

Loss, lies and flawed love

Fifteen years after the author's first novel, her second is worth the wait

FICTION

Lucy Atkins

THE KINDNESS by POLLY SAMSON

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Polly Samson is the author of two short-story collections, and one previous novel, *Out of the Picture*, published in 2000. What took her so long? The opening scene of her second novel involves a young woman flying a hawk called Lucifer. Thanks to Helen Macdonald's incomparable *H is for Hawk*, this feels – perhaps unfairly – a little heavy-handed (“and there he was: a dark Cupid's bow firing straight at her from the heavens”). Indeed, I almost lost heart at this stage. But what a loss that would have been. *The Kindness* is cumulatively addictive: intriguing, cleverly structured, lyrical without pretension and thoroughly engrossing.

At its centre is an emotional mystery: what destroyed the love between Julian, a postgraduate student when they meet, and Julia, eight years older, and escaping an abusive marriage? First we see the past from Julian's saddened perspective. He falls in love with glamorous (if hawkishly untameable) Julia and they have a daughter, Mira. We know from the start that Mira becomes extremely unwell, but we do not know how that ends. Julian becomes a successful children's writer while Julia sets up a gardening business. They live in a freezing London flat and everything is perfect. Julian then hears that his childhood home, Firdaws, is for sale. He buys it and, with his mother, starts to re-create his boyhood (including moving all the family furniture back in). Samson's descriptions of Firdaws and the countryside are particularly transporting, but Julia, understandably, is less keen on this rural idyll, not least because she has to work in London, leaving the childcare

to Julian. Then little Mira falls gravely ill.

The latter part of the novel revisits all this, but through Julia's edgier eyes. And this is where things become really interesting. The central secrets, around which we have been circling, come slowly into focus. We see the same events (a romantic trip to Paris, the purchase of Firdaws, Mira's sickness) from Julia's perspective, filling in some crucial details until, slowly, it all makes sense.

A couple of later plot twists do take a leap of faith, but they feel manageable because, by this time, the book is hard to put down. I finished this story of loss, lies and flawed communication at two in the morning, desperate to know the truth. As a second novel, this really was worth the wait.

✉ Polly Samson writes in today's Sunday Times magazine, p36. The Kindness is available at the Bookshop price of £12.99 (including p&p) and £12.99 (ebook) on 0845 271 2135