

## What lies beneath

At first I was not sure which of the houses on the west London mews belonged to Polly Samson. But then I heard the sound of a piano drifting out of an open upstairs window, and knew I'd come to the right door. Music is a significant thread in her new collection of interconnected stories, *Perfect Lives* (Virago, November), and it is as much a part of Samson's life as is her writing. "The great joy was coming back to writing and finding that it was the piano that led me back to it," says Samson, who took up the instrument in an attempt to encourage her children to practise. Her self-professed obsessive streak meant she had quickly replaced the eight or nine hours a day she would have spent at writing with piano practice.

Samson's first collection of short stories *Lying in Bed*, and a novel, *Out of the Picture*, were published in 1999 and 2000 respectively, and she had every intention of carrying the momentum on to a third book, immediately writing 30,000 words of another novel before abandoning it: "It just died and it completely threw me. It was a really depressing experience." It was a visit from her piano tuner about two years ago, and hearing him play brilliantly when he thought no one was listening, that triggered her latest 11-strong story collection, with story two, the rather melancholy and beautifully paced "Barcarolle", the direct result.

### Speaking in tongues

Samson was also writing lyrics for her husband David Gilmour's band, Pink Floyd, during this gap between books: "It's almost like trying to translate someone who's speaking in tongues . . . it's also slightly like being a ventriloquist." Giving characters a voice is what she prioritises in her fiction too: "I want them [the readers] to feel that they know the people almost instantly." In *Perfect Lives*, these characters—hurt lovers, fractious couples, and adults revisiting sinister memories—dart in and out of more

Polly Samson's latest collection of short stories marks her return to fiction after a 10-year break. She talks to **Charlotte Williams**



than one story, giving the reader the chance to see them in 3D. "I wasn't deliberately doing it at all . . . I would think about the character and find that they already existed for me." Samson's next project is likely to be a novel involving some of the same characters, perhaps particularly returning to the opening story of the collection, "The Egg". "It's like having a whole cast, and well, what am I going to do with them now? I can't just throw them away."

### Sharing secrets

Samson admits to always carrying a pencil and paper around with her so she can capture ideas as they flicker into life: "'The Man Across the River' just came because I was walking down by a river and I saw a flash of a man's T-shirt opposite. The whole story just came from that one flash." Working straight onto the computer ("I can't handwrite any more"), one story can be written in a week of eight or nine-hour

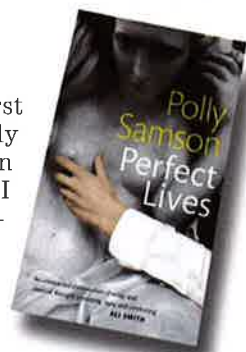
days. "The first draft is really quick and then the bit that I love is the endless redrafting . . . I find the getting to the first draft almost breathless, it's a feeling of panic . . . It's almost that thing of having a big, big secret; it's that feeling of telling someone that is getting the first draft down."

Her former career in publishing at Ebury, Hutchinson and Jonathan Cape informs the decisions she makes around her stories now. "I still retain some sort of knowledge about that [the publishing process], and I always imagine that my publishers get really irritated . . . I am very particular." Talking about the short story as a genre she notes: "Everyone says they love stories and then all you hear from the publishing world is that sales are down, and so I started to think that maybe this was a novel in 11 stories . . . It is quite a grey area when you have linked materials".

### State of flux

She feels the industry has changed immensely since her time at Cape: "I can remember being quite shocked by the way things changed with conglomeration and I think now is another change, everything is in such a state of flux." When first reading about the recent Wylie deal with Amazon, Samson remembers thinking: "how does anyone cope with such unknown worlds?"

Dealing with the secret, hidden worlds within people's lives is the recurring theme of *Perfect Lives*. "Things [may] appear perfect on the surface, [but it's about] looking for what's underneath; if you look under that rock, what's crawling around?"



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### CV

- 1962 born in London
- 1980–83 secretary, promotions assistant, then promotions manager, Macmillan
- 1983–84 publicity manager, Hutchinson
- 1984–85 publicity manager, Ebury Press
- 1985–89 publicity manager, then publicity director, Jonathan Cape
- 1988 began writing as a freelance for the *Observer*, *Sunday Times* and *Guardian*
- 1993 co-wrote lyrics to seven tracks on Pink Floyd's "The Division Bell"
- 1999 *Lying in Bed* (Virago)
- 2000 *Out of the Picture* (Virago)
- 2010 *Perfect Lives* (Virago)
- Agent Ed Victor
- Editor Lennie Goodings, Virago