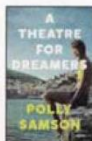


READING ROOM



Author Q&A: Polly Samson

A THEATRE FOR DREAMERS
(Bloomsbury)

On the cusp of revolution in 1960, this glittering novel follows teenage Erica, who arrives on the Greek island of Hydra and joins a circle of poets, painters and musicians ruled by writers Charmian Cliff and George Johnston – the king and queen of bohemia. Within the circle a triangle forms between writer Axel Jensen, his wife Marianne and a young Canadian poet called Leonard Cohen.

Do you need to be a fan of Leonard Cohen to appreciate the book or could you read it without knowing a thing about him or having heard him sing?

I don't think it makes any difference at all. The book is set in 1960 when Leonard Cohen was a fairly unknown 25-year-old Canadian poet who arrived on the island to write his first novel. In fact, I had to try to forget everything else I knew about him in order to write him as a character who is not a famous singer and writer.

Tell us about your protagonist, Erica. Is she entirely fictional? And why did you choose to write from her point of view as opposed to one of the well-known real-life characters?

Erica is 17 when the story begins. I wanted a character who could act as a portal to put the reader plonk in the middle of the artistic colony on Hydra. It helps to consider the women she finds there as they act on her as both role models and anti-role models. I liked having a narrator who is teetering on that brink between childhood and being a woman at a time when so much hangs in the balance for women in that post-war period, between the first wave of feminism and the second, when social revolution is afoot but the Pill has still not been invented.

Cohen's music explores diverse themes – loss, faith, loneliness, love, death and politics – but with a distinctive and cohesive style. Did you set out to do the same?

I can't say I set out to do anything except to explore how the real people

in that group interacted and lived. They were all so fascinating that I let the real facts frame the story and the issues that arose.

As a writer married to a musician some people might think your life is a romantic one that could make a good story. Do you think we have a tendency to romanticise the past and other people's lives and miss the joy of our own present?

I certainly may have missed some of the joy of my present life by spending so many years researching this book in my shed! But that's the thing about being a writer – there is nothing I like more than writing and that does involve quite often living in a fantasy world and missing out on some of the real things. I don't think this book romanticises the past. In fact I think it probably explodes quite a few myths about what people might have thought of as a halcyon period on a Greek island.

Travel and freedom are major themes of the novel and things that we have no doubt taken for granted before being suddenly temporarily stripped of them. Could you foresee a 1960s-style renaissance of society enjoying its freedom when we're eventually let back out of our homes?

I think people may have a more responsible attitude to travel – that our working lives could well be rearranged for the better. There's something very wrong when people think it's OK, for example, to take a flight from London to New York for a meeting so perhaps – and this is only one example – some good will eventually emerge from all this.

ANTONIA CHARLESWORTH

OFF THE SHELF FOR BETTER OR WORSE ABBIE GREAVES

If you were to judge the state of marriage by its fictional representations, then you would be foolhardy to tie the knot at all. Troubled marriages are two-a-penny in literature. An entirely problem-free union? Inconceivable! Not to mention unrealistic.

In my novel *The Silent Treatment*, Frank hasn't spoken to his wife of 40 years, Maggie, for the last six months. When friends and family found out about its subject matter, many were surprised. But while I've never been married myself, that doesn't mean I am any less fascinated by what it takes to sustain a relationship over a lifetime.

The books that have inspired my interest in the topic all share one central question – how well does anyone really know their spouse? In *The Husband's Secret* by Liane Moriarty (Michael Joseph), mother of three Cecilia discovers a letter from her husband, hidden in the attic. The catch? The envelope reads: "To be opened only in the event of my death". It is a masterclass in how a sudden revelation can unravel decades of marital security.

By contrast, *The Wife* by Meg Wolitzer (Vintage) works in reverse, as resentments accumulated over the years threaten to detonate at the most important moment in Joe Castleman's career. Like *Fates and Furies* by Lauren Groff* (Windmill), the reader quickly learns that, just as there are two sides to every story, there are two perspectives in every marriage and there is often little to no hope of aligning them.

As if it wasn't hard enough for a husband to reconcile his differences with his wife, then spare a thought for those with two. *Silver Sparrow* by Tayari Jones (Oneworld) begins with the line: "My father, James Witherspoon, is a bigamist". It's a beautiful, enlightening look at the two families caught up in one man's deception.

The Silent Treatment deals with many of these same issues that plague a troubled marriage – secrets, resentments, conflicting perspectives. But the novel is also a celebration of the transcendent love that carries couples through crisis.

For better or worse has never been so apt.

***The Silent Treatment* by Abbie Greaves is out now, published by Century**

