

Q&A *with* POLLY SAMSON



With such a diverse career, can you tell me about yourself?

I was born in 1962. My parents were, at the time, communists. They were both displaced; my father arrived in England on the Kindertransport in 1938 and my mother from Shanghai at around the same time. Education to communists in the 1960s was a bourgeois concept, so I use that to explain my lack of it, rather than any laziness on my part. Having fulfilled my role as a child of revolutionaries by being expelled from school, I became a Telex Operator and the superior secretaries made me stand outside while they sent "highly confidential" Telexes. I was so bored that I taught myself to decode the dots; at that point I knew it was time to become a bit more bourgeois and even educated and get into publishing. My first job at Macmillan, in the days when Harold [Macmillan] would occasionally come in to beam at us youngsters, became my version of school, and then at Jonathan Cape, where the great Tom Maschler published my favourite writers: Chatwin, McEwan, Amis, Lessing, became my university. When I was at Jonathan Cape, I had a friend who worked at *The Observer*. He found two pieces I'd written: the first was an account of being photographed by David Bailey and the second was about the joys of taking ecstasy. Without my knowledge he showed them to the legendary Ann Barr at *The Observer* and that was how my career as a feature writer began.

Your mother's story is incredibly interesting; how did her experiences influence you?

I think this needs a little explanation. It starts with my Cockney maternal grandmother, who in the 1930s, took a slow boat to Shanghai having married my Mandarin grandfather while he was studying in London. Three children later and on the brink of the Japanese invasion she returned to London where she dumped her children in a Doctor Barnardo's home. My mother had an atrocious childhood, when she 16-years-old she made her way back to Red China, arriving at the docks she announced that she'd come to join the Revolution. She rose to the rank of Major in Mao's army and her story is documented in her book *Black Country to Red China* (1981). As this truncated version might indicate, she was not an orthodox mother. She didn't talk about her life at all until she started to give Chinese cookery lessons. The women of the local Women's Institute started to ask her life questions, which opened the floodgates. I remember her blazing eyes as she bashed away morning and night on the typewriter and the book that emerged was a revelation. In my copy she wrote: "When you read this you will understand why I was never a 'gushing' mother." That was something of an understatement and the book has been in print ever since.

Can you tell me about your writing process?

Each night I go to bed determined that I will start work early the next day. This never happens. Though on the best days, I wake and immediately make notes, because when I'm in full flow, my dreams become about my characters. Then I answer emails and letters, but in a very bad-tempered way. I do my piano practice, also with bad grace (I take lessons, which started as a way to encourage the children, but has become my favourite displacement activity). Then I eat lunch, resenting each mouthful for the time it takes to chew. I usually start writing at about two in the afternoon. Always with a walk first as that saves a bit on the carpet as I do a lot of pacing. I usually write for six hours before I start seeing double.

How has your work progressed from your previous works?

I'm older; I've done more and have a different perspective on life. Most of the stories in *Lying in Bed* had been with me for a long time, some since childhood. My novel, *Out of the Picture*, was written to first draft in six weeks, because it came out in one burst. I was in the grip of paranoia and thought that I should get it done before *Lying in Bed* was published. I wrote it fast because I had no idea that my first collection would be so enthusiastically received. The reviews for those two books have signified that I'm more confident these days, but also more of a perfectionist. *Perfect Lives* has taken eight years and I've stuck with a small cast of characters who weave in and out of each other's stories and lives.

Your stories take a mundane incident and demonstrate that the smallest details effect our lives, where do you get your inspiration from?

It always starts with character. I'll give a couple of examples from this collection: One day the piano tuner was at our house, he hadn't realised that anyone was home when suddenly he started playing Chopin so beautifully that I hid and enjoyed a private concert. While he was playing I was thinking how at every music soiree I'd ever been to at our children's schools there were always one or two irritating show-offs who made all the other children's parents sick with envy. I started to wonder about all these motivated mini-maestros and how they couldn't all grow up to be concert pianists, from those two events the character of Richard emerged in *Barcarolle* in *Perfect Lives*. *Remote Control* came at a time when my family was watching a lot of television. I found myself alone with the cat most evenings and from the "all my best conversations are with the f***ing cat" monologue came a voice, that of Cato the cat, an intellectually snobby character with a comically disdainful view of Western society.

How did you turn your hand to lyric writing, were the seven tracks on *The Division Bell* the first songs that you wrote?

I didn't mean to write lyrics. I was recovering from glandular fever and my boyfriend (now husband) David Gilmour was spooning chicken soup into my mouth at his house, at the same time he was writing and recording a new Pink Floyd album. He was stuck with hundreds of great tunes and no songs, while I was palely loitering and therefore available. I begged him not to be included on the credits of *The Division Bell* (1994) and to be allowed the status of ghost, but he insisted that I'd regret it and he was probably right. Since then we've worked together again, without me wishing to hide, and the result was another number one album, *On An Island* (2006).

Perfect Lives starts with a Leonard Cohen quote; can you tell me more about this?

I listen to Leonard a lot while I'm writing, willing and hoping that a bit of him will rub off on me (sorry, the mere mention of his name and the words I type come out with their own Leonard-esque innuendo). In his song, *Anthem*, there's a line: "There's a crack in everything that's how the light gets in" sums up everything I'm trying to say in this collection (though "say" is wrong). I found the quote that I've used at the beginning of the book when I was pootling about wasting time online and thought "I'll have that."

What are your plans for the future?

I have just started to think about a novel I'd like to write. I'm at the stage where it's all excitement and no graft.