

IN BRIEF...

PAPERBACK OF THE WEEK



The Kindness
Polly Samson

Bloomsbury £8.99

From the opening chapter of Polly Samson's second novel, *The Kindness*, we are immersed in a pastoral world where betrayal and brutality linger in the deceptively tranquil summer air. It's 1989 in rural Oxfordshire as Julia flies her husband's hawk while musing on her affair with Julian, eight years her junior. When she arrives home, her husband challenges her on her infidelity, prompting a scene of shocking barbarity, and concluding in Julia's decision to leave.

Jumping forward to August 1997, the novel finds Julian, now "an old man of 29", living alone at Firdaws, the childhood home he has rescued and restored. Julia and his daughter, Mira, are no longer present, and a sense of mystery and melancholy surround their absence. Only the smallest traces of Mira remain, a single shoe Julian keeps in his desk drawer: "Cut-out diamonds in the leather and a whitish crepe sole." This is a house – and an existence – filled with tangible ghosts, and Samson conveys Julian's mourning with immense poignancy and perception.

As the story unfolds, various deceptions emerge, both the life-changing secrets characters keep from one another, and the secrets Samson skilfully withholds from the reader. Shocking revelations are delivered with the pitch-perfect timing of a psychological thriller.

Samson creates a visceral sense of heat and claustrophobia, both physical and emotional. Her evocation of the countryside – both its idealised promise and its oppressive disappointments – is both poetic and sensuous.

Juxtaposing the quotidian and the profound, Samson imbues *The Kindness* with an almost mesmeric quality; amid the mourning and the melancholy there is a keen eye for the mundane details of

everyday life; the cups of coffee left to go cold, the fridges empty of food, the dinners cooked with the best of intentions.

Good intentions are, in some ways, at the heart of the novel. Acts of kindness – both genuine and self-serving – pervade a story that entices you to revel in its languid, beautifully written prose while demanding that you turn the page to discover the secrets it holds.

Hannah Beckerman

To order *The Kindness* for £7.19 go to bookshop.theguardian.com or call 0330 333 6846