

Keeping up appearances

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Perfect Lives

Polly Samson

Virago, 256pp, £15.99

There's a magical, sleight-of-hand quality about Polly Samson's third book, a linked collection of short stories concerning the well-heeled residents of a seaside town. It arises from a pleasurable mismatch between external impressions and internal realities, where lives so artfully arranged they resemble scenes from a *Toast* catalogue are cracked open to reveal innards as unexpected as they are unsettling. The trick wouldn't work if Samson didn't have a gift for exquisite surfaces, or such a knack for capturing psychic disarray.

"The Egg", the first story in the collection, both encapsulates this process and sets it in motion. Celia Idlewild is a middle-aged, middle-class mother. Into her elegantly minimal world comes a neat symbol of chaos: a broken egg, posted through the letterbox, "spreading itself over the stones like a stain". It's an ugly reminder of a moment she's attempted to forget, when a chance revelation at a birthday party revealed the lie at the heart of her lovely life.

The Idlewilds and their Bösendorfer concert piano will appear again, seen glancingly through the eyes of the loose circle of relatives and neighbours between which these stories prowl. The technique is intensely satisfying, though the character returned to most frequently – and the only one to command a first-person voice – is, aside from her first outing, the weakest on display.

Samson is highly skilled at exploiting the overlapping fields of vision, using stray observations casually to illuminate the blind spots in others' lives. Children spy things they aren't supposed to see; eyelashes prove the giveaway in relationships between strangers; a woman is observed by a besotted piano-tuner before reappearing, almost unrecognisably, in the gaze of her mother.

These shifting perspectives are matched by a suppleness of tone. In the most disturbing story, "The Man Across the River", a woman remembers being chased as a child by a man armed with a cudgel and accompanied by two dogs. The fairy-tale resonances of this frightening episode are heightened when the woman's mother, something of a witchy figure, begins to retell a story from the morning's paper: "Something grisly about a missing girl and a man who drove a butcher's van". Inevitably, the two tales collide with an eerie thwump that even manages to deliver a jolt of political relevance.

The tension between keeping up appearances and accepting chaos is a recurring theme in women's domestic fiction. At times Samson sounds like an echo of Tessa Hadley, who also likes closed sets. Elsewhere, with a talking cat and a woman who falls in love with her camera, she has some of the surreal playfulness of Jane Gardam.

The exactness of Samson's language and the coherence of her vision are all her own, however, and though they conspire to make the pursuit of perfection seem a mug's game, they do it almost flawlessly. ●