

SHORT STORIES

Betrayals, longing – and the joys of a peppermint piano

Perfect Lives

Polly Samson

Virago £15.99, pp225

Aphrodite's Hat

Salley Vickers

4th Estate £16.99, pp262

The beauty of a short story is the way in which one moment in a life can ripple outwards, offering the reader a glimpse of the past and future that surround this snapshot. Polly Samson's second collection, **Perfect Lives**, gives the sense of moving like a tracking shot through an affluent English seaside town, peering in through lit windows at characters whose lives touch one another's in tangential relationships. In this interconnection between the stories, the collection is reminiscent of Rachel Cusk's *The Lucky Ones*, but Samson also shares Cusk's gift for precise, thoughtful language and her sharp eye for the discrepancies between characters' inner monologues and their public faces.

Needless to say, the title is freighted with irony. In the first story, a wealthy wife is reminded on Father's Day of her husband's infidelity, a truth airbrushed out of their family life, but at what cost?

In another, a successful concert pianist visits the Jewish cemetery in Hamburg where her family history is buried. A young mother relocates from the city to a country idyll but yearns for the lost satisfaction of her career, until she is shocked by near tragedy into discovering maternal love. The small intricacies of family life – misunderstandings, betrayals, disappointments, longings – are Samson's raw materials, and the stories pulse with unspoken feelings.

Perhaps the greatest joy is in her descriptions, often as striking and economical as poetry. One character

is "so expensively beige"; a newly tuned piano is "crystalline, clean as peppermint". Or there's this wonderful image of life with a young baby: "A day with Danny was like being left in charge of a nuclear power plant, lonely and bleak, slightly nerve-wracking, with lots of servicing and safety checks required."

Although these stories are largely about the heartache beneath the surface of lives that appear enviable, they are far from bleak. Characters from earlier stories reappear, often having taken some small step towards happiness. There is a recurrent sense of stoicism; an acknowledgement that, for most characters, change comes not from dramatic revelation but with greater acceptance, self-knowledge and a degree of compassion, until they are able to say, like the only first-person narrator here, "It wasn't perfect, but it would do." *Perfect Lives* confirms Samson's reputation as a significant chronicler of contemporary life.

Salley Vickers is best known as a novelist and in the introduction to **Aphrodite's Hat**, her first collection of short stories, she namechecks those writers who have inspired her by succeeding in both forms – James Joyce, EM Forster and the late Penelope Fitzgerald, who commended Vickers' story,

"The Dragon's Bones", included here. Threaded together by the broad theme of love – what she describes as "the moment that can flash between human beings, making a homecoming of their apartness" – these stories have an impish side and often conclude with a reminder that the characters who take themselves too seriously are those who most frequently end up being made to

Those who take themselves too seriously frequently end up being made to look foolish

look foolish. There is a lovely example of this in "Mrs Radinsky", where the residents of an apartment block make assumptions about the strange old lady who lives on the top floor, and truth triumphs over hypocrisy.

But Vickers doesn't shy away from the pain of that "apartness" and her characters' failure to find their moment of connection. "The Buried Life", an extended story developed from Matthew Arnold's poem of the same name, is perhaps the most heart-rending; an unflinching look at a

woman's search for love and the price exacted for it, ripe with regret and the awful wisdom of hindsight, balanced against the longing to be understood. In "The Return" she veers towards Wilkie Collins territory, when a young couple on holiday in Rome encounter a more sinister visitor.

"How lucky that you can do these. I find them so hard," Penelope Fitzgerald wrote to Vickers of her stories, and there is no doubt that she can "do these"; *Aphrodite's Hat* is an assured debut, confidently ranging across moods and voices, and deftly pinpointing the moments when her characters most truly reveal themselves. Regret and optimism are finely balanced, and although her themes are contemporary, there's a pleasing old-fashioned quality to the stories, presumably thanks to the influence of the masters she cites in her introduction.

The short story is considered by some editors to have less commercial appeal than the novel; it's heartening to know that writers such as Samson and Vickers put such love and art into the form. **Stephanie Merritt**

To buy *Perfect Lives* for £12.79 and *Aphrodite's Hat* for £13.59 with free p&p call 0330 333 6847 or go to guardianbookshop.co.uk



Salley Vickers (left) and Polly Samson.