



Perfect Lives,
by Polly Samson
(Virago, £7.99)

Far from being perfect, the lives in Samson's cleverly interlinking stories are full of disillusionment. It's not just the obvious things, like a husband's affair, that have the power to distort and pollute relationships, but also the seemingly insignificant things, such as a mother's disgust at her daughter's tattoo or a wife's frustration with her husband's attachment to the TV remote. Many of Samson's characters feel a sense of failure and inadequacy: an embryonic concert pianist has his ambitions dashed when stage fright reduces his hands to a "pair of pale flounders"; a new mother struggles to bond with a baby who reminds her of "a Christmas gammon, boiled and ready for studding with cloves". But there's playful humour, too; a woman is gripped by an unexpected passion, a boy savours the vision of his scantily clad babysitter whizzing past on a circus trapeze, and a prospective bride simulates fellatio on a statue, ignorant of her boyfriend's parents' presence. Revealing the elusiveness of the perfect existence, these stories make us realise that life is all the more interesting for its absence. **AS**