

'When I'm writing, I go into a trance'

Author and lyricist Polly Samson talks to books editor Joanne Finney about her writing tricks and collaborating with her rock star husband, David Gilmour

Polly Samson's family history is the stuff of fiction: her mother, Esther, moved between China and children's homes in the UK, before joining Mao's Red Army as a major. Her father, Lance, was originally from Hamburg and arrived in the UK on the Kindertransport in 1938. Polly has been asked many times to write her memoirs but has always said no. 'That's my well and I'm worried it would drain it dry if I did,' she says.

Polly grew up in south-west England and moved to London at 18 to live with her grandmother. She worked as a publicist, before becoming a journalist. Published just before she turned 40, her first book was a collection of short stories called *Lying In Bed*. She's since written several novels, as well as numerous song lyrics. Her latest novel, *A Theatre For Dreamers*, is about a bohemian group of writers and artists, including Charmian Clift, George Johnston, Leonard Cohen and Marianne Ihlen, who lived together on the Greek island of Hydra in the 1960s.



Now 58, she lives in a farmhouse in Sussex with her husband, musician David Gilmour of Pink Floyd fame. Between them they have eight children. In 2010, her son Charlie was arrested for violent disorder after taking part in student protests against tuition fees and he was sentenced to 16 months in prison. Now a father himself, he has also written a book about an injured magpie he rescued. 'I'm thrilled that Charlie is such a good writer,' says Polly. *'Featherhood* is a beautiful book; I'm so proud of him.' Here, Polly talks about becoming so engrossed in writing that she forgets to eat or drink...

I wrote my first novel in six weeks, when my three boys were small. I couldn't bear to be apart from them. I started a second novel and it was much more of an effort, and I realised I wasn't going to be able to do it fast. When I had my daughter, Romany, in 2002, I knew it was unlikely I'd have any more children and I just wanted to take the time and not be divided against myself. I didn't want to have to tear myself away from the children in the way I need to when I write a book.

My latest book, *A Theatre For Dreamers*, came about through a lot of serendipity. I went to the Greek island of Hydra in 2014. In the house where we were staying, there was a copy of *Peel Me A Lotus* by Charmian Clift, a memoir about her life on the island. Then, by chance, I met the person who lived in her old house, who agreed to show me around. Finding out about her was like falling in love; she has such an amazing voice and writes so well. Later, I found photographs of her with Leonard Cohen. That's where I started.

The difference when writing about real people is that there's so much research. I was obsessed with the subject, so it wasn't a hardship; every waking minute, I was thinking of these people. I didn't feel I could write the book while they were still alive. I was worried I'd bump into Leonard Cohen on Hydra and have to tell him what I was planning. After he died in 2016, it seemed okay to go ahead. **The advice I'd give to my younger self would be that life gets better.** My 16th year was an unhappy period in my life. I had lots of family-related problems, was quite depressed and I didn't go to school. If I could talk to that poor girl, I would say, 'Life won't always be like this.'

When I was 18, I went to live with my grandmother, who was wonderful. She

was my salvation. I had no education, no qualifications. My grandmother was very literary and I wanted to please her, so I applied for jobs in publishing. She'd been deprived of her own children because they were separated from her when they were quite young and came to the UK on the Kindertransport. She got out of Germany in May 1939, really late, and never lived with her children again. Our relationship went both ways: she was a maternal woman and had a great need to have a young person live with her. It was a hugely wonderful thing.

I've always earned my living through words, whether that's publishing, journalism or lyric writing. My mother says I could write before I could read, but I'm not sure about that. In my 20s, I wrote short stories, but I was completely secretive about it. A friend happened to read something I'd written and made me enter a *Guardian* short story competition. I ended up being runner-up. That was a real boost.

Writing fiction and writing lyrics have similarities. Because my lyrics are going to be sung by David, I think of him as a character. If I was writing for myself to sing, heaven forbid, the subject matter would be very different. I want the preoccupation of the song to be his. It's rather like for a character – it just happens to be someone I know better than anyone else in the world.

David and I have the luxury of taking

it in turns to work. We had a rule when the kids were young, because we have so many, that one of us wouldn't work. When I'm working, he's there for me completely. He did massive amounts of research for my book. We're both quite obsessive, so there's no boundary really between work and home. If David's working on an album, in the evenings, we're trying out lyrics, he's playing demos and everyone comments. With me, everyone's reading around the subject. We understand each other's processes. If I'm preoccupied and not making any sense, he doesn't take it personally.

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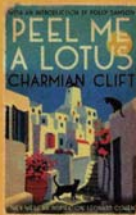
Sometimes, I can't tell if I've been working for an hour or eight hours. The problem with that is I forget to eat and drink! I have no cut-off point. My daughter often comes and finds me in my shed, shaking and exhausted! She's been

brilliant at taking care of me.

My trick is never to look anything up until the end of the day, so I don't get distracted. Anything that needs researching online I do in one go when I get back to the house. I don't even have my phone with me when I'm writing. **I never just sit and stare at a blank page.** If I don't know what I want to write, I go for a walk with the dogs. They wait for me outside the shed. I tend to walk away from my desk and end up running back! • *A Theatre For Dreamers* (Bloomsbury) by Polly Samson is out 2 April

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ON POLLY'S BOOKSHELF



• It was an immense pleasure to reread the Charmian Clift memoirs (*Peel Me A Lotus* and *Mermaid Singing*).



• I'm just reading *Gratitude* by Delphine de Vigan. It's about old people and language, and it's really good.



• I have never been big on thrillers, but I found *Magpie Lane* by Lucy Atkins so compelling. □