmour, "without whose support and encouragement" etc etc. The stories here are about the cracks behind the façade of the perfect

## Tilda tries to love her baby, but he reminds her of a boiled Christmas ham

life: the secrets, lies and bitter compromises that eat away at apparently blissful marriages in enormous stuccoed houses in picturebook seaside towns.

The stories are linked by characters, locations and, in one case, "the loveliest yellow cotton dress, the belt [like] a daisy chain". In each one, deception gnaws from the inside like a canker in a blossom. A chance revelation at a birthday party stays lodged in a marriage. A discarded wife can't get up in the mornings for "the great weight of her soul pressing on her chest as soon as she opened her eyes, so heavy, she said, it felt like it had been ripped from her in the night and plonked there, filled with rubble". That physical, acid sensation of feeling wronged is frequently and beautifully evoked, with foodie metaphors deliciously distorted and played with.

In "A Regular Cherub", a particularly striking story, Tilda is trapped in a countryside idyll with the unspeakable secret that she does not love her baby. She thought that she would, but trying to force it is "like willing a dream", and he only reminded her of a Christmas gammon when he was born. "Her breast [was] grappled with like something to be stuffed into the cavity of a chicken," she recalls. "[The midwife] brought green cabbage leaves when Tilda was so inflamed that her breasts looked like two monstrous gorgonzolas, cornflower for her nipples and, on Fridays, iced buns for Callum... Tilda began to feel that she belonged in the dairy."

Characters transplanted into each others' stories shed fresh light on what we have seen before. Tilda's sister, Anna, is a beautiful artist to her smitten piano tuner in "Barcarolle"; in "The Rose Before the Vine" she is a torment in the judgement of her mother, Rose, who in turn feels judged by her. Anna thinks that Rose remarried too soon after her father died. The plasterwork on Anna's seaside house reminds Rose "of her first wedding cake, the one she'd cut with Jimmy, a struggle to get the knife through the cold white icing, three tiers".

Hardly anything is as it seems. Someone described as if he is a lover turns out to be a father, or indeed a camera. And perfection is not what it's cracked up to be, either. The final story, "Remote Control", predicts catastrophe and sadness all the way through, but concludes, hopefully: "It wasn't perfect, but it would do." I hesitate to call Samson's collection perfect, then. It isn't perfect; but it's all the better for that.



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