

## Under the skin

Susan Hill

### Perfect Lives

Polly Samson  
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Why do so many aspiring writers think it best to begin with the short story and graduate to the novel? It's madness. The short story is infinitely harder to write well. Some novelists succeed at both — William Trevor and John McGahern are the names that spring to mind — but Chekhov never wrote a novel and, coming up to date, our leading woman short-story writer, Helen Simpson, has not been tempted to do so either. I can count on a hand the names of contemporary writers whose collections of short stories are worth reading, but Polly Samson has belonged on one of its fingers since her fine first volume, *Lying in Bed*. That was published ten years ago. She brought out a novel which is best forgotten, and my gut feeling tells me that Samson is not a natural novelist and should stick to what she does best.

The stories in *Perfect Lives* are loosely linked, with characters appearing in one and reappearing in another. Most are set in an English seaside town one places as Brighton — though, English seaside towns being what they are, others would serve.

Samson is good at getting under the skin of those whose lives and relationships are apparently serene, fortunate, sorted. She knows about appearances, as she knows about self-deception — at which her characters, especially the women, are expert. Women are her real subjects, and at the centre of her unnervingly cool focus. Men do appear but even when they seem to play a

prominent role, somehow we are made to look at them from the outside, not taken into their hearts and minds.

It is the same with the children, of which there are several — they are viewed through the eyes and ears and emotions of their mothers. Samson's women love their children, pine for their earliest years, fear for them, are terrified of time and life carrying them away. You sense that these mothers want to stay frozen in time with their offspring at a permanent five or six years old, and always to have a baby at the breast. But there is nothing remotely sentimental about the vision or the writing. Samson is extremely clear-eyed.

The most devastating story, the best told, the most perfectly shaped, is on a theme as old as time — betrayal and the discovery of betrayal, within a marriage. It moves seamlessly and skilfully between present, after the betrayal is known, and past, when Celia prepares a birthday party for her husband Graham on the beach in front of their house, with oysters, crab, champagne, and a birthday cake which is destined never to be cut or eaten, its candles never to be lit. A woman without malice but with too big a mouth drops a bombshell in conversation, does not realise it and even when she gets an inkling, continues to talk, while Graham turns beetroot red and Celia's life turns to ashes.

And in the present, while she is alone in the kitchen preparing breakfast, something small but vile happens.

To do something quite new with a situation so familiar, so that the reader is smacked

in the face as hard as Celia is, requires skill and sophistication.

That story is the first in the book. The last, 'Remote Control', has a pent-up rage, bitterness and frustration boiling just beneath its surface in a cameo from another apparently good marriage. Simon comes home every day and switches on the television. He watches rubbish and the remote control is his alone. He eats in front of the TV, he enrages his wife, and there is a terrible moment in which he points the remote at her by chance, and she thinks 'He is trying to switch me off.'

Some stories work better than others. I grew tired of a piano that kept appearing, and even more tired of the piano-tuner who could have been a concert pianist but for stage-fright. The description of the piano itself though is perfect. It 'took up half of the living room and most of the oxygen. A carnivorous old thing, it had teeth rather than keys and a lid just right for trapping little fingers.' So the author sees it as a tiresome and even sinister object too — and indeed, more than an object. That piano has a personality.

Samson does not show off as a writer; her prose is clear and precise, but she makes it sparkle every now and then by producing a brilliant image. A 'repulsive waiter' is 'pale and slightly sweaty as though he'd been poaching too long in his own juices'. She knows instinctively that such images need to be placed sparingly.

*Perfect Lives* has been worth the ten-year wait. I hope Polly Samson's next collection comes along sooner.