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## How the middle class strives for perfection!



### Perfect Lives by Polly Samson

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 £13.99 (PLUS £1.25 P&P)  
 0844871 1515 ★★★★★

The author of a collection of discrete stories, *Lying in Bed* (1999), and a novel, *Out of the Picture* (2000), Polly Samson has chosen the middle way with her third book.

*Perfect Lives* is a collection of 11 interlinked stories, set in a chilly English seaside town and featuring a group of characters (and a cat) who move in and out of each other's lives and tales. One woman has a dress with a belt like a daisy chain; this is a daisy chain of a book.

When we first encounter Samson's protagonists, they are usually preoccupied with mundane matters – whether everything on the black,

lacquered breakfast tray is “as it should be”; whether the blue of a husband's hatband is the right shade to match his eyes; whether the flower arrangement works; whether the piano is in tune.

How strenuously the middle class strives for perfection! And how misguided they are, Samson suggests. “When people get what they want,” observes a mother to her disgruntled daughter, “they haven't a clue what to do with it.”

In any case, something will always happen, someone will always do something, to spoil the party or sully the snow. Another character, Celia, owns a beautiful piano, but it was once owned by an SS officer.

Samson's stories tend to follow a pattern of presenting some kind of bourgeois ritual before pointing out the secrets that lurk beneath its rather

smug surface. On the day of her husband's perfectly planned birthday party, Celia learns he has been unfaithful.

“It takes just one thing,” she observes, “a freak in the weather; a tsunami snatching people up from the shore like jacks in its giant fist; a thermal maelstrom; the wrong sneeze; the bad geography where thermal plates rub themselves into a frenzy; or a Rachel at a party who can casually shatter a perfect life with a few words.”

In another story, Rose sits in her daughter's lovely room with the soft light and music, and waits to share news of a hereditary disease. “The pin was almost out: she was like a terrorist, biding her time.”

These are not stories about lives blown apart. Rather, the interlinked collection allows Samson to explore how people

survive the “something small but monstrous” that threatens to wreck everything.

What consoles them is love – a “warm kitchen with its big family table” – but also art and craft. Samson's seaside is bohemian and mostly well heeled. Her protagonists are pianists and piano tuners, television producers, photographers and picture restorers; one hand-dyes rugs made from rags and, in doing so, finds “the gleam with the gloom”.

Like the sea, whose nearby presence is always felt, they learn to live according to the tides and to accept change and imperfection. A life with scars, stains and flies in the jam “will do”. Yet for all that she suggests such realism should be comforting, this remains a melancholy book.

**Kasia Boddy**



Demigod: Rick Riordan is at home in the British Museum

ANDREW CROWLEY